

COMPROMISE HAS CONSEQUENCES

By Steve Zeisler

About twenty years ago there was a popular television show, *Mission Impossible*. Peter Graves played a distinguished-looking character named Mr. Phelps, who would come on early in the show. He would receive a mysterious tape and be given an assignment to go off with his associates and do some extraordinary thing or other (perhaps to find a spy nest in an obscure place and clean it out). It was always something in which success was against all odds. It was Mission Impossible: the call to do something that was beyond the ability of ordinary people to even conceive of. Once the assignment was given, viewers would discover how Mr. Phelps and his friends would do the impossible as the drama unfolded.

I'd like to ask you to assume the role of Mr. Phelps this morning. We'll all receive an assignment that, for ordinary people using only human strength, is impossible. You will discover the tape giving you the assignment in the book of Philippians. Chapter 2, verses 14 and 15 call upon us as followers of Christ to accept a role that we are unable to fulfill on our own, yet which we are required to accept by the power of God. Here is the assignment, Mr. Phelps:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world....

Three-Part Assignment

There are three parts to this mission that I would like you to focus on. First, by your heart attitudes as they reveal themselves in your actions, you are called to live out your family name, to be children of God. You are sons and daughters of the King, and you are to be distinguishable from other people. Thus your character, attitudes, and actions are to be above reproach.

The second part of this assignment requires that this life is to be lived out in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. The word perverse, or depraved as the NIV translates it, is a very strong word in Greek. It describes moral decay that has gone about as far as it can go. In the midst of a crooked and depraved generation we are to be children of God. We can't be children of God off by ourselves or find an enclave where we join only with other children of God to live lives that are above reproach. We are not allowed to disconnect ourselves from the pain-filled world of our contemporaries.

And the third point follows from that, and that is that we are to be lights in the world. Our lives are to be of such quality that against the darkness of the generation we live in we are sources of light that glorify God on the one hand, and on the other offer an invitation to the unsaved. We offer a chance for people who are in the darkness of a Mexican prison (as Ernesto Leon shared this morning), or who are in the darkness of our own neighborhoods, to leave the condition they were born into, that they might themselves become children of God.

If we are to take up the mission impossible to be children of God amidst a perverse generation, displaying light to the world around us, this book will help us learn how

Now this is an impossible mission-being children of God, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, offering light-and yet it is the clear calling of everyone who belongs to the Lord. In order to accept this responsibility and learn how to live like that, I'd like you to turn with me now to the book of Judges in the Old Testament, where we will begin a series of studies in this much-neglected book of the Bible. The book of Judges is exactly a story of crooked and perverse times. The period of the judges is probably more like our day

and age than any other in the history of Israel. It was a time of moral decline among the people of God, who were surrounded by a culture that flaunted depraved behavior. So the lessons we can learn in this book from studying how God called out a people to be his children, to represent him in the midst of those times, will help us succeed in the mission we are given in Philippians 2.

A Survey of O.T. History

Let me just place Judges for you in the history of the Old Testament. As you know, the perspective of the Bible is that human beings were made great once and then fell into sin, that all of us are born in a state of rebellion against God, and that what we require is some act of God to save us from the condition of our birth. We need help. Every one of us in every generation and every culture is separated from God and in rebellion against him until something happens that will save us. And so the story of the Bible is that of God's intervention to do something about our dilemma.

Abraham was named as the father of a nation that would tell the truth about God to every other nation. And Abraham was given a land by promise, but he and his son didn't get to possess the land; they were only wanderers in it. Abraham's great-grandsons eventually went into Egypt. Four hundred years passed as this family, the representatives of God who could tell the truth about his love and redemptive plan, became a mighty people who were subsequently reduced to slavery. Then, led by Moses, they left slavery in Egypt and wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, anticipating a home. Finally under the leadership of Joshua, they entered the land originally promised to Abraham and his posterity and began the conquest that was to gain them a home from which they could bless the rest of the world. Eventually Joshua died, and then they entered into a long period of decline in which they became barely distinguishable from their Canaanite neighbors. This is the period described by the book of Judges.

It is critical that we who know the truth be different from the unsaved world in which we live, in what we say, what we do, and who we are. One of the horrible and sinful opportunities presented to the people of God is to compromise, to be indistinguishable from those around us. Light is hid under a bushel. That is a temptation that confronted Israel over and over again; it is the temptation to which they largely succumbed in the book of Judges. If we are to take up the mission impossible to be children of God amidst a perverse generation, displaying light to the world around us, this book will help us learn how.

No King in Israel

The book of Judges does something helpful to those who would attempt to teach it. It makes "bookends" of the first and last verses of the book that gather up the themes that you'll find in the rest of the book. The very first verse of the book of Judges reads this way:

Now it came about after the death of Joshua that the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, saying, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?"

Now, the rest of the first chapter of Judges describes events that actually took place while Joshua was living: Joshua was a remarkable man who had been steadfast during the wilderness wanderings and the early years of the conquest of Canaan. His death is highlighted early in this book because those who follow him fall short by comparison.

The last verse of Judges relates the other theme that we'll discover as we study through the book:

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

This summary makes clear that the period of the Judges was characterized by a rejection of God as the sovereign of the nation. Each individual consulted only himself in determining what was right.

When Joshua died there were none left who were willing to bow the knee to the sovereignty of God and give all their heart to him. There were none who responded to the claim of his lordship on their life without reservation. That's why the words Joshua addressed to the Israelites at the end of his life were so important: "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15.) When Joshua died, there was no one left with his commitment to obedience.

When everyone does what is right in his own eyes, there is no standard, no word from the Lord anymore. Lies and truth, righteousness and evil are indistinguishable from each other. Everything starts with me: What do I want to do? What is to my advantage? What promotes me and my interest? That alone is the measure by which I will live my life. In that time everyone did what was right in his own eyes, and the book of Judges records the horrible results. Rape, mutilation, murder, subversion, treachery, and graphic violence are all there. The pages of the book have heroes whose lives are stirring, but over and over again the flaws of the heroes and the greater flaws of the people stand out.

Choosing Compromise

The descent into lawlessness and anarchy, as Judges will show, begins with compromise. It's selling out at minor points along the way, which leads to more selling out, which eventually leads to decay. Now, think for a moment about the world we live in. Think about how that story is being lived out everywhere in this culture. Time after time we learn of political, business and religious leaders whose impressive public image is a mark for private unrighteousness.

We have come to the point where the police practices in the city of Milwaukee caused ordinary policemen meeting a naked teenage boy in the street, bleeding by some accounts, in the middle of the night, to send him back into the apartment where the man who would execute him lived. When questioned about why they didn't do something else, they responded, "We assumed it was a lovers' quarrel of some sort. It seemed normal to us." It seemed like the right thing to send that child back into the setting where he was eventually murdered! What's so tragic about that is that they don't even have any standard that says, "Wait a minute. We ought to act differently than that," that suggests that rather than a send naked, bleeding teenager back into a setting like that, you start with the assumption that maybe there is a problem. The decay that spreads from compromise leads eventually to a kind of lawlessness in which people can't tell what's right to do anymore.

Stanford University and the Salomon Brothers investment house in New York have both been discovered in this last year or so to have regularly, repeatedly, and knowingly practiced fraud with a kind of arrogance that said, "Well, we are who we are. We get to do whatever we want." Senior leaders in each organization allowed the end to justify the means and believed so thoroughly in their own greatness they winked at laws meant for "ordinary" people. These compromises led to decay and eventual rebuke.

God At Work

That's the story of the book of Judges. But in Judges is also the story, wonderfully, of how God acts in times of decay. When a crooked and perverse generation prevails, how do his children become blameless and above reproach and offer hope to those around them? That's the story of the book of Judges, too, because God doesn't abandon decayed cultures. He doesn't leave his people behind when they fail.

Let me take you briefly through the first chapter of this book. We won't read it all; I just want you to get a feel for this word of introduction. Verse 1:

Now it came about after the death of Joshua that the sons of Israel inquired of the LORD, saying, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites to fight against them?" And the LORD said, "Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand." Then Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I in turn will go with you into the territory allotted to you." So Simeon went with him. And Judah went up, and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the

Perizzites into their hands; and they defeated ten thousand men at Bezek. And they found Adoni-bezek in Bezek and fought against him and they defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. But Adoni-bezek fled; and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes. And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me." So they brought him to Jerusalem and he died there.

Adoni-bezek was a Canaanite king. The lives and religion of the Canaanites, these tribes that inhabited the land of promise before the Jews got there, were sown through with wickedness, depravity, and disease. They were in every sense the precise opposite of the truth, of righteousness, and of God and what he stood for. And so Adoni-bezek had lived for some years and had conquered seventy men himself and had mutilated them. Having your thumbs and your big toes cut off means you'll never fight again. It means you can't carry a sword, you can't draw a bow, you can't lead an army. It's a way of humiliating your enemy.

The people of God were called to occupy the territory, to take over, to expel and exterminate those who were in opposition to them. But they were not called to humiliate their enemies as the Canaanites did. Adoni-bezek said, "I've had kings picking up scraps with only the four fingers they have left on each hand under my table, and now it's been done to me." The tragic thing from the point of view of the people of God is that they were beginning to act like the nations around them. Instead of responding to the call of God to do what was right, to establish a beachhead where his name could be witnessed to, they learned from their enemies. They learned to enjoy humiliating others. They learned to practice the kind of warfare that their enemies practiced. They learned to become just like the people who were around them.

The account goes on and talks about the sacking of Jerusalem in verse 8. They sacked and burned it, but they didn't occupy it, and it was retaken by the Jebusites, as verse 21 mentions. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin both had Jerusalem at their border, and neither one of them would end up occupying it for a long time. Its Jebusite people diluted the worship of God as a result.

**The mission that we have been called to is to be children of God
in a crooked and perverse generation**

Caleb and Othniel

There is the story of Caleb. As we read in verse 10, Judah went up against the Canaanites who were in Hebron (the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba) and they struck Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai. These were giants, the Nephilim, extraordinary figures who had lived in the land of Canaan for years. A generation before, Caleb had gone in as a spy and had come back and said, "I want to go fight the giants for God's sake. And I'm going to take that land of Hebron, and it is going to be mine." He was a member of the tribe of Judah, and in the campaign of Judah, Caleb did fight against the giants and defeated them. It's the story of someone who wanted what God wanted. Caleb is one of the great figures of the Bible. But then as the story in chapter 1 unfolds, he promised to give his daughter in marriage to someone who could act heroically as well. His nephew Othniel stepped up, fought a battle, and was allowed to marry Achsah, Caleb's daughter, as a result. And then there was an embarrassing interchange as Othniel proved to be quite unlike his more heroic father-in-law. Verse 13:

Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah for a wife. Then it came about when she came to him, that she persuaded him [the word in Hebrew is really nag; she nagged him] to ask her father for a field. [But the field was not enough.] Then she alighted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you want?" And she said to him, "Give me a blessing, since you have given me the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water...."

You get the impression that this younger hero who could fight wars had no ability at all to interact with his

wife, and she led him around by the nose and told her father what they required for themselves. In Canaan Caleb fought giants who defied the living God in exactly the same way that David would one day fight Goliath, the giant who defied the armies of the living God. Caleb fought for righteous reasons. Othniel fought and then was nagged by his wife and begged from his father-in-law. He was different from the older man. His motives were less pure; the greatness was diminished.

The first chapter of Judges contains other peculiar stories, with little effort made to relate them to each other. As the battle moved to the northern territories, the house of Joseph went against Bethel (verse 22). They found a man who was willing to spy on his people, and they won the battle as a result. The story is reminiscent of the capture of Jericho. You will recall that after Rahab helped the army of Israel, she actually became a member of the tribe of Judah as a result. But in this story, the man sold out his city for selfish reasons. He went off and built towns among the Hittites later. Rahab responded to God, joined the people of God, and became in fact a foremother of Messiah. This man was just a mercenary; he realized which army was bigger and who was going to win, took advantage of the opportunity, and then went off and lived for himself.

The stories here in Judges are similar to events that took place under Joshua's leadership, but they are reduced, sadder, less heroic, and there is less godliness in them. Repeatedly we see evidence of compromise in the book of Judges.

Difficult and Dangerous

Let me just summarize the rest of chapter 1 by calling your attention to a couple of points. Verse 19 says this:

Now the LORD was with Judah, and they took possession of the hill country; but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots.

And verse 28 says:

And it came about when Israel became strong, that they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but they did not drive them out completely.

Beyond verse 28 we read more accounts of partial victory and incomplete responsibility. There are ultimately two things that kept the people of Israel from succeeding in the battle to which they had been called. First, it was dangerous, and second, it was difficult. It was dangerous because the inhabitants of the valley had chariots, and so they decided not to do anything that would hurt too much or cost too much. They reasoned, "Let's just leave the Canaanite tribes in place in the lowlands. We'll accept the hill country. We don't want to have to fight against a powerful military. We don't want to accept the danger or take on the hard assignment." And the other thing they decided was that it was much easier to leave the Canaanite people in place as slaves. Life without slaves is more difficult. Incomplete victory and ultimately the decay that is so much sewn throughout the fabric of this book came from these compromises.

The opening five verses of chapter 2 tell how the angel of the Lord spoke to the people. He reminded them of the faithfulness of God and of the unfaithfulness of their choices, and they left weeping. Verse 4 says:

And it came about when the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, that the people lifted up their voices and wept.

This weeping is where we'll end the story this morning. And there are many of us in this room who live Christian lives that are acquainted with compromise and weeping, aren't there? When it seems either too dangerous or too difficult to do otherwise, we make choices to compromise. We choose to do less than God is calling us to do. We pad an expense account. We live with prayer lives that are mediocre, intermittent, and shallow rather than learning to pray in any depth. We experience thought lives that have all sorts of inappropriate fantasies in them, and we never attempt to judge them or turn to God for help. We let our temper

explode and overwhelm us and assume there is no help for this temper problem that we never seem to be able to get over. We don't do the hard work of going back and confronting what needs to be confronted and being freed from it.

Admitting these things means we are ready for an impossible mission-beyond human strength, accomplished by God's power for His glory. The mission that we have been called to is to be children of God in a crooked and perverse generation, lights in the world. Instead of being sorrowful at our lot in life we are to be those who offer hope to other people. Only we who know the Lord have a voice that can offer help to a decaying world. There are people around us on every side who are tragically sad and lost because they don't know the Lord, and our responsibility is to be true to him from the heart so that we can offer them hope.

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