

Prayer

Come to us in power, Lord Jesus, so that we may serve You with vigour and honesty. We need Your help because we do not necessarily have all the care and compassion that others need from us. May we not be afraid to confess our weaknesses and limitations, so that we may receive Your forgiveness and the power of Your love. Lead us on to stand firm in faithful witness and service, we pray: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

The church anoints people for ministry, and the Lord anoints people by the Holy Spirit for special work He wants done. Take time to think about these things. Do you seek either form of anointing? Should you seek either anointing?

On-going prayers

- **Pray for North Africa and the Arab world:** *Pray for the country of Egypt, and for those who seek genuine freedom and peace for all its citizens*
- *Give thanks for the gift of music and those who use this within our churches*
- *Pray about the threats to world peace caused by everything from international financial instability and political unrest.*

Meditation

We live in an extraordinary world, where people:

Use positions of advantage for personal gain at the expense of others;
Prey upon the weak and use them without respect for human dignity;
Work in public services but do not accept the accountability of office;
Employ bullying tactics to get what they want and control others;
Use money and influence for personal gain, at the expense of others;

But there are also very good people who:

Identify with the world's poor, and work for justice and freedom for all;
Work selflessly for others, and refuse to engage in corrupt practice;
Strive for all truth, spiritually, intellectually and compassionately;
Work peacefully to promote the good of all and respect for true Faith;
Bring justice to our world by advocating the timeless truths of God's Word.

By faith in Jesus Christ, may we always be such people.

Bible passage - Judges 2:1-10

The Lord warns Israel about her failure to take the land

Now the Angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. He said,

'I brought you out of Egypt, and led you to the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said,

"I will never break my covenant with you, ² and you must never make a covenant with those who live in this land. You must tear down their altars!"

'But you have not carried out my instruction! Why have you done this! ³ So now I now tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be like thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.'

⁴ When the angel of the LORD had spoken these words to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud. ⁵ So they named that place Bochim ('weepers'), and they offered sacrifices there to the LORD.

Israel is faithful, but only for a generation ...

⁶ After Joshua had dismissed the people, the Israelites went to take possession of the land, each one to his allotted inheritance. ⁷ The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived him (who had seen the extent of all that the LORD had done for Israel).

⁸ Joshua, the son of Nun and the LORD'S servant, died at 110 years of age. ⁹ They buried him within the borders of his allocated land in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

¹⁰ Now, after that whole generation passed away, another generation came after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

Bible Study

Review

The book of Judges now comes to life with the dramatic incident at Bochim, an unknown site within the borders of Israel. There, the angel of the Lord met Israel for some straight talking about what had been going on. The people undoubtedly knew that their occupation of the Promised Land was not going well, but as the angel reminded them forcefully of God's covenant promises and commands, their weaknesses were exposed. The people had not completed the work God has given them to do!

This was an important moment for Israel. The angel's movement from Gilgal to Bochim suggests that God had indeed accepted what had been done to take the land, but God's rebuke was clear. His covenant with Israel promised them His absolute and everlasting love, but it also required their obedience. They had been instructed to remove all evidence of pagan religion, but they had failed to do this (2:2). We also know that the effort was tainted by personal greed; for example, Achsah acquired favoured land from her father Caleb, the army commander (1:11-15). Israel was a potent cauldron of godly intent and sin, and the two had not been separated out.

We are therefore left with the same 'stalemate' within the land of Israel that is found even today. With the help of the Lord, Israel became dominant in the region, but they were not as strong as they should have been. Their failures meant that they had to share the land with others, and although this was not what God wanted for His people, He was prepared to allow it. It would not be long before the people needed His regular help in the form of the 'Judges' to overcome enemies she had failed to evict at the beginning.

It is no wonder that Israel wept (2:4), and we may imagine from frustration, but this is not what the passage says. After the angel spoke they wept, for one of two reasons. They either heard God's judgement and were genuinely repentant, or they were upset by God's curse declaring that the gods of Canaan would ensnare them (2:3). So whether the weeping was because of repentance or disappointment, the people then worshipped the Lord by offering sacrifices, and even this can be understood in two similar ways. They either worshipped as truly repentant people who wanted to do what was right, or in the hope of appeasing the Lord's wrath! We therefore remain uncertain about the true state of Israel's heart.

It is likely that the author of Judges did not wish to convey one motive or the other, because the people of Israel were indeed in two minds. They wanted to do God's will, but as the whole history of the exodus from Egypt showed, they still had a strong tendency to go their own way. Faith and sin existed in them side by side, as it does in people even today. In the wilderness, their sin resulted in Israel's wandering for forty years before coming into their inheritance; as they came into the Promised Land, it meant that they could not have Canaan to themselves.

The problem of Israel's double standards is driven home in the second half of this passage, which describes the death of Joshua (2:6-10). This was the man who had led Israel faithfully after the death of Moses, for during his lifetime and that of the leaders who served with him, Israel remain faithful to the Lord. Before he died, Joshua had gathered all Israel together to make a covenant with God. He made a solemn personal promise; *'as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord'* (Joshua 24:15), and urged all Israel to do the same. But now that Joshua had died, would lead Israel as the focus of their unity and zeal for the Lord?

The evidence is beginning to stack up to suggest that severe problems lay ahead for Israel, and the writer of Judges knew it. Tomorrow, we will read a remarkable passage in which the author of Judges gives a remarkable and clear analysis of the state of Israel, and of her faith and sin. In the meantime, we are left to dwell on this spiritual dilemma. Israel was faithful but lacking, and both were expressed in her weeping.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The place name 'Gilgal' (2:1)
- The name 'Bochim' (2:1,5)
- God's instruction to tear down the altars (2:2,3)
- The weeping at Bochim (2:4,5)
- Joshua and the elders (2:6-9)
- The loss of knowledge about the Lord (2:10)

Notes on the text and translation

V2 'you have not carried out my instruction'

Other translations:

'you have disobeyed me' (NIV)

'you have not obeyed my command' (NRSV)

The Hebrew words here are interesting, because they do not include the usual Hebrew words for 'obey' or for 'command'. Translated literally, the sentence reads, 'You do not give attention to my voice'. I have therefore translated this in a way that respects the original, but avoids the words 'obey' and 'command'.

V3 'they will be like thorns in your sides'

Other translations:

'they will be thorns in your sides' (NIV)

'they will be adversaries to you' (NRSV)

The Hebrew text here is awkward, and reads, 'they will be to you like sides'. Of course, this does not make sense, unless the Hebrew word 'side' has some colloquial meaning we do not know of. The NRSV interprets this as someone who 'takes a different side', hence its suggestion of 'adversary'. The Hebrew word is also very similar to another word meaning 'lying in wait', and this also gives the idea of someone who is an opponent. I have preferred to keep to the traditional interpretation, which is that of a 'thorn in the side'. It is extremely disappointing that something as important as the relationship between Israel and the nations of Canaan is described in this vague way. Hebrew scholars continue to try and find a way of making this passage clearer.

V6 'the Israelites went to take possession of the land, each one to his allotted inheritance'

Other translations:

'the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land' (NAB)

'the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land' (NRSV)

The Hebrew reads simply; *'the Israelites went each man to his allotted share to take possession of the land'*. In order to make this sentence work best in English, it is best to switch around the phrases, so that *'each to his allotted ...'* comes last.

V10 'passed away'

Other translations:

'were gathered to their fathers' (NIV)

'was gathered to their ancestors' (NRSV)

The Hebrew phrase is a standard Hebrew colloquial expression for dying and moving on. I have simply used the most obvious expression that means the same thing today.

Going Deeper

V1 – the place name ‘Gilgal’

The name ‘Gilgal’ means ‘place of stones’, and it was the place where Joshua set up the twelve stones taken from the river Jordan as a reminder of Israel’s entry into the Promised Land after the wilderness years (Joshua 4:19f.). It also became a monument to the power of God to set His people free (Joshua 5:9f.). As such, it was the base for Israel’s operations to take the Promised Land during the days of Joshua.

V1,5 – the name ‘Bochim’

As far as we know, there is no place in Israel called Bochim. The word occurs only here in the Old Testament, and it means ‘weeping’. It was common for the people of Israel to name places after events, so it may be that they did so on this occasion, but the new name did not ‘stick’, and is not known today.

Most scholars think that the events of this passage took place somewhere near Bethel. The reason for this is found in Genesis 35:6-8:

Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. And Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So it was called Allon-Bachuth.

The clue is to be found in the place name for oak where Rebekah’s nurse died, ‘Allon-Bachuth’. The second half of this name contains two of the same consonants as the name ‘Bochim’ (see ‘Bachuth’), and in Hebrew, this means that the words are related. Indeed, ‘Allon-Bachuth’ means ‘Oak of weeping’. It is because this oak is situated somewhere near Bethel that the name ‘Bochim’ is connected by some with Bethel. It is a reasonable theory, though it has no supporting evidence from anywhere within or outside Scripture!

Incidentally, the shrine at Bethel occupies an interesting place within Israel’s history. It was associated with the great forefather Jacob (Gen 28), and also Abraham (Gen 12:8, 13:3). But in later years after the reign of Solomon, it was also associated with a pagan shrine built by the breakaway faction of Jeroboam, who sought to make a religion for Israel in competition with the Temple at Jerusalem. For later Israelites, the name Bethel and anything associated with it meant religious compromise! Everything we have discussed in this passage appears to add to this theme.

V2,3 – God’s instruction to tear down the altars

On one of the first occasions that God spoke to Moses about guiding Israel into the Promised Land, He said that the Canaanite system of religion should be destroyed. The altars that had to be torn down were the shrines for the worship of ‘Ba’al, the god of the Canaanites.:

“Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare to you. You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their ‘Asherim’ (sacred poles)” (Exodus 34:13)

It is obvious that these words are very important for our passage here in Judges. The text is echoed closely in what the angel at Bochim says (2:2,3). These words were spoken after the terrible incident in the desert where the people had made a golden calf, and Moses had confronted Israel with her sin. After a number of dramatic events, the Lord spoke to Moses in order to clarify the vision that drove both him and Israel as they faced the journey through the desert (Exodus 34). God set out the covenant (34:6-7), then promised to help Israel as they invaded the Promised Land, and then warned Israel about the dangers of Canaanite religion and their ‘altars’.

If you read Judges chapter 1 carefully, the author does not give many reasons for Israel’s failure, he just states it, and you will probably gain the opinion that Israel failed in battle. In this passage however, we learn that Israel’s failure was not one of strength or of battle. She had failed to ‘tear down the altars’. God’s instructions were clear; He wanted no competing religion in Israel, and all evidence of Canaanite religion was to be eliminated. The people of Israel failed in the Promised Land because they had not overthrown the altars and cut down the poles of the Canaanites.

Of course, we might well ask ‘why did Israel not do this?’ I am of the opinion that this is exactly what the author of Judges wants us to ask, for the subject of compromise with Canaanite religion would become one of the repeating themes of the whole book of Judges. It is easy to gain the impression that the book of Judges tells this repeated story: Israel was oppressed, and then God repeatedly saved them from the oppressors using the Judges. However, this analysis ignores one key element, which is Israel’s sin in turning away from her God to Canaanite gods. This was the cause of Israel’s downfall and her consequent oppression by her neighbours, and it plays an important part in the cycle of stories in Judges. We will learn much more about this in tomorrow’s study, from Judges 2:11-23.

V4,5 – the weeping at Bochim

'Weeping' was a significant part of the rituals associated with Canaanite worship; they acknowledged death as part of the cycle of life that came before renewal, as represented by springtime. This was celebrated in the staging of dramatic religious plays in which the god's Ba'al and Asherah played out the 'death and resurrection' of the seasons; autumn and winter, followed by spring and summer. The death scenes were accompanied by ritual weeping and wailing, whilst the celebration of new life was accompanied by fertility rituals and rejoicing. We learn much more about these things from the Old Testament prophets, who castigated this false religion (see Hosea 2, for example)

The Israelites did not weep in this way. They wept because they had failed their God, as the Angel pointed out. This is the first time that we hear of Israel weeping because of her sin, and it happens many times in the following centuries. Isaiah speaks of the sound of weeping in Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple (Isaiah 65:19), Jeremiah prophesies that Israel will 'weep' for her children because of the sins of the fathers (Jeremiah 3:21), and the bitter 'weeping of Rachel for her children' (Jeremiah 31:15). Also, the exiles wept when they realised the extent of their sin (Ezra 3:13), and the psalmist weeps for the sin of Israel but shouts for joy at the Lord's deliverance (Psalm 126:6).

In the Bible, therefore, weeping is the sincere acknowledgement of sin. It can never be ritualised because it is meaningless unless it is sincere and specific, as here in this passage.

V6-9 – Joshua and the elders

The generation of Joshua was regarded as a 'good' generation, because of the early victories in Canaan, including those at Jericho and Ai (Joshua 6-8), and his covenant relationship with God (Joshua 24). The writer of Judges does not include these verses simply by way of report, however. If you look back into the book of Joshua, you will see that it ends with a very similar passage (Joshua 24:28-31). In order to show how close they are, they are printed below, side by side:

After Joshua had dismissed the people, the Israelites went to take possession of the land, each one to his allotted inheritance. The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived him (who had seen the extent of all that the LORD had done for Israel). Joshua, the son of Nun and the LORD'S servant, died at 110 years of age. They buried him within the borders of his allocated land in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. (Judges 2:6-9)

So Joshua sent the people to their inheritances. After this Joshua son of Nun, the LORD'S servant, died at 110 years of age. They buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-serah, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived him (who had seen the extent of all that the LORD had done for Israel). (Joshua 24:28-31)

As you can see, there are only small but significant differences between these two texts, and this leads us to believe that either the writer of Judges had the book of Joshua to hand, or the same person who wrote Judges, also wrote Joshua!

The repeat of this information within Scripture does indeed connect the books of Joshua and Judges, but it also highlights the importance of Joshua's generation in the eyes of later Israelites. They were regarded with awe just as Christians today look back with awe at the days of the early church. But what was so good about the generation of Joshua? The answer is found here and it is found next, in verse 10

V10 – the loss of the knowledge about the Lord

Verse 10 states the contrast between Joshua's generation and those that came later. Joshua and his generation knew 'the Lord and the work He had done for Israel' (2:10). It was not that Joshua exercised faith, rather that he was obedient to the God who had so patently saved His people. Of course, by the time Israel entered into the Promised Land, Joshua was the only person alive who had been present when Israel had left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, heard God speak to them at Sinai, and endured the wandering in the wilderness. Everyone else who had started the journey had died out, but Joshua was himself the link with this glorious past, and it was he who inspired his generation.

Judges now breaks the link with this past, and informs us of a generation that did not have this firsthand knowledge of God's great work. As we will see tomorrow, this sets us up for the startling analysis of Israel's condition, found in the second half of Judges (2:12-23).

Application

This whole passage suggests that God's people are at their most vulnerable when they worship Him, but harbour attitudes, beliefs and practices that are not compatible with true faith in God. If God's people of old struggled with this issue in their own day, then we struggle with it today. We do not worship the Ba'als, but we do struggle with a variety of beliefs and practices that are sub-Christian, and are unworthy of people of faith.

God is jealous by nature, and He asks for our complete commitment. Why then should a Christian superstitiously 'touch wood' or be a slave to any other superstition? Is faith in Christ not enough? Why then should we seek to submit to the belief system of Yoga, which is based upon the idea of balancing spiritual energies in the body in order to find peace? The physical exercises may be great, but what does this say about the human spirit? Do we seek to balance the spirit within, or yield to the Holy Spirit of God who alone can make the human spirit whole? I repeat, physical exercise alone is one thing, but when it is attached to spiritual control it is another. After these examples, I hope that you can extend the principle in a number of ways, according to your own experience.

The other part of this passage that begs for some application is the analysis of generations that 'know the Lord' and those that do not (2:10). It may be easy to pass cursory judgement upon any generation, but the true lesson of this passage is surely that each generation must come to know the Lord and His works for itself. Each individual must also come to know the Lord for himself and herself. Any church or system of organised Christianity will fail if it does not include within its guiding principles the need for each generation to seek out the work of God, decide upon it and own it; moreover, there is no suggestion in the Bible that these things should be done privately!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage tell us about God's grace and favour towards His people?
2. What are the gods whose altars must be removed and destroyed today?
3. Do you live in a generation that 'knows the Lord'? If not, why not, and how can you help this generation to know the Lord?

Personal comments by author

This is one of many Old Testament passages that excites me because it contains something of an analysis of the human condition and the nature of faith. They connect strongly with the New Testament, and the theology of 'faith' that can be found in the writings of Paul, even though there are no direct quotes to join tie the two together. Sin, of course is ever present even today, and the more we know about it, the more we can submit it to Christ for His forgiveness and salvation.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Find out about how young people are presented with the claims of the Gospel within your church. Some have formal schemes to help young people at a certain age, others leave the challenge of the Gospel virtually to the occasional encounter. What do you think is the best way to help each generation come to 'know the Lord'?*
- *What are the sins that beset God's people today, and why do they cause trouble? Make a list, and add to it as you reflect on this for several days. Do not use this to attack the church or anyone else. Use it for prayer and to help your understanding of people's problems with faith.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, You have known Your people over thousands of years, and You know how to deal with us far better than we know how to deal with each other! Open our eyes to see our sin, and reveal Yourself in power and love to forgive these sins so that we keep on the pathway of faith throughout our lives, and to the glory of Your name: AMEN