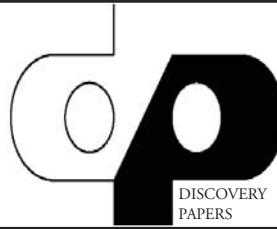


PLACE OF TEARS

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 1:1-2:5

1st Message

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The first class I took in biblical exegesis, some twenty-five years ago, featured the Book of Judges. For me, the narrative was both captivating and unnerving. The relevance of the ancient narrative to contemporary life captivated me; the interpretive conundrums unnerved me. I also sensed that there was a whole lot more going on in these stories than I was grasping. I always hoped that my journey would bring me the way of Judges again. Today, I'm having another go at it.

Judges features some of the most compelling stories in the canon. Mostly, they are stories of decline. But stories of decline are stories of need and stories of need are what we need. We need to know our need—our desperate need for God, our desperate need for Christ. The Book of Judges helps us do that. Jesus extolled Mary, who was seated at his feet in order to learn from him, for preferring the one necessary thing (Luke 10:42). The book of Judges illustrates the need for a king. The king we need is Christ. Perhaps we don't need as many things as we think. Whatever we need, one thing's for sure: we need Christ.

In biblical history, Judges spans the gap between the exodus and the monarchy. The Book of Exodus chronicles Israel's release from slavery in Egypt and her formation as God's people in the wilderness of Sinai. The Book of Joshua features Israel's conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land. By the time of the Book of Judges, however, much work was still left to be done. For that work, God raised up a series of tribal leaders, or judges, before finally anointing a king after his own heart, David, who united the twelve tribes (1 and 2 Samuel). Still, David was a flawed leader (see: Bathsheba), and his success was only short-lived. He leaves us wanting—wanting for Christ.

The violence featured in Judges—particularly the God-ordained violence—flies in the face of modern western sensibilities. Why, we might ask, did God order the Israelites to wage war against the Canaanites? God had been extraordinarily patient with the Canaanites, but they had become irredeemably wicked (Genesis 15:16, Deuteronomy 9:5, Leviticus 18:24). God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but he holds his creation accountable for wickedness (Ezekiel 18:23, 32). The wars ordained by God, however, should not be confused with ethnic cleansing, for he spared repentant Canaanites

(Joshua 6:25). (See also Genesis 18:22-33.) In time, under his original covenant with his people, God replaced the sword with the prophetic word, and finally, under the new covenant, he commands his people to love their enemies and engage in spiritual warfare not against flesh and blood but against demonic forces (Matthew 5:44, 2 Corinthians 10:3-6, Ephesians 6:12). Believers under the new covenant possess the Holy Spirit, which means that their power to influence for holiness transcends any power that would influence them for unholiness. Therefore, they need to love those they live among, not drive them out.

War is horrible; it illustrates the horror of sin, how devastating it is to reject God. The Book of Judges, in part through the conflicts it chronicles, illustrates the horror of sin. Even so, we would do well to remember that death, no matter how horrible, whether it comes by the sword or not, is not final. One day, everyone will be raised from the dead to stand before God, who will judge rightly (Acts 24:15, Romans 2:6-8). Mostly, we should remember that God went to war against Satan, sin, and death in our behalf and won a great victory when his Son died a violent death at the hands of humanity; therefore, there will come a time when there will be no more death, let alone war (Revelation 21:4).

The Book of Judges features a balanced, three-part structure: a two-part prologue (Judges 1:1-3:6), the main body (Judges 3:7-16:31), and a two-part epilogue (Judges 17-21).

Compromising Decisions

In the movie *A Man for All Seasons*,¹ a young man, Richard Rich, approaches the king's minister, Thomas Cromwell, in search of a court position. Before granting him the position, Cromwell persuaded the young man to divulge privileged information. After Rich reveals his secret, Cromwell tells him, "That wasn't so difficult, was it?" Rich simply answers, "No." Cromwell: "You'll find it easier the next time." Cromwell was right. The young man proceeded to make a series of compromising decisions, and the lust for status and power took control of his life.

Has something taken control of your life? Perhaps like Richard Rich, you've made a number of compromising

decisions, maybe without even realizing it. Perhaps you have thereby granted a place in your life to a power the scriptures call sin. If sin has taken over, what might you do about it? Sin took over Israel during the period of the Judges. In the end, Judges 1:1-2:5 shows us what Israel did about it—and, by extension, what we might do about it.

The prologue to the Book of Judges both summarizes and anticipates the entire book. Part One (Judges 1:1-2:5) mostly considers the perspective of the Israelites, while Part Two (Judges 2:6-3:6) mostly considers the perspective of God. Part One features the relative success of Israel's attempts to complete the conquest of the Promised Land in the south (Judges 1:3-21) and the relative failure of her attempts in the north (Judges 1:22-36).

Success in the South

Judges 1:1-21:

¹After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the LORD, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?" ²The LORD answered, "Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands." ³Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them. ⁴When Judah attacked, the LORD gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek. ⁵It was there that they found Adoni-Bezek and fought against him, putting to rout the Canaanites and Perizzites. ⁶Adoni-Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes. ⁷Then Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have picked up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

⁸The men of Judah attacked Jerusalem also and took it. They put the city to the sword and set it on fire. ⁹After that, the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites living in the hill country, the Negev and the western foothills. ¹⁰They advanced against the Canaanites living in Hebron (formerly called Kiriath Arba) and defeated Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmi.

¹¹From there they advanced against the people living in Debir (formerly called Kiriath Sepher). ¹²And Caleb said, "I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher." ¹³Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it; so Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage. ¹⁴One day when she came to Othniel, she urged him to ask her father for a field. When she got off her donkey, Caleb asked her, "What can I do for you?" ¹⁵She replied, "Do me a special favor. Since you have given me land in the Negev, give me also springs of water." Then Caleb gave her the upper and lower springs.

¹⁶The descendants of Moses' father-in-law, the Kenite, went up from the City of Palms with the men of Judah to live among the people of the Desert of Judah in the Negev near Arad. ¹⁷Then the men of Judah went with the Simeonites their brothers and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath, and they totally destroyed the city. Therefore it was called Hormah. ¹⁸The men of Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron—each city with its territory. ¹⁹The LORD was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots. ²⁰As Moses had promised, Hebron was given to Caleb, who drove from it the three sons of Anak. ²¹The Benjamites, however, failed to dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the Benjamites.

For the most part, the tribes of Judah and Simeon succeed in conquering the southern inhabitants of the Promised Land. Their success is empowered by the Lord, who led Judah into battle (v. 2), gave the inhabitants of the land into her hands (v. 4), and was with them (v. 19). Still, the faith of the tribe of Judah played a part. Thus, the Lord's covenant—or partnership—with Israel is on display in Judges 1:1-21. If the Lord had not empowered Judah, Judah would not have been successful. Conversely, if Judah had not obeyed the Lord, it would not have been successful. For example, Judah could have chosen to disobey the Lord's command to attack the Canaanites. If it had done so, it wouldn't even have engaged the Canaanites let alone defeated them. A partnership takes two parties. A successful partnership takes two parties who each fulfill their obligations. Judges 1:1-21 features a successful partnership.

The success of the partnership is illustrated by the family story featured in Judges 1:11-15. Caleb, who had spied out the Promised Land and believed that the Lord would give it to his people, promises to give his daughter in marriage to the one who conquers one of the Canaanite cities. Such a promise may pose an affront to modern Western values, which extol the virtues of individual choice, but Caleb was ensuring a noble husband for Acsah, his daughter. The man—and the husband—turned out to be Othniel, who would become the first judge in the Book of Judges. Acsah also shows herself to be no slouch. In the Hebrew Scriptures, valuing the land that God promised to his people is considered a virtue. Acsah, who treasures the land, is a woman of faith. She envisions harsh living conditions in the desert-like land of the Negev that she has inherited; therefore, she also asks her father for—and receives—springs of water in order to grow crops.

The story reads like a fairy tale (though the resourceful Acsah in no way plays the part of the damsel in distress). A patriarch inspires faith in a hopeful young man, who for the sake of love defeats the evil landholders and wins the hand of the maiden, and the couple begin their life together in the land of promise, nourished by springs of water. All that's missing is, "And they lived happily ever after."

A True Story

As children, we hear the fairy tales and we believe them. Oh, we know they're stories, not history, but something within us wants life to be this way. Then we grow up, and life doesn't unfold like a fairy tale. We don't live happily ever after. We start living practically and stop believing in fairy tales. Still, we read them to our children, who will read them to their children, and so on. The fairy tales have a certain staying power. My wife and I took our children to Disneyland recently, where the longest wait wasn't for the so-called "major attractions." We waited in line for ninety minutes so that our daughters could have an audience with the Disney princesses. The fairy tales, I think, will be with us for a while. Maybe the fairy tales resonate not only because we want them to be true but also because we were made to resonate with them. And maybe we were made to resonate with them to prepare us for a story that seems too good to be a true, like a fairy tale, but is true nevertheless. Here's the story:

Some 1,300 years after Othniel married Acsah, another hopeful young man, for the sake of love, defeated the evil landholders and won for himself a bride. The man: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. The bride: his church,

those who believe in him. The evil landholders: Satan, the ruler of this world, and his demons. Having come to "destroy the devil's work," Jesus, on his way to the cross, said "now the prince of this world will be driven out" (1 John 3:8, John 12:31). Jesus loved the church and gave himself up for her so that that he might win for himself a glorious bride, holy and blameless, without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Acsah, the bride of Othniel, was nourished by springs of water in the land of promise. Jesus effected a new covenant, a new partnership with God, so that we, as the bride of Christ, might be nourished by the springs of the Holy Spirit in this world, which is already on its way to becoming the new Promised Land, the new heavens and the new earth (John 7:37-39, Matthew 5:5, Romans 4:13). The Spirit empowers us to worship God and serve him.

If Judges 1:1-21 reads something like a fairy tale, Judges 1:22-36 reads more like reality.

Failure in the North

Judges 1:22-36:

²²Now the house of Joseph attacked Bethel, and the LORD was with them. ²³When they sent men to spy out Bethel (formerly called Luz), ²⁴the spies saw a man coming out of the city and they said to him, "Show us how to get into the city and we will see that you are treated well." ²⁵So he showed them, and they put the city to the sword but spared the man and his whole family. ²⁶He then went to the land of the Hittites, where he built a city and called it Luz, which is its name to this day.

²⁷But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land. ²⁸When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely. ²⁹Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them. ³⁰Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol, who remained among them; but they did subject them to forced labor. ³¹Nor did Asher drive out those living in Acco or Sidon or Ahlab or Aczib or Helbah or Aphek or Rehob, ³²and because

of this the people of Asher lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. ³³Neither did Naphtali drive out those living in Beth Shemesh or Beth Anath; but the Naphtalites too lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, and those living in Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath became forced laborers for them.

³⁴The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain. ³⁵And the Amorites were determined also to hold out in Mount Heres, Aijalon and Shaalvim, but when the power of the house of Joseph increased, they too were pressed into forced labor. ³⁶The boundary of the Amorites was from Scorpion Pass to Sela and beyond.

In the north, the tribes of Israel repeatedly failed to drive out the Canaanites. As a result, the Canaanites lived among the people of Israel. The Israelites tolerated the presence of the pagans. Furthermore, as the campaign continues, two tribes of Israel, Asher and Naphtali, are reported as living among the Canaanites. First, the Israelites allow the Canaanites to live among them; then, the Canaanites allow the Israelites to live among them. Furthermore, the Amorites were strong enough to force the tribe of Dan to live at a distance. Finally, the Israelites are described as living not within their own border but within the border of the Amorites. Part of the Promised Land, which the Lord had given to the Israel, is still depicted as belonging to the pagans.

Why were the southern tribes mostly successful and the northern tribes only partially successful? The Lord did his part. He was with the tribes of Joseph, and presumably with the other northern tribes also. But the northern tribes didn't do their part. They lacked faith. With the Lord's help, they could have driven out the Canaanites, but they failed to trust him. Their obedience was incomplete. We observe, in Judges 1:22-36, an unsuccessful partnership.

The anecdotes at the beginning of each section are illuminating. When Judah defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites at Bezek, they pursued a pagan ruler, Aboni-bezek, maimed him, and brought him to Jerusalem, where he died. On the other hand, spies from the tribes of Joseph cut a deal with one of the inhabitants of Bethel and allowed him to go free, in disobedience to the Lord. The tribes of Joseph lacked faith. They trusted not in the Lord but in a pagan who showed them the entrance to the city of Bethel. Consequently, although the Israelites conquered Bethel, the man from Bethel built another city and named

it Luz. The pagan presence was not eradicated; it was simply transferred from one place to another. [Although the tribe Judah is depicted in a more favorable light than the tribes of Joseph, still, the behavior of Judah in the first anecdote leaves something to be desired. Instead of killing Aboni-bezek, as the Lord would have it, the men of Judah cut off his fingers and big toes, imitating a pagan practice. Even so, even Aboni-bezek considers his punishment just.]

The story echoes, in a backward sort of way, a chapter in the story of Jacob, one of Israel's patriarchs. Jacob had a powerful encounter with the Lord in Luz and renamed it Bethel, which means House of God (Genesis 28:19). Then, when his descendents conquered Bethel, they allowed one of its descendents to rebuild a pagan city called Luz. In the south, a pagan ruler died in Jerusalem, the future site of Israel's temple, the House of God. In the north, a pagan man is allowed to go from "House of God" and establish a pagan outpost.

Sin Takes Over

Jesus wins us as his bride and effects a new covenant so that we might be empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship and serve God. Sometimes, perhaps, as in the case of Judah and Simeon, everything works. Other times, perhaps, as in the case of the northern tribes, we fail to serve God's purposes. Instead of trusting God, we cut deals with sin.

All sin stems from the worship of false gods. We've dethroned God and become the rebel rulers of our own lives, turning to gods such as money, sex, power, and success to meet our needs and satisfy our passions. Sinful behavior reflects a disposition to worship gods of our own choosing instead of the God who created us. The worship of false gods is the fountainhead from which all aberrant behavior flows. [I explore the core place of false worship further in my commentaries on Romans 1:18-32² and Romans 3:1-20.³]

Sin, the scriptures tell us, is a malevolent tyrant that must be mastered (Genesis 4:7, Romans 6). Once you let sin in, it's hard to kick it out. It tends to make a home near you, so to speak, the way the former inhabitant of Bethel built a pagan outpost in the Promised Land and called it Luz. And sin is never happy with just a little; it wants everything. A little sin is never enough. In the words of C.S. Lewis, sin's poisonous formula is "an ever-increasing craving for an ever-diminishing pleasure."⁴ First, we tolerate sin, the way the northern tribes tolerated the pagans. Then we allow sin to live near us. When we do so, sin pushes us further away from God and from trusting in him. Finally, but often

subtly, apart from our awareness, sin takes control of our lives. [I explore these themes more fully in my commentary on Romans 6.⁵]

Has something taken control of your life and crowded out devotion to God? Has your schedule taken over? Has your cell phone, Facebook, or the Internet taken over? Have the tools, that were supposed to help you, overshadowed the God who helps you? Has the lust for money, power, sex, or success taken over? Has alcohol or drugs taken over? Has everything taken over, crowding out the one thing, allegiance to Christ, that puts everything in perspective?

How, then, within the framework of our covenant with God, do we deal with sin, this malevolent tyrant? Listen to the words of an angel.

Words of an Angel

Judges 2:1-5:

¹The 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, ²and 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? ³Now 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.” ⁴When the angel of the LORD had spoken these things to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud, ⁵and they called that place Bokim. There they offered sacrifices to the LORD.

What do we make of Judges 1? The Lord, through his special envoy, the angel of the Lord, offers his interpretation. He reminds Israel of what he has done: rescuing her from bondage in Egypt, making a covenant with her, and leading her into the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord, as a covenant partner, pledged his faithfulness, and he accuses Israel of unfaithfulness. The house of Joseph showed more interest in making a covenant with an inhabitant of the land than in honoring its covenant with the Lord, even promising to treat the man kindly. Literally, the house of Joseph promised to show the man “loyal love,” the kind of covenant faithfulness the Lord promised to show his people. Furthermore, the tribes tolerated the presence of

pagan altars instead of tearing them down.

The Lord isn’t simply accusing, however; he is also asking. “Why have you done this?” he asks. Perhaps they don’t know, at a conscious level, why they did what they did. Perhaps, at some deeper level, they know what motivated them, but they don’t want to go there for fear of what they might find. The question forces them to probe the deeper regions of their hearts.

In the north, the Israelites failed to drive out the inhabitants of the land. More precisely, they failed to trust the Lord to drive out the inhabitants. Now, in view of the tribes’ disobedience, the Lord says that he will not drive them out. The Lord wanted to empower Israel to drive out the inhabitants for her own good. If the inhabitants of the land and their altars were allowed to remain in the land, they would have a corrupting influence on God’s people. Israel has not demonstrated the willingness to drive out the inhabitants, so the Lord, in essence, gives them what they want: he will leave the inhabitants in the land. As a result, the inhabitants will be like a thorn in the side, a constant irritant, and their gods will be like a snare, trapping Israel in pagan worship.

By all appearances, the people of Israel respond sincerely, weeping in sorrow, memorializing their encounter with the angel by naming the place Bokim, “Weepers,” and worshiping the Lord by offering sacrifices to him. We wonder as readers: Where does Israel go from here, from Bokim, the place of tears? The first part of the prologue draws us in to the drama.

A Way Forward

How do we deal with sin? The angel’s words, coupled with Israel’s response, gives us a way forward.

First, the angel reminds Israel what the Lord has done for her. We remember what the Lord has done for us in Christ, who for the sake of love defeated Satan and won us as his bride, leading us into the kingdom of God in advance of the day when the kingdom comes in full. We revel in the story that seems too good to be true, like a fairy tale, but is true nevertheless. We revel in our own stories and the particular ways that God has blessed us in Christ.

My study is adorned with several visual reminders of what the Lord has done for me, including photos of the wife and children I waited so long for, a photo collage from my time as pastor of the young adults ministry, and photos of an Italian village and a favorite trout stream,

where the Lord has met me in special ways. Sometimes, when I meet with the Lord, I let my eyes linger over these reminders of God's faithfulness. I remember. I revel. In an unguarded moment—and what is there to guard against in the presence of the Lord?—those photos can reduce me to tears.

Second, with respect to Israel's disobedience, the angel asks, "Why have you done this?" Perhaps, at a conscious level, we don't know why we do what we do. Oftentimes, when I ask my children why they did something wrong, they respond with the timeless answer, "I don't know." As adults, we're old enough to probe the deeper regions of our hearts, where the battle for faithfulness is won and lost, but perhaps we don't go there for fear of what we might find. If, however, we courageously answer the angel's question, we'll begin to excavate our motivations. Understanding your motivations does not necessarily enable you to change what you do, but it can be an important step in the process of renewal. Motivations stem from beliefs. If you know the false belief, you can apply the truth to it. The Lord doesn't just care about our behavior; he's more concerned with our hearts. Jesus, for example, asked his disciples, "Why are you so afraid?" (Mark 4:40).

Third, the Israelites responded to the angel's words by weeping in sorrow. Remembering what the Lord has done for us on the one hand and coming to terms with what we have done on the other hand can create a collision in the heart that produces godly sorrow, maybe even tears of godly sorrow. The Israelites worshiped by offering sacrifices to the Lord. We worship by offering the Lord our broken and contrite hearts.

How do you deal with sin? You deal with sin by drawing it up into worship. Sin is simply our convenient substitute for God. We ask sin to do for us—meet our needs and satisfy the deep craving of our souls—what only God can. In worship, we experience God. In remembering and reveling in what God has done for us, we discover—in an experiential way—that he is superior to our substitutes. Really, nothing compares to experiencing God. The satisfaction that sin brings shrivels when we experience God. Then, when we open up with him about our sin, we discover—again, in an experiential way—that he forgives us in Christ, that he moves not away from us but toward us. Think about it: we hide from our world what we think it will find unacceptable, but when we bring what we think is unacceptable to Jesus, he embraces us. Sin is a malevolent

tyrant, but worship takes it down. It's the smooth stone in the shepherd's pouch that fells the giant.

Taking Time

Worship—the kind of worship that experiences God—takes time, and time is something we never seem to have enough of. Israel, when confronted by the angel, took the time to worship. Perhaps a re-evaluation of priorities is in order. It takes time to discover that nothing compares to God. It takes time to discover that Jesus moves toward us, not away from us. It takes time to experience God. Part of the Israelites' problem in the Book of Judges was that they tended to worship in times of crisis but not regularly.

For me, meeting with the Lord most days for at least thirty minutes, spending an entire day with him on a regular basis, and going on two-day personal retreats have brought times of refreshing. For my daily meetings, I often employ the traditional ACTS acronym: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. For my days with the Lord and my personal retreats, I mostly just enjoy him and listen for him. I can live without such encounters with God, but I cannot thrive. I know this because when I've neglected meeting with God, I've paid a price: I've granted sin a place.

I have help, though. The new covenant features the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who convicts us and nudges us and reveals God to us. The Spirit empowers us to worship God and serve him. Perhaps the Spirit is stirring in you even now.

Where will we go from here, from Bokim, the place of tears?

NOTES

¹Fred Zinnemann, Director, *A Man for All Seasons*, 1966.

²Scott Grant, *World Gone Wrong, Romans 1:18-32*, 2006, <http://www.pbc.org/messages/15701>.

³Scott Grant, *The Best Is a Bust, Romans 3:1-20*, 2006, <http://www.pbc.org/messages/15703>.

⁴C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour and Co., 1943), 49.

⁵Scott Grant, *Freedom From Sin, Romans 6*, 2006, <http://www.pbc.org/messages/17774>.