

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have called us and placed us within Your world, and given us homes, places of work, and fellowship. Give us a heart to honour and respect all with whom we share these blessings of Your love, and help us fulfil Your command to 'love one another'. Give us the strength to overcome the divisions between Your people, and establish Your Kingdom in our midst, we pray. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Reflect upon the different parts of your body, give thanks to God specifically for each part, and pray for its health. Ask the Lord whether there is anything you might do to improve your health and the functioning of your body – for His glory!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for North Africa and the Arab world:** *Pray for the country of Libya, and for those who seek genuine freedom and peace for all its citizens*
- *Pray about the threats to worlds peace caused by everything from international financial instability and political unrest.*
- *Give thanks to God for Christian communities throughout the world who serve God in difficult circumstances*

Meditation

Through the liberty of salvation in Christ our Lord,
We are set free as the people we were made to be.
Through Him, our lives are covered by forgiveness;
So that nothing from our past can hurt us for ever.
Through Him, we are given the strength of angels;
To achieve what seems impossible to the world.
Through Him, we hear the eternal Word of truth;
Yielding joy, peace and divine deliverance.
Through Him, the heart discerns good from evil,
For right judgement defends the soul from sin.
Through Him, we have confidence in the past and present,
And the future is secure on earth and in heaven.
Through Him, death holds no more terror or fear,
The Saviour has walked ahead of us, preparing the way.
Our testimony of faith is found through Him
We praise Him forever, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Bible passage - Judges 1 (1:1-4,8,9,20-28)

Judah battles to take the Promised Land, with Simeon

¹ After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the LORD,

‘Who will be the first to take on the Canaanites, and fight them?’

² The LORD said,

‘Judah; for I have placed the land in his hand.’

³ Judah said to his brother Simeon,

‘Come with me to my allotted territory to fight against the Canaanites, then I will go and fight with you.’

So Simeon went with him. ⁴ Then Judah attacked and the LORD gave them the Canaanites and the Perizzites, and they defeated ten thousand of them at Bezek.

Judah sets fire to Jerusalem

⁸ The men of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it, they put the city to the sword and set it on fire. ⁹ After this, the men of Judah fought against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, in the Negeb, and in the lowland.

Benjamin fails to win Jerusalem

²⁰ As Moses had promised, Hebron was given to Caleb, and he drove the three sons of Anak out of the city. ²¹ But the Benjaminites did not remove the Jebusites who were living in Jerusalem, so they have lived there with the Benjaminites to this day.

Joseph captures the city of Bethel

²² The house of Joseph also attacked Bethel, and the LORD was with them. ²³ They sent out spies to Bethel (formerly Luz). ²⁴ Now when the spies saw a man coming out of the city they said to him,

‘Show us how to get into the city, and we will treat you well.’

²⁵ So he showed them.

They put the city to the sword, but they let the man and all his family go. ²⁶ So the man went to Hittite territory, where he built a city and named it Luz, which is its name to this day.

Manasseh fails, but forces the Canaanites into submission

²⁷ Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean, Taanach, Dor Ibleam, Megiddo, and their villages, and the Canaanites continued to live in the land. ²⁸ So when Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labour, but did not in fact drive them out.

Bible Study

Review

A general introduction to Judges

Today, we begin a new series of studies in Judges. This great book of the Bible contains some remarkable and very ancient stories about Israel after they had entered into the Promised Land. Its most memorable features are the stories of the great ‘Judges of Israel’, from whom the book takes its name; especially Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson.

Towards its beginning, Judges contains a crisp analysis of the failures of Israel (ch 2), which explains why they needed God’s help through the Judges. It is a fascinating description of what happens to God’s people when they are poorly led, and is worth our attention. In addition, it may be forgotten that the last five chapters of Judges contain an appalling description of life in Israel without the Judges (17-21). These are some of the most difficult passages of Scripture and they contain the awful story of the slaughter of the Levite’s concubine. However, if we persist with these texts they have much to teach us about God’s people, and about good and bad leadership. These things are important.

As with so many Old Testament texts, the first reaction of many who read them is to be puzzled or bored, or both! The language can be repetitive, and much of the story line contains unfamiliar details. Any commentary on Judges will have much information about the many names and places it contains, and their significance within the Bible. This is of great interest to those doing detailed study, but most readers simply want to gain a good sense of what happened and what it all means. They also want to find out whether God has anything to say through what seems like the fog of antiquity.

For this reason, these studies in Judges will often focus on a large chunk of text (here, Judges 1), yet present only some of its verses for reading and review. The selected passages also have headings, which guide the reader through the sometimes bewildering array of names, events, and places. It is hoped that this

will help the reader achieve the objectives of gaining an overview of the passage, and therefore be able to interpret it without making any major errors due to general lack of knowledge.

Judges chapter 1

The first chapter of Judges presents us with several clear conclusions about the occupation of the Promised Land. Firstly, Judah emerged as the leader of the tribes. Judah seems to have been chosen to lead the assault (1:1,2), but we do not know why. It is likely that the decision was taken by consulting the priests of Israel for a decision 'from the Lord' (see Ex 28:30, Num 27:21). It was a decision that would have massive implications for the future of all Israel.

Judah took his brother tribe Simeon (see Gen 49:5f.) to war, and they seem to have been successful. They took the barren but beautiful southern lands of Israel, later known as 'Judah', and got rid of the local inhabitants (1:4), who had lived there peacefully with Abraham centuries before (Gen 20,21). It also seems that Judah attacked Jerusalem (1:8), an ancient city that predated the Exodus, but having sacked it, they must have left it. Later on, the Benjaminites had to try and take it, but they failed (1:20)!

As this chapter continues, we are gradually introduced to more and more failure. Benjamin failed to take Jerusalem (1:21), and although the tribe of Joseph were successful in taking the important city of Bethel (1:22-26), Manasseh failed to subdue the Canaanites in the central highlands of Israel (1:27,28). It was a failure that would be repeated throughout northern Israel (1:29-34). At the end of Joshua we are led to believe that the entire Promised Land was occupied and all Israel lived at peace (Joshua 23:1f.), but if this was ever achieved it was a short lived peace. The original occupants of the land remained to be overthrown, as we clearly read here, and the people of Israel were unable to take the Promised Land by themselves.

While this is the overriding theme of this chapter, there is much more of interest, and it makes us wonder what the future of Israel will be if it has not been able to do God's will. What we have read sets the scene for the whole book of Judges, which both explains how God deals with the failure of His people, but also asks why they failed. These questions are worth pursuing, and they will lead us to discovering much about the relationship between God and His people, and the need for good and proper leadership.

Lastly, we cannot start this study without revisiting the subject of violence in the Old Testament. This chapter describes Israel's military conquests, and the story line glosses over the horrors of war and all this means. People today ask, 'How can God ask His people to destroy others?' It is an important question, and if we are to answer it, we must be ready to walk out of our cultural 'comfort zones', and read Judges from the perspective of ancient people who needed quite literally to 'win to survive'. Yes, God worked through real and painful human history to forge His Old Testament people, just as He is working today through real and painful history to forge His New Testament people, the Church.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The accession of Judah
- The importance of Jerusalem
- Judah, Benjamin and Simeon
- The other tribes
- Destruction and the problem of violence in the Old Testament

Notes on the text and translation

V2 *'I have placed the land in his hands'*

Other translations:

'I have given the land into their hands' (NIV)

'I hereby given the land into his hand' (NRSV)

The Hebrew word for 'to give', can also be translated 'place', 'set', and a wide variety of other similar words. It is obvious what is meant here. Throughout this passage, the ancient Hebrew uses forms of speech that are often best translated using more current phrases with the same meaning.

V16 *'they settled with the Amalekites there'*

Other translations:

'to live among the people' (NIV)

'they went and settled with the Amalekites' (NRSV)

On the one hand, the Hebrew seems simple enough. It says that the Kenites settled with the people in the region of the Negev desert, as in the NIV translation. The NRSV however, with reference to Numbers 24:20 and 1 Samuel 15:6, reminds us that the Kenites lived amongst the Amalekites, a tribe whose name is the same as the word 'people' in Hebrew! The rest of Scripture testifies to this connection between the Amalekites and the Kenites, so this is convincing enough for me to accept that the text does indeed refer to the Amalekites, rather than just 'people'.

V17 'and destroyed it completely'

Other translations:

'and they totally destroyed the city' (NIV)

'and devoted it to destruction' (NRSV)

The Hebrew word here is difficult, because it refers to something with which we are completely unfamiliar today, and is highly controversial. When in battle for land and for survival, people of ancient times would frequently commit the spoils of victory to their gods, which meant that every living thing was destroyed. Hence the awful phrase '*devoted to destruction*' used by the NRSV. However, because this is difficult to explain, and without care, it is possible to get the wrong idea, I have avoided using this phrase or anything similar. I have translated '*destroyed it completely*' and left an explanation of this both to these notes, and to the study.

Going Deeper

The accession of Judah

The relative success of Judah in conquering the Promised Land against the failure of the other tribes is a reflection on the later performance of the nations of Israel and Judah. By the time of the Exile, Judah was a separate nation from Israel. After the reign of Solomon, the northern tribes of Israel left Judah, and the nation was divided between Israel in the north with Samaria as its capital, and Judah in the south with Jerusalem as its capital. The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles chart the separate growth and development of these two over several centuries. Eventually, the northern kingdom of Israel was obliterated by the Assyrians in 721BC, and the southern Judeans were overcome by Babylon in 587BC.

So, when God revealed Himself to the exiles in Babylon (see studies in Ezekiel), He did so to the people of Judah. When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they had to try and rebuild Israel from the rump of Judah, and precious little that was left of the other tribes. The story is complex. But there is no doubt that God favoured Judah and chose this tribe as the one from which the favoured King David came, and also Jesus Christ, his descendant. Yet God's choice to bless Judah started here in Judges, and there is little historic evidence of this before Judah was allowed to lead the occupation of the Promised Land.

Judah was the brother of Rueben (Jacob's firstborn) and Simeon and Levi. These four brothers were the first sons of Jacob, born to his concubine Leah. Historically, Rueben was cursed by his father because he had sex with one of his concubines (Gen 35:22), and Simeon and Levi were blamed by their father for their violence after the family returned to the Promised Land from Mesopotamia (Gen 34:25f.). So although there is no firm evidence of God's favouritism of Judah before Judges 1, it certainly becomes evident here.

The importance of Jerusalem

It is not easy to make sense of the two battles for Jerusalem described here (1:8 and 1:21). Blandly, Judah captured the city, but for some reason, it remained for Benjamin to capture it sometime later, and their assault ended in failure. The result is that the city continued in Jebusite hands, and remained so until David took the city shortly after beginning his reign over unified Israel.

Jerusalem has lasted as a city for probably 5,000 years. It is commonly thought to be the city mentioned in Genesis 14, where Abraham met the 'high priest of Salem (possibly Jerusalem) after a military victory in the region. It seems that God's blessing already rested on the city, as a place that was under the Godly priesthood of Melchizedek. Archaeological evidence suggests that habitation on the site is too early to estimate, because of the complexity of remains that can be found in the one location.

Jerusalem lies within the territorial land of Benjamin, and after it was acquired by David (2 Samuel 5), it was commandeered for the nation as a capital city. It also lay on the borders between the southern and the northern tribes, and was therefore a key piece of David's strategy to promote the unity of Israel.

It is possible that the two 'invasions' mentioned here reflect the dual claims' of ownership of the site by Judah and Benjamin. But while Benjamin was never able to assert his rights over the property, Judah was, and this may be the point of these two stories here in Judges 1. People today are interested in time-lines and accuracy, but ancient people were interested in what these events meant for the future of Israel!

Judah, Benjamin and Simeon

Every act of Judah was successful, including those of finding land for people attached to the tribe, such as Caleb's family (1:11-15), and the relatives of Moses' father-in-law (the Kenites 1:16). Judah only had difficulty with the capture of coastland (called 'the plain' in 1:19), because of superior iron equipment held by the locals! This is an interesting observation, because later Scripture also speaks of Israelites going down to that region to have their knives sharpened, or to obtain metalwork (e.g. see 1 Sam 13:20).

We discover here that Simeon was called to act alongside Judah (1:3f.) in fulfilment of the lot drawn in Joshua's day (Joshua 19:1-9). In truth, we do not hear a great deal more of the tribe of Simeon throughout the rest of Israel's history. Benjamin is more important, and the tribal area granted by lot to Benjamin was all border land between the large southern region of Judah and the other tribes, including the border city of Jerusalem. We should also remember that the tribes of Reuben and Gad, together with the part of Manasseh the had their tribal lands secured on the East of the Jordan, and so are not mentioned here in the list of battles for the Promised Land. They were committed to help their brothers in warfare, but received no land West of the Jordan (see Joshua 1:12-18). Neither do we come across the tribal name of Levi here in Judges 1. They were not permitted to fight, being set aside for the 'service of the Lord' (Josh 13:14f.).

The other tribes

Having eliminated all else, the rest of the tribes of Israel constitute those mentioned next in Judges 1, numbering seven; Joseph (1:22-25), Manasseh (1:27,28), Ephraim (1:29), Zebulun (1:30), Asher (1:31,32), Naphtali (1:33), and Dan (1:34-36). The only tribe missing from this extensive list is Issachar, a tribe with lands just south of Lake Galilee, sometimes counted as part of neighbouring Naphtali and Manasseh.

These seven tribes collectively fail to take the Promised Land with the single exception of Joseph. The tribe of Joseph is rarely mentioned in the Old Testament, and is normally represented by his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Here, Joseph captures the vital city of Bethel, a place strongly linked with the forefather Jacob, and his famous vision of the angels ascending and descending (Genesis 28).

The collective failure of the northern tribes establishes Judah as the leading tribe and the only one capable of success. It provides a basis for the belief in later years that only Judah was truly faithful to God.

Destruction and the problem of violence in the Old Testament

The problem of violence in the Old Testament is acute. People read about the Israelite destruction of nations with horror. For how, they say, can God allow such things? In answer to this question, which colours the whole of the Old Testament, I have written a paper that can be found by accessing the 'resources' page of this website. If this is something that causes you concern, please consult this paper. Otherwise, I have to ask you to understand that although we may regard such things with horror today, we have to suspend our judgement to appreciate events that happened a long time before ours.

Then, as now, people cannot 'live' anywhere unless they possess land. God needed to give His people land, and this meant displacing other peoples who were not part of God's 'choice' at that time. In those days it was entirely natural for people to invade lands and totally destroy what was there before, including people, in order to guarantee a future peace. God seems to have been willing to be associated with events that were normal for those times, in order to obtain the land needed for His people. This is not an excuse for violence, but rather an explanation of the violence we find in Scripture, which reflects the violence of ancient times. Please read my article for a fuller description of this and its connection with spiritual warfare.

Application

There is no doubt that even today, life for the Christian can be tough, and it will often contain battles against all that is evil within this world. Some will always stand back from such things, and others will endlessly question the moral judgements of Christians who feel that they must take a stance against evil, and confront it. To begin with, this passage of Scripture tells us that God's battles are battles for all His people, not just individuals presuming to act on the behalf of everyone. Just as God called on Israel to occupy the Promised Land, He asks His people today to 'take' the world for the sake of the Kingdom, and it is a battle that must be fought by God's people together, or like the tribes of Israel, our achievements will be few.

The people of Israel had to fight real wars to gain their land, but now, the Christian must fight a spiritual war for the Kingdom. We face this battle with the love of Christ, and ready, like Caleb in our passage (1:24), to demonstrate that love wherever we can. The evils we face are manifold and perilous, and each one who

reads this will have their own opinions about them. I would suggest that we consider the evil of various forms of domination, financial, dictatorial, political, intellectual, and personal. To this day, women throughout the world face continued domination and oppression, often through the most awful religious presumption. Men also face cultural misunderstanding and domination, mostly by other men. I could go on about other evils such as the abuse of the environment, corporate sin and much more, but I leave you to develop the idea. I simply ask that when you talk about such things you understand this is not just a debate, for we are touching on the battle for the soul of humanity.

The one thing that we can learn from this passage is that we will probably experience defeats and disappointments, just as the Israelites did. We know the love of Christ and His salvation, and we are confident of ultimate victory, but we remain just as sinful by nature as God's Old Testament people. Yet just as God had a plan to deal with the failure of Israel, God is able to lead His people through failure today, and we should therefore be willing to read the Bible and find His advice for how to deal with it. There is little such advice to be found here, because the passage sets the scene for what is to come, but much more will follow!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage of Scripture tell you about the battles that we fight today?
2. What do you think of the violence we read about in the Old Testament? How can we defend the Bible to people outside the church who find it hard to read these things?
3. What effect did the failure to capture Jerusalem have on Israel? Who captured it later on, and in what circumstances (read 2 Samuel 5)?

Personal comments by author

It is important to revisit the subject of violence in the Old Testament, because the book of Judges is probably the most violent in the Bible. The more I read about real human history, the more I know that most people are caught up in real violence whether they like it or not. So I have also come to believe that most people are caught up in spiritual battles whether they like it or not. People are often bewildered about why the Church seems impotent, for example, or why society seems to be so 'anti-Christian'. But these things are all part of the spiritual battles in which we are all engaged, and if we do not fight on 'the Lord's side', then we can inadvertently help the opposition. We all need to be aware of these things, for the good of all.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through some of the book of Joshua to give you further background to the study of Judges. Make a list of the features of spiritual warfare that you find within the Bible, and note how this is connected to your experience of life.*
 - *Pray that God's people will come to terms with the idea of spiritual warfare, and not just leave this to the arena of discussion and debate.*
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Final Prayer

Lord God, heavenly Father and Lord of All, create in each one of us a heart that is willing to follow You wherever You lead, to do whatever You ask of us each and every day, and to listen to all You have to say to us whenever You need to say it. May we live each day as if it was a true gift, full of opportunities to live for You! AMEN
