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Broken promises

Please read Judges 1:1–2:5; Joshua 23, 24

‘The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, “I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.’ Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you” (Judges 2:1–3).

The book of Judges strikes us at first glance as possibly the darkest book in the entire Bible. It records the significant events of some three and a half centuries of Israel’s history, from the death of Joshua to the rise of Samuel and the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, i.e. from c. 1390–c. 1050 BC.¹ In so doing, it charts the decline of the covenant people of God as they increasingly depart from the commands

and the blessings of God to give themselves over to the wickedness of the very peoples that they had been sent to destroy and supplant. From that perspective it is a sad story indeed. There is, however, a thread of blessing and of hope shining forth from this tapestry of national sin. It was a period in which God planned to govern his people by ‘judges’, whom he would sovereignly raise up and endow with spiritual power to be the instruments of revival. These were not judges in the modern sense, but were civil governors and often military leaders upon whom the seal of God was placed. We are told that ‘the Spirit of the Lord’ came upon some of them and it is evident that the periods of relative peace and prosperity were often of considerable duration. For example, Ehud’s defeat of Moab brought eighty years of peace to the land. Peace is not the same as spiritual revival, but it seems clear enough that these were times of a revived faithfulness of some kind. While the book, then, certainly portrays human depravity in all its viciousness—what can surpass Judges 19–21 in this regard?—it also reveals the unfolding of the divine plan of redemption and calls sinners to repentance. The message of salvation to undeserving rebels is renewed, generation after generation, underscoring the great mercy of the living God and, sadly, the unyielding hardness of heart of the generality of those who are supposed to be his own people.

In this fact there is a point that must not be missed if we are to understand what the Lord is doing in this period. Very often, in order to make application of this to our own day, the expedient is adopted of substituting the name of one’s own nation for Israel. The idea is that what applies to the nation of Israel carries over in our age to apply to, let us say, Britain or the U.S.A. This is simplistic and misleading, for a proper view of the unity of the Old and New Testaments involves a proper view of the essential unity of God’s people in these two eras.

Israel, then, is the church of the Old Testament and the fact that it is a political entity detracts from that not one whit. The application to our own day is to the covenant people under the New Testament—to the church, those who by their own profession and history have been in covenant with the Lord. We must seek to see the lessons of Judges in terms of ‘us’ rather than ‘them’—of the church rather than modern nations. The first call is to the Lord’s people now upon earth to be faithful to their covenant with God. It is also true, however, that there is a call to the unbelievers in every nation under heaven. It is true that nations will perish under God’s judgement if they are given over to darkness and wickedness. God, however, is not concerned with national boundaries as much as he is concerned with the presence and power of the church from place to place. There is ‘one nation under God’ and it is the holy nation, the royal priesthood, the elect church of God in Christ of every tongue and every race upon the earth. The fundamental application is to call that body to faithfulness against the awful background of the broken promises of God’s people of old. They were, as one writer put it, ‘all talk and no walk’. Will this also be the testimony of heaven against us? This is our challenge from Judges!

Sure promises

It was not for want of promises or evidences of divine power that Israel failed. According to promise they had been delivered from Egypt and brought to the promised land. By the end of Joshua’s campaigning days much had been achieved and, although the coastlands and valleys still remained to be conquered, the Canaanites were terrified by Israel’s victories and the ‘momentum’, as we might say, was very much with God’s people (compare Joshua 11:16–23). When Joshua bade farewell to them, as recorded in Joshua 23:6–11, it was with the promise of God’s power to finish the task. ‘One of you routs a thousand,’ he said, ‘because

the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the Lord your God' (vv. 10–11). Subsequently, the covenant was renewed at Shechem, at which time Israel solemnly professed to be devoted to the will of God.

This latter episode is instructive in that, while it assumes the sure promises made earlier, it also reveals something of the cracks in Israel's faithfulness which were to widen into chasms later on. Joshua recounted the mighty acts of God in their behalf hitherto and, having done so, challenged them to choose whom they would serve (Joshua 24:15). Would it be the false gods they worshipped in Egypt, the false gods of the Canaanites or the Lord Jehovah? 'Why,' the people protested, 'the Lord, of course.' Joshua perceived that they protested too much and told them that they were unable to serve the Lord and that the Lord would make an end of them if they chased off after the Canaanite gods. In other words, he was telling them to make sure that they knew what they were doing when they so easily asserted their faithfulness (24:19). Still they affirmed their covenant (24:21) and so Joshua called for practical obedience in the casting away of their 'foreign gods' (24:23). Again they witnessed their engagement to be the Lord's servants (24:24) and so Joshua set up a stone to record their action. This would be a witness against them if they were untrue to the Lord (24:27)—an intimation of the fact, surely, that men are not so much condemned by what they simply do not want to do as by that which they so easily promise the Lord they will do, yet fail to deliver. How near we can draw to God with our lips while our heart is far from him! To all appearances, Israel was on the threshold of final triumph—but, alas, the triumph was not to be!

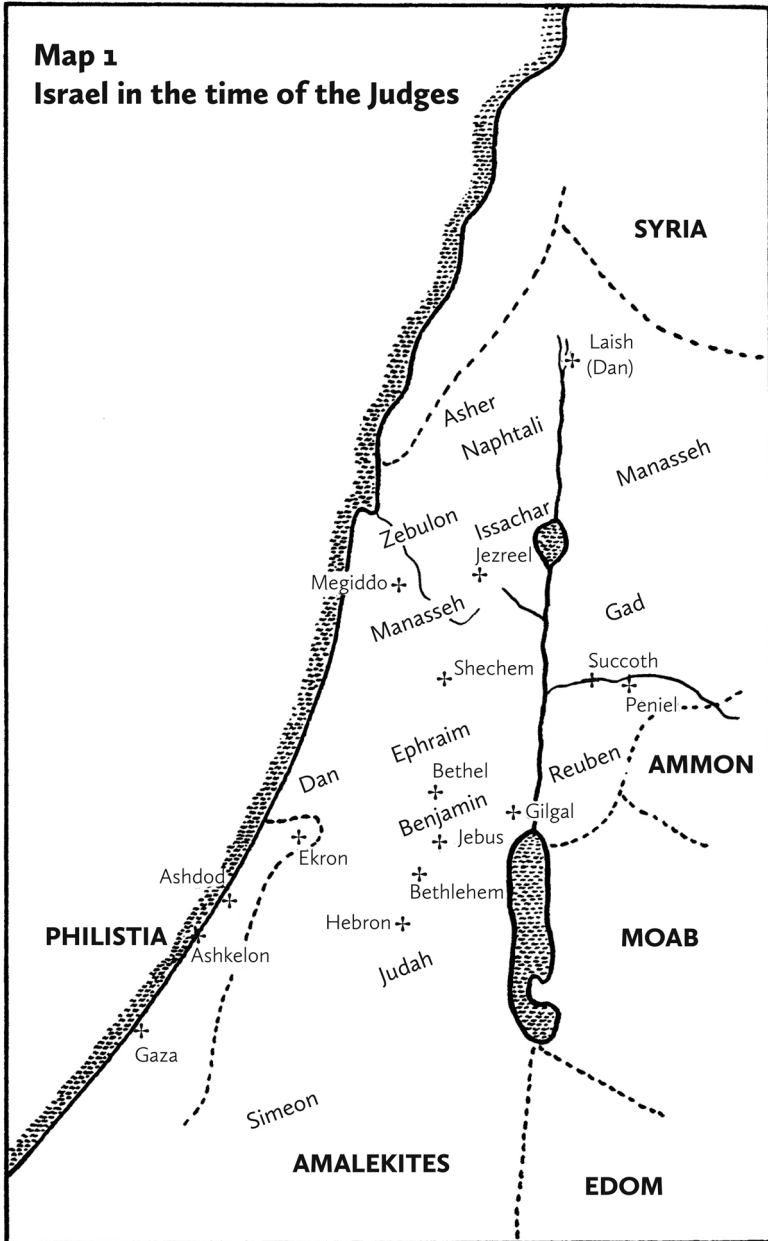
Selective obedience

Judges 1:1–2:5 is the first of two introductions to the chronicles

of the judges. It recounts the negligence of Israel to carry out her commission and the subsequent rebuke administered by the Angel of the Lord. The second introduction, which extends from 2:6–3:6, covers much the same ground except that it does so more with an eye to the history of cyclical regression and revival to be unfolded in the body of the book.

We are told that Judah—with Simeon, whose territory was a number of cities in Judah's area—was first to go to war. They defeated Adoni-bezek (1:4–7). They seized Jerusalem (1:8), although it must have soon fallen back into Jebusite hands (Joshua 15:63). They gained many victories, for the Lord was with them (1:19), but 'they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots' (1:20). The other tribes had more limited success still and, although they were able to put the subjugated Canaanites to forced labour, they apparently deliberately ignored God's command to destroy them.

It is clear enough that they were content, in the main, to restrict their conquests to the hills and also only to enslave rather than destroy the inhabitants. In the light of 2:1–6 and subsequent events, and remembering Joshua's anticipation of imminent apostasy, it seems inescapable to conclude that the Israelites did not want to destroy the Canaanites and their cities and did not wish to venture any campaign in the coastal plain where the added hazards of the 'iron chariots' would have to be faced. They were, in fact, directly disobedient to the Lord and their motive, as confirmed in Judges 2:12–23, was an openness to the false religions of the land. We are never militant in opposition to those sins which are secretly dear to us. Israel was compromised as the executor of the divine justice by simple unbelief in the living God and his precious promises!



Let us apply this to our own day. The church is commissioned to preach the gospel. This is her great task while the world lasts. With this is the promise of the blessing of God. To be sure, the church is not promised a set growth rate or level of success. It is not revealed to us who is to be saved or how many will be converted. There may be growth in the local church or there may be refining and testing. Yes, churches may even experience a *blessed* contraction! For all that that is true, however, the central theme of God's work is the outpouring of blessing upon his faithful covenant people. The church will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea and when we consider the invisible aspect of the church, namely the ingathering of the elect, then the church is indeed always being added to, since not one of these true believers can be plucked out of the hand of the Lord (John 6:37–38). History is seeing, with the translation of deceased believers to glory and the conversion of the lost in the church upon earth, the inexorable progress of God's work of redemption to the completion at Christ's return of the church of the first-born (Hebrews 12:22–24). The specific point of application is to ask: 'What are your expectations for the gospel? Is it an unfolding vista of victory? Or a gloomy holding operation? Is your church a stopping-off place for a few hardy folks who are in town for a while and want a cosy little fellowship? Or is your perspective that of conquest for Christ, of venturing for the lost in your community?

On the individual level a similar point may be made. Often professing Christians draw back in relation to personal holiness. There is almost a fear of being too holy. Actually it is a love for the old ways. Somehow the world would not be the same without some old-fashioned sin—or opportunities to sin—around. There is a tacit acceptance of organized sin in the world. Do you remember how Bishop Pike felt that prostitution, for instance,

had some ‘redeeming social value’? We don’t want to disturb the alleged ‘rights’ of people to be wicked. We are rather in favour of the concept of ‘victimless crime’—which is a completely anti-Christian notion, in point of fact. Sinners are at least victims of their own sins. The heart is so deceitful that Christians will not destroy the Canaanites of their own sins, because they have a recurrent desire to go back to them. Consider, then, the Lord’s admonition to his professing people in Judges 2:1–5.

The chickens come home to roost

God’s challenge and rebuke to Israel was brought by the ‘Angel of the Lord’, whom we believe to be the second person of the Trinity.² He came from Gilgal to Bokim (2:1). It is put this way, not to indicate his itinerary, but to remind Israel of the last time that he had come to his people, namely, just after the renewal of the covenant sign of circumcision at Gilgal and prior to the taking of Jericho (Joshua 5:13). The same Angel of the Lord who gave them their former conquests now came to deal with their covenant-breaking.

Israel had disobeyed God. They had neither destroyed the Canaanites nor kept themselves from false gods. The Lord told them that he would not drive out the Canaanites and that they and their false gods would be a trouble and a snare to them (2:3). They were without excuse. Their sin now became their punishment and in this are two points of universal applicability. First of all, if we will not do the work of God when he has commanded us to do it, then he will not do it for us. The devil will not flee from us, if we decline to obey the Lord’s injunction to resist him (James 4:7). We will, in other words, inevitably fall into our own sins—they shall, as the Bible says, ‘find us out’ (Numbers 32:23). In the second place, there is very frequently a residual and abiding effect of sin, in spite of the fact that we may have repented

of it and have been cleansed of it as to its guilt and penalty as regards salvation. Israel had a ‘thorn in the flesh’ to remind her of her disobedience. Sin leaves its marks and only death and resurrection will eradicate them. Our corruptible, our dying flesh reminds us of our sins, and our particular weaknesses, even when triumphed over in Christ, remain somehow attached to us and recall to us our utter dependence day-by-day upon the Lord for salvation from our sins. That is why the true Christian always is longing for heaven, for there is the work of redemption to be completed in us, and only there, with Christ, our Saviour.

The response of God’s people (2:5) is as instructive as it is heart-rending. First there was sorrow for sin, touchingly signaled in the name given to the place of confrontation—Bokim, literally ‘weepers’. Men weep for many reasons—laughter, separation, bereavement, anger—but least of all for their sins. When did you last weep as you considered your sins? When were you last ‘stricken’ while in prayer? This is the beginning of a real devotion and of blessed communion with the Lord ... a sense of helplessness, of need and of a lack of any deserving of blessing by reason of having offended a holy God. The second element is that of appealing to the mercy of God. Israel ‘offered sacrifices to the Lord’. Here the Christological heart of the whole book of Judges comes into focus. Israel fled to the Lord for grace and forgiveness and in the presence of the eternal Son of God, the ‘Angel of the Lord’. This same eternal Son, only made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, is our Saviour. Now in the risen Christ is redemption revealed in its fulfilled glory. The shadow of Bokim is now the substance at Calvary. ‘Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning’ (Psalm 30:5). When the chickens (of our sins) come home to roost (in the rebuke of our Lord) we should give thanks, because mercy is offered and a Saviour is revealed to us. Have you little but a catalogue of ‘broken promises’ to show before the Lord? Then return and repent.

Flee to Christ. He is the sacrifice for sin and he will not despise the broken spirit and the contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). This was the Lord's message to Israel and it is his message to us all.

Questions for further study:

1. Why was a successor to Joshua not appointed? (1:1-2.) How was Israel to discover the Lord's will? (Compare Judges 20:18-28.)
2. What do you make of the way Adoni-bezek was treated? (1:4-8.) Why were the Canaanites to be annihilated?
3. Review the performance of the various tribes. What was right and what was wrong in their actions in the campaign? (1:9-36.)
4. Compare the events at Gilgal (Joshua 5:1-15) and Bokim (Judges 2:1-6) respectively. Who was the Angel of the Lord? What is the ultimate significance of the latter passage for us?
5. Consider the application of the passage to God's people in every age:
 - a. broken promises/covenant breaking—its nature and effects;
 - b. the 'thorn in the flesh'—its meaning and purpose;
 - c. rebuke and conviction of sin—their place in our lives;
 - d. sacrifice for sin—who is our sacrifice and what is our duty under the gospel of Christ?
6. How is the church to approach the world? What are our expectations to be? What are the promises of God? What are our responsibilities?