

“I Will Never Break My Covenant With You”

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 1:1-2:5 (text); Ephesians 6:10-20

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Dear congregation of Christ: The book of Judges is a hard book to preach on, so that many pastors avoid preaching or teaching from it. It is full of names, geography, conflict, and even uncomfortably graphic sex, violence and gore. So it is a wonder that sex-and-violence crazed Hollywood has not made more movies about the stories in this book, except about Samson, and Delilah of course.

The title of the book comes from the title given to it in Latin, translated as “The Book of Judges.” We think of a judge as one who adjudicates legal and criminal cases. But this is not the responsibility of the judges of Israel. The Hebrew word for the title “Judges” actually means someone who saves or delivers, as seen in 2:16, “*Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.*” The word also means those whom God has tasked to rule and lead the people in spiritual and moral matters.

Judges is obviously a collection of stories of the 12 judges by different authors in different areas of Israel, specifically tribal groups. These stories took place between Joshua's death in mid-14th century B.C., to the ascension of Saul as king of Israel in the mid-11th century. But the timeline of the book suggests a period of about 400 years, which is much longer than the actual period of about 300 years. So it is also obvious that some of the stories took place concurrently in different tribal areas of Israel.

When we read this book, we will see that it tells how Israel as God's people degenerated spiritually in unbelief and disobedience against God's law. This downward spiral is also seen in the judges themselves, going from bad to worse. In particular, even as many Christians see Samson as a hero, and seen in Hebrews 11 as a hero of the faith, Samson was nevertheless the most disobedient judge of all.

From the first to the twelfth and last judge, we will see a cyclical pattern. First, Israel does evil, especially in its idolatry. Then the LORD gives them into the hands of oppressors, the nations around them, and they serve the oppressors for a number of years. The people then cry out to the LORD for help, and the LORD gives them a deliverer, the “judge.” The people have rest for a number of years under the judge. After the judge dies, the cycle repeats itself. But the cycle is not merely history repeating itself. The unbelief and disobedience of both the people and the judges become worse with each cycle. It was a downward spiral.

But Israel's breaking of God's covenant laws is not the only story. Throughout the book, God declares to Israel his faithfulness to his people, in spite of their disobedience, unbelief, and in spite of God's anger against them. God tells them that he will never break his covenant with their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So we will meditate on this theme, “I Will Never Break My Covenant With You,” under three headings: first, **In Spite of Unbelief**; second, **In Spite of Disobedience**; and third, **In Spite of God's Anger**.

In Spite of Unbelief

From the time of their escape from Egypt until they went into the Promised Land of Canaan, the Israelites showed their great tendency towards unbelief. Within several months from their exodus from Egypt, they came to the gates of the Promised Land. Then they sent 12 men to spy out the land, and what did they report back to Moses and the people? They brought back good news: abundant fruits from “a land flowing with milk and honey.” But they also had bad news: the people who lived there were strong, big men so that the spies looked like grasshoppers compared to them. Their cities are big and well-fortified. The spies said there was no way Israel would be able to drive those people out of their cities.

So all the people grumbled against God and Moses, saying that they would rather go back as slaves again in Egypt than die fighting the mighty people of Canaan. Joshua and Caleb were the only spies to disagree, saying, *“If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them”* (Num 14:8-9).

The LORD repeatedly promised Israel that he was giving the land to them. If the LORD can bring down Egypt, the greatest military power in the world at that time, can he not also defeat the much less powerful kings of Canaan? But Israel wouldn't hear any of this. They did not believe the LORD, Moses and Joshua.

So the LORD punished them. He gave them what they wanted, turning them back to the wilderness, wandering in the desert places for 40 years. God condemned all the adults who came out of Egypt: they would all die in the wilderness, never to enter the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who believed the LORD's promise, were allowed to enter in. During all those 40 years of wilderness wandering, the people continued in their unbelief. They continued to grumble against Moses about food, water, hardship, and danger from wild beasts and enemies around them. They were a rebellious people.

Then after they conquered all of the Promised Land, Joshua died. But the people of Canaan were still living in the land. So in judges 1:1-3, the people inquired of the LORD who shall go up first against the Canaanites. And God answered, *“Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.”* But the tribe of Judah did not believe that God would fight for them to drive out the inhabitants of the land allotted to them by Joshua. So they asked the tribe of Simeon to help him. Notice that Israel had no leader after Joshua died.

Notice also verse 19, *“And the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron.”* Even before they went into Canaan, God already assured Israel that God can drive out the powerful people of the land, *“You shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong”* (Jos 17:18).

Israel's lack of trust in God's sure promises to them led to their disobedience of God's laws.

In Spite of Disobedience

How did the Israelites disobey the LORD's commandments in *Judges 1*? First, they did not drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land. But why drive out the inhabitants? God was clear: the inhabitants would influence them to worship their idol-gods and disobey all of God's laws written by Moses at the covenant at Mount Sinai. The LORD warned them, "*when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction.*" They were not to make treaties with them. They were not to intermarry with them, "*for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods,*" and then the LORD would destroy them (Deu 7:2-4). The tragic result of interacting and intermarrying with the Canaanites is that the Israelites would end up worshiping their idol-gods.

So the most blatant rebellion of Israel is idolatry. As new arrivals in the land after suffering for 40 years in the wilderness, they found themselves surrounded by great nations. These nations were more advanced in their military might, fortified cities, and wealth. So their pagan gods must have blessed them with this power and wealth. Why not worship the same gods so they too would have the same power and wealth and all the advances of their civilizations?

The other specific command that Israel broke is that they were to "*devote the people to complete destruction.*" The Hebrew word used for this is related to the name of one city they conquered. In verse 17, after they conquered the city, they "*devoted it to destruction,*" so they named it *Hormah*. Why devote them to destruction? Isn't this genocide or ethnic cleansing?

Remember, firstly, when God made his covenant with Abraham? He prophesied that after spending 400 years in Egypt, his descendants would come back to the Promised Land and destroy the Amorites living there, "*for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete*" (Gen 15:16). Those people would become so wicked that God's patience with them will soon run out, and God would use Israel to destroy them (Deu 9:1-5; 20:16-18). Secondly, Israel or any other nation does not have any authority to do this without God's explicit command. In all of Scripture, only Old Testament Israel was God's chosen geopolitical nation. Thirdly, this command is only against those people living inside the Promised Land. This means that Israel must not go to war indiscriminately to grab power and expand its territory outside of the Promised Land.

Lastly, Israel herself was not exempt from this destruction by God's wrath. If they were to take for granted that they can disobey God's law to their heart's desire, they too would be destroyed by God. In fact, God commanded Israel to "*devote to destruction*" any of their own cities that turned to pagan idols (Deu 13:15-16). In the end, after centuries of rebellion, God destroyed the whole nation and sent them into exile in Assyria and Babylon.

In *Judges 1*, we read that the Israelites failed to obey this command. Eight of the twelve tribes mentioned – Judah, Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan – failed. They destroyed only one city, Hormah. And they also failed to drive out all the inhabitants of the cities they conquered. The failure of the tribe of Dan is notable, because they were the ones driven out by the Amorites from their allotted land (verse 34). So these pagan peoples lived among the Israelites, even if they were forced into slavery (verses 28, 30). This disobedience had disastrous consequences – including idolatry, immorality, violence – as we shall see in our study of the whole book.

In Spite of God's Anger

The consequence was God's anger and his judgment against the people. In *Judges 2:1-5*, we read that the Angel of the LORD, the same Angel of the LORD who destroyed all the firstborn children and animals of Egypt on Passover night, came to Israel with a word of judgment. (By the way, most theologians believe that this Angel is the pre-incarnate Christ.¹)

The Angel of the LORD recounted how he promised that he “*will never break my covenant with you,*” but Israel broke the covenant. They made covenants with the people of the land, and allowed them to continue worshiping their idols. So God tells them that these pagan people will become “*thorns in their sides, and their gods shall be a snare*” to them. Upon hearing this, the Israelites wept, so they called the place *Bochim*, which means “weepers.” They also offered sacrifices to the LORD. But was this true repentance? We know that it was not, based on their continued unbelief and disobedience in the book.

But even in this anger, God showed his mercy and patience in three little episodes in Chapter I. When Judah and Simeon fought against the people of Bezek, “*the LORD gave [them] into their hand.*” They captured the lord of Bezek (*Adoni-Bezek*) and cut off his thumbs and big toes so he would not fight again. Judah's tribe also had success conquering other cities (verses 4-10).

Then in verses 11-16, we read of the story of Caleb and his daughter. Before Caleb went against the city of Debir, he offered a prize for anyone who would capture the city: his daughter Achsah. So Othniel, Caleb's nephew, captured it and Achsah became his wife. But Achsah was a wise woman, asking Caleb to give her the land of the Negeb. Since Negeb was a desert, Achsah also persuaded Caleb to give her water rights to the upper and lower springs.

In the third story, verses 22-26, the tribe of Joseph attacked Bethel, “*and the LORD was with them.*” God provided a man from Bethel to show the Josephites a secret way into the city. After the city was captured, this man and his family was spared, and he was given a new city to build. This, of course, reminds us of Rahab, a woman of Jericho who helped Israel capture the city.

In these three little stories, the hand of the LORD is evident. The LORD gave the cities into the hand of Judah. The LORD gave wisdom to Achsah so that she was able to secure a land with water for her household. The LORD was with the Josephites at Bethel, giving them a spy so they could enter and then capture the city.

Dear friends, you may be thinking, “These are all good information. But what's in it for me?” This whole passage should resonate with us, but there are three caveats in applying this passage to our current situation. First, we cannot say that America, or any other nation, is like Israel. If we just maintain our faithfulness to God and obey his commandments, America will continue to have peace and prosperity. Or if we just elected committed Christians to the highest places in government, then we will be blessed by God. True, if the people and their leaders honor and respect God's laws as formulated in our Constitution and our laws, most likely, we will enjoy peace and prosperity, not corruption, immorality, lawlessness and violence. But no, America is not God's chosen nation. The church is.

¹ See for examples, Gen 16:13, 16:10 and 22:17; Jgs 6:21-22; 13:19-22.

The second caveat is in making the well-known judges such as Gideon and Samson as our moral examples. We often hear pastors preach sermons saying, “Be Like Gideon” or “Samson is Our Champion.” But these kinds of sermons disregard the role these judges played in the overarching drama of God redeeming his people. These judges are sinful, fallen human redeemers compared to Jesus Christ, the coming final Redeemer of all of God's covenant people made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

The third caveat is that we are not to create some sort of Christian enclaves, separate from our unbelieving neighbors. Jesus prayed for our faithfulness in the midst of a hostile world. But he did not pray that we separate ourselves from the world. He did pray, obviously, for us to be “*in the world, but not of the world.*” Our separation from this pagan world is in our thoughts, desires, plans and behavior, not in where we live or where we work.

God's prohibition to Israel against making treaties with the pagan people in the land is also a command today to us. In what way? We are not to compromise our faith because it might break our relationships, or we might lose our jobs, or we might be ridiculed. The church must not implement unbiblical doctrines and worship practices of other churches to attract many people. The church also must not compromise its faith for fear of being taken to court by its enemies. These are some ways in which we are “*in the world, but not of the world.*”

And even after the LORD was wrathful against Israel that he gave them into the hands of Babylon, he still promised restoration. He still promised that he will not break his covenant with them. After the time of the judges, God gave them kings, but most of them were also flawed and even wicked. The LORD renewed his ancient covenant to King David, promising him a holy and righteous Son who would be King of kings and Lord of lords. This King will inaugurate a new covenant in which the Spirit will be poured out on all believers, Jews and Gentiles. God's promise to Abraham of an innumerable children in the faith has been fulfilled by Jesus the Messiah.

Unlike Israel and previous centuries of church history, we do not wage war against unbelievers with swords, spears and arrows. Our war is a spiritual war against the demonic powers that rule the world in idolatry, immorality and violence. Paul says, “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” So how do we wage this war? By taking up “the whole armor of God,” we are able to stand firm and be faithful to the end. This armor consists of the belt of truth, Jesus himself who is the only bearer of Truth; the breastplate of righteousness given to us by Christ the Righteous One; shoes of readiness to preach Christ's gospel; the shield of faith in Christ alone to defend yourself against the devil; the helmet of salvation accomplished by Christ in his death and resurrection; and the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Eph 6:10-17).

God provides us with his spiritual armor because he will never break his covenant with our forefather Abraham, that he will be a blessing to all the nations. When you have this armor, God's promise is that he will be with you, and will give you your glorious inheritance, not in Canaan, but in heaven itself.