

DOWNWARD SPIRAL, PART 1: “THE NEED FOR GOD’S LEADER”
JUDGES 1:1-2:5

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We are beginning a new sermon series through the book of Judges today.

“Judges” here doesn't refer to judicial or court judges, but these judges were military leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from an oppressor. They were *not* kings over all of Israel, but they were more like clan or tribal leaders.

And the title of our sermon series through the book of Judges is “Downward Spiral.”

We'll see more of this downward spiral as we progress through this book, but the general pattern that we'll see is that...

- Israel rebels against the Lord by turning to idolatry,
- the Lord hands them over to their enemies as an act of discipline,
- the people cry out to God for mercy,
- the Lord responds by raising up a judge (or a military leader) to deliver his people from their enemies and give them rest,
- the judge eventually dies,
- and the people return to their wickedness, but it's even worse than before, so that by the end of the book, the people of Israel look more like the pagan Canaanites than the people of God.

So that's the downward spiral that we'll see play out later, but as we begin the book of Judges today, the opening chapters are more introductory, setting up the major problems that are at play that cause Israel to go into such a downward spiral.

Today's sermon is titled: “The Need for God's Leader.”

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

“When the righteous increase, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.” Proverbs 29:2.

Consider *The Lion King*: under *Scar's* reign, the Pride Lands are devastated. Animals go hungry and the land itself withers. It's only when *Simba* steps into his role as the rightful king that the animals and the land thrive again.

Or consider *The Lord of the Rings*: under the leadership of the *stewards*, Gondor was a kingdom in decline—directionless, distressed, and demoralized. It's only when *Aragorn* steps into his role as the rightful king that the people are united and filled with hope, they're able to defeat their enemies, and they experience a new era of peace and prosperity.

When the *right* leader is leading, the people experience *blessings*; when there is the *wrong* leader or *no* leader, the people experience *devastation*.

This vital role of leadership can be seen everywhere—in the home, in the workplace, in the arts, in the governing of nations.

And that's what we'll look at more in today's passage.

The One Thing

God's people need God's leader to experience God's blessings.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 1:1-2:5.

There's a lot of ground to cover, so I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon.

If you need access to a Bible, just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

Now, as we enter the book of Judges, we enter a major transition in the whole Bible.

- In the books of Genesis, the main characters are the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—as God makes a covenant with them.
- From Exodus to Deuteronomy, the main character is Moses—as God uses him to deliver his people from slavery, to establish them as a nation under his Law, and to lead them throughout the wilderness to the *edge* of the Promised Land.
- In the book of Joshua, the main character is Joshua—as God's appointed leader after Moses who leads Israel *into* the Promised Land.

But from Judges onward til the end of the Bible, the main character is basically King David.

- Judges is about how Israel *needs* King David from the tribe of Judah.
- Ruth is about the events leading to David's birth.
- 1 & 2 Samuel is about the establishment of David as king.
- 1 & 2 Kings is about how David's sons fail to walk in his ways as king.
- The prophets prophesy how the Lord will establish a righteous Son of David who will lead his people.
- And the entire New Testament is about Jesus Christ, the righteous Son of David who has finally come to perfectly lead his people.

So, as we begin to look at the book of Judges, it must be viewed from *that* lens, which the book itself makes clear as it says four times in its concluding chapters, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1).

So, let's keep that in mind as we begin to read these opening chapters.

Scripture Reading

Let's read Judges 1:1-2:5.

^{1:1} After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" ² The LORD said, "Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand." ³ And Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites. And I likewise will go with you into the territory allotted to you." So Simeon went with him. ⁴ Then Judah went up and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek. ⁵ They found Adoni-bezek at Bezek and fought against him and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. ⁶ Adoni-bezek fled, but they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and his big toes. ⁷ And Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table. As I have done, so God has repaid me." And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

⁸ And the men of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire. ⁹ And afterward the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, in the Negeb, and in the lowland. ¹⁰ And Judah went against the Canaanites who lived in Hebron (now the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-arba), and they defeated Sheshai and Ahiman and Talmi.

¹¹ From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. The name of Debir was formerly Kiriath-sepher. ¹² And Caleb said, "He who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give

him Achsah my daughter for a wife.” ¹³ And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it. And he gave him Achsah his daughter for a wife. ¹⁴ When she came to him, she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, “What do you want?” ¹⁵ She said to him, “Give me a blessing. Since you have set me in the land of the Negeb, give me also springs of water.” And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

¹⁶ And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad, and they went and settled with the people. ¹⁷ And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath and devoted it to destruction. So the name of the city was called Hormah. ¹⁸ Judah also captured Gaza with its territory, and Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. ¹⁹ And the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron. ²⁰ And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said. And he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. ²¹ But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.

²² The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the LORD was with them. ²³ And the house of Joseph scouted out Bethel. (Now the name of the city was formerly Luz.) ²⁴ And the spies saw a man coming out of the city, and they said to him, “Please show us the way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you.” ²⁵ And he showed them the way into the city. And they struck the city with the edge of the sword, but they let the man and all his family go. ²⁶ And the man went to the land of the Hittites and built a city and called its name Luz. That is its name to this day.

²⁷ Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages, for the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. ²⁸ When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely.

²⁹ And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them.

³⁰ Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol, so the Canaanites lived among them, but became subject to forced labor.

³¹ Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon or of Ahlab or of Achzib or of Helbah or of Aphik or of Rehob, ³² so the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out.

³³ Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, so they lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and of Beth-anath became subject to forced labor for them.

³⁴ The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. ³⁵ The Amorites persisted in dwelling in Mount Heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labor. ³⁶ And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akkrabbim, from Sela and upward.

^{2:1} Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, ² and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? ³ So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.” ⁴ As soon as the angel of the

LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept.
⁵ And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in three parts.

- I. The importance of leadership (1:1-21)
- II. The appearance of success (1:22-36)
- III. The consequence of disobedience (2:1-5)

I. The importance of leadership (1:1-21)

The book of Judges starts with "After the death of Joshua," but then there's no clear *person* appointed as the next leader of Israel (cf. Josh. 1:1).

And the rest of the book of Judges will show that there is a *need* for a righteous king to lead God's people (cf. Deut. 17:14-20).

Israel consisted of 12 tribes, and it was earlier prophesied in Genesis 49 that Israel's kings would come from the tribe of *Judah* (Gen. 49:10).

But later in Israel's history, the first king ends up being King Saul, who was *not* from the tribe of *Judah* like God's Word says, but he was from the tribe of *Benjamin*—and he turns out to be a king like all the *other* nations (1 Sam. 8:5, 19-20).

And so, the point that is being made here is that Israel needs a king from the tribe of *Judah*, as God's Word says, *not* from the tribe of *Benjamin*, like they end up choosing later on.

<pause>

Let's see how the author makes this point.

In verses 1-2, the LORD clearly appoints the tribe of *Judah* to lead the people of Israel into battle.

In verses 3-7 and 17, we see that, when Judah leads, *teamwork* is fostered between Judah and Simeon, and they're able to defeat the inhabitants of (or those who lived in) the land. Regarding the cutting off of Adoni-Bezek's thumbs and big toes in verses 6-7, Adoni-Bezek himself recognizes that this is God's *just* judgment upon him for what he did to many others.

In verses 8-10, the men of Judah capture two key cities—Jerusalem and Hebron. These would later be the capital cities of Israel where King David reigns from.

In verses 11-15 (cf. Josh. 15:15-19), we're introduced to Othniel, who we'll see again later as the very first judge that God raises up to deliver his people (Judg. 3:7-11). But here, he captures a city and marries Achsah, and they're given not only land but springs of water. And this is to make the point that, when *Judah* leads, not only is there military victory but there is family prosperity—there's marriage, there's blessing, there's land, there's springs of living water.

And then, in verse 16, we're introduced to the Kenites, who were *not* Israelites, but they were the people of Moses' father-in-law. And here, we see them joining the people of *Judah*, and are therefore included in experiencing the blessings of God's people.

So, here, we see a glimpse of how the nations are being *blessed* through the family of Abraham, particularly through the tribe of *Judah*.

In verse 18, three major Philistine cities—Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron—are defeated. The Philistines were a *major* enemy of Israel throughout the book of Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel. They'll only later be *definitively* defeated by none other than King *David* from the tribe of *Judah* in 2 Samuel 5 (vv. 17-25).

In verse 19, it's affirmed that "the LORD was *with* Judah" as they took possession of the hill country. But then, there's one *dark* note that's given about the tribe of Judah—"but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron" (cf. 4:3, 15), which hints that not all is exactly right with the tribe of Judah either.

Nevertheless, in verse 20, the last verse regarding Judah, it ends with a high note, reminding the readers of Caleb, who was one of the original 12 spies that were sent to survey the Promised Land about 40 years earlier, and he was the representative of the tribe of *Judah* (Num. 13:6). The "sons of Anak" were the supposed giants that intimidated 10 out of the original 12 spies, who spread fear among God's people saying, "we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them [the sons of Anak]" (Num. 13:33).

So Caleb, the representative of the tribe of *Judah*, defeated these so-called *giants*.

<pause>

And after those 20 verses *praising* the tribe of Judah, verse 21 starts with "But." And in just one matter-of-fact verse, the tribe of *Benjamin* is directly contrasted with Judah—and there is no victory or teamwork or justice or blessing recounted, no family prosperity alluded to, no key cities subdued, no giants defeated.

All it says is what the tribe of Benjamin did *not* do and how the pagan Jebusites continue to live with them even until the day of writing.

<pause>

So what can we take away from these verses?

Even though we're not part of ancient Israel, we don't have kings here in Indonesia, and we're not entering some earthly Promised Land, the key takeaway here is still the same for us as it was for the original readers.

What do I mean by that?

We ultimately need God's appointed king from the tribe of Judah to lead us.

And I'm not referring to King David, but the *greater* Son of David, King *Jesus*. We need him to lead us...

- to experience victory over our greatest enemies of sin, death, and Satan;
- to work together in unity by our common faith in him;
- to do what is just and right;
- to be a blessing to all the nations through the gospel we proclaim;
- to experience prospering family life according to his design;
- and to bring us one day into our heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

The whole message of the Bible is *not* about all that we need to do to defeat the giants in our lives. No, it's about the righteous King we need to *lead* us and *represent* us to do what we could *never* do ourselves.

That's the main takeaway here—God's people need God's leader to experience God's blessings.

More than anything, we need King Jesus, the greater Son of David, from the tribe of Judah, to reign in our hearts and rule over our lives. He does for us what we could never do for ourselves. He is our representative, our substitute, who lived the perfect life we could never live and die to take the penalty that we deserved, so that, if we repent and believe in him as our King and Savior, then we can be forgiven our sins and have eternal life in him.

The blessed life begins with accepting and following *Jesus* as our King.

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Now, a secondary takeaway here is that God's people need *godly* leaders who *resemble* King Jesus to experience God's blessings.

King Jesus reigns as the *Chief* Shepherd over his church (1 Pet. 5:4), but he also calls and gifts *under-shepherds* (or pastors) to lead in his church (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11).

This is why, in 1 Timothy 3 (vv. 1-7), Titus 1 (vv. 5-9), and 1 Peter 5 (vv. 1-4), God gives biblical qualifications for church elders (or pastors) who lead local churches.

We should never appoint for ourselves leaders who are like "all the other nations" (so to speak). But we need church leaders who have godly character, who are committed to faithfully teaching God's Word, who model what it looks like to follow Jesus in all areas of life, and who encourage and challenge God's people to follow Christ above all else.

It doesn't matter how competent, how likeable, how much capacity, or how much charisma someone has; if they do *not* meet the biblical qualifications of an elder, we should *not* appoint them as an elder in the church.

That's also why I tell our congregation, at times, that, if I ever start preaching something that is *contrary* to the gospel, then you should *fire* me. Or, if you ever see that my life is out of step with the gospel and the biblical qualifications, then you should *say* something—and depending on what it is, you should possibly *remove* me as a pastor.

How many pastors have brought down the witness of Christ due to scandal? How many pastors have led their congregations astray because they were not committed to faithfully teach God's Word? How many pastors have abused their authority to take advantage of the very people they were meant to care for?

It's really very sad and even angering to think about. Church leaders will ultimately have to give an account before God himself for how they led his people (Heb. 13:17), but we should also take care to *pray* for our leaders in light of the biblical qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5, and to *only* appoint those who *meet* those qualifications.

We need biblically qualified leaders in the church, so that God's people will be led to experience God's blessings that we see in his Word.

<pause>

Now, a third takeaway here is that, in our various positions in life, we ought to lead in such a way that *blesses* those we lead.

Interestingly, King David's last words are about leadership; he says in 2 Samuel 23 (vv. 3b-4), "When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth."

The idea is that, when we lead with the fear of God—with the proper reverence of God as our controlling anchor for everything we do—it *blesses* everyone under our leadership. Like a sunrise on a cloudless morning, they can feel the *warmth* and see the *beauty* of such leadership. Like the rain that makes grass to sprout, such leadership gives *life* to those who experience it.

Whether we're a husband, a parent, a teacher, a manager, a business owner, a coach, or in some other position of authority, that's how we should lead others.

If we are *not* in leadership to *bless* those under our leadership, we should *not* be in leadership. We do the most damage to others and to the reputation of Christ when we lead in a way that is *not* intended to *bless* others.

Perhaps some of us have suffered abuse under such leaders. Perhaps some of us have seen leaders use their position selfishly for themselves at the expense of those under their care. This is profoundly evil because it ultimately *lies* about God—because that is not at all how *God* leads his people.

<pause>

So first, the importance of leadership; and second...

II. The appearance of success (1:22-36)

In verses 22-26, *other* tribes of Israel are now introduced. “The house of Joseph” is referring to two tribes—Ephraim and Manasseh—two of the largest of the remaining tribes.

And here, the LORD enables them to conquer the city of Luz. *But* the man they let go ends up going to another part of the Promised Land, and he just rebuilds the city and names it “Luz,” which was the same pagan name of the city that was destroyed (cf. Josh. 2, 6).

So even though the house of Joseph *appeared* successful in conquering the city of Luz, they actually didn’t really accomplish anything because the pagan city was rebuilt in another part of the land.

<pause>

Now, in order to understand what is going on in these chapters, we need to understand what God told the Israelites to do when they entered into the Promised Land. This is what God told them through Moses in...

Deuteronomy 7:1-6 = “When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

We saw that phrase “devote them to complete destruction” used earlier in Judges 1:17, where the tribes of Judah and Simeon “devoted [the city of Zephath] to destruction.”

The main idea of what God was telling them to do is this: Israel was to completely destroy all the inhabitants and possessions of these seven nations in the Promised Land. This is sometimes called putting the people “under the ban.”

Now, why would God do this?

First, to show that sin deserves God’s judgment.

It may seem shocking to us to hear God say to the Israelites, “show no mercy to them,” but we have to realize that God does not *need* to show sinners mercy. He is perfectly just and right to *punish* sinners according to what their sins deserve.

In fact, mercy does not have any real meaning unless we first recognize the fact that our sins against a holy God rightfully deserve his judgment.

By definition, mercy is *not* getting the judgment we deserve. So how can we say that God is merciful if we never deserved judgment for our sins to begin with?

God shows mercy when he *withholds* the judgment that we deserve for our sins, but he would be completely right and just to judge sinners for their sins.

That's what he did with the flood in Noah's day, and that's what he did with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day. And this is what God was doing with "the ban" in Israel's day.

It was to show that sin deserves God's judgment.

And all of this was to serve as a "preview" (so to speak) of what God will do on the *final* day of judgment.

A day is coming when we will *all* stand before the judgment seat of God and he will rightfully judge us for our sins, and God has mercifully warned us of this judgment not only with words but also with the inbreaking of that final judgment at different points in history to show that such judgment is *real*—that he will *not* overlook sin forever, but he *will* punish our sins as they deserve, if we do not repent.

<pause>

To be clear, we as the church are *not* to carry out "the ban" on this side of redemptive history.

The church is not a theocratic nation like Israel once was. The church is not a single nation where God directly rules over his people, but the church is made up of people from every nation and are spread throughout the whole world.

Also, in Ephesians 6 and 2 Corinthians 10, God has explicitly told his church that our battle is not against flesh and blood—we're not warring against *people*—but we engage in a *spiritual* battle (Eph. 6:10-20; cf. 2 Cor. 10:3-5).

<pause>

So, the first reason God decided to put these nations "under the ban" is to show that sin deserves God's judgment...

And second, it was to keep the Israelites from following the wicked idolatry and practices of those nations.

The Israelites were to be a people "holy" or "set apart" to the Lord. They were supposed to participate in the worship of the *true* God, and their practices were not to resemble anything close to the false worship of all the false gods of those seven nations.

In order to understand this, we have to know how *sinful* these nations were. They're described as a culture of idolatry, temple prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, incest, murder, bestiality, gang rape, and child sacrifice. These were not only practiced here and there, but they were widespread and accepted because this is what their false gods were like.

For example, regarding child sacrifice, the way they worshipped their false god Molech is by sacrificing their babies on the burning, red-hot outstretched arms of an idol as a raging fire incinerated these babies alive. *That* was the nature of their false gods and their false worship.

The sins of these nations were so evil that the Lord considered even the land they lived on to be made unclean (Lev. 18).

And after over 400 years of God's *merciful* patience and 400 years of them *not* repenting but only diving deeper into their sins, the Lord was finally going to pour out his judgment upon their sins through "the ban."¹

¹ God's mercy ought to be noted throughout. Before the flood, God had Noah preach to the people for years, but none but Noah's own family responded in repentance and faith to be saved from the flood (1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5). Before the destruction

And the Lord *knew* that if the inhabitants of these wicked nations *remain* with the Israelites, they will “turn [them] away” from following him to serve these other false gods and to adopt all their abominable practices in worship of their gods (cf. Deut. 20:18).

So “the ban” was to protect his people from the false worship and wicked practices of those nations.

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We should also note that this is why believers in Jesus Christ should never marry unbelievers.

“You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.”

This had nothing to do with race, but it had everything to do with worship.²

Now, when a believer marries an unbeliever, there are only a few outcomes.

First, the believer pushes their faith in Christ to the *margins* in order to accommodate their unbelieving spouse. And so, the believer either *flounders* in their faith because they don’t feel they can nourish it without causing conflict in their marriage, or they end up *abandoning* their faith in Christ altogether.

Second, if the believer holds fast to their faith, then their unbelieving *spouse* becomes more marginalized in their marriage. And so, even though marriage is meant to display the beauty of the oneness or unity that Christ shares with his church, they cannot experience that in their marriage because the husband and the wife do not share the core of who they are in regard to Christ, so the unbelieving *spouse* will be pushed to the margins.

Third, the believer and the unbeliever have some kind of “truce” where each person feels that they’re compromising a bit for the other person, but *neither* of them is very satisfied. Perhaps they’ll only go to church once a month or just on holidays. Perhaps the believing spouse can read the Bible to the kids, but the unbeliever doesn’t want to hear their spouse ever talk about the Bible with them. They stay together, but there’s a deep sense of *loneliness* because of their differing faiths.³

Fourth, and this is what everyone hopes for, is that the unbelieving spouse becomes a believer. We pray this will happen, but we have to know that only *God* can save, and we cannot force his hand by dating or marrying an unbeliever. And even if the unbelieving spouse becomes a believer, the *ends* do not justify the *means*. If a believer *intentionally* enters into a marriage with an unbeliever, it is not only *foolish* for all the reasons given above, but the Bible is clear that it is blatant *sin*.

The New Testament says the same thing—believers are free to marry whomever they wish, “only [that they be] *in the Lord*” (1 Cor. 7:39).

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Now, I trust that this is not new information to many believers, yet why is it that believers start dating and marrying unbelievers? Perhaps some of us have done that, or have been tempted to do so, or have friends who have done so.

of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded with God to spare the city for the sake of even ten righteous people, but none could be found (Gen. 18:32). And before “the ban” was applied to these seven nations in the Promised Land, God waited around 400 years until the sins of those nations was “complete” (Gen. 15:13-16). And “the ban” was not applied to *all* unbelieving nations, but only to these *seven* nations (cf. Deut. 20).

² That’s why Rahab and Ruth, who were *not* Israelites, could join the people of God and intermarry with them *because* they evidenced true faith in the one true God. And in fact, both of these non-Israelite women became ancestors of King David and later King Jesus (Matt. 1:5).

³ Kathy Keller, “Don’t Take It from Me: Reasons You Should Not Marry an Unbeliever,” January 22, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/dont-take-it-from-me-reasons-you-should-not-marry-an-unbeliever>.

I'm sure many reasons could be given, but it essentially comes down to our incredible ability to rationalize away what God says and to self-justify.⁴

But just know that God doesn't tell us things arbitrarily (or without reasons), but his Word is for our *good*. Even if it doesn't feel like it is in the moment, his design is always *best* and for us to experience his *blessings*.

Is that not why he came down to be our crucified and risen King? Has he not shown that he can be trusted and that he does all things for our good?

I know that it may be painful now to obey God's Word, but not only will disobedience *not* satisfy you, it will only cause you more *pain*. Blessings are only experienced when we follow the lead of our trustworthy King and trust him at his Word.

<pause>

But just as we are prone to disregard God's Word, so were the people of Israel.

As we look at these verses here in Judges, aside from the tribes of Judah and Simeon, *none* of the other tribes of Israel carried out "the ban."

In verses 22-26, the house of Joseph *should* have devoted the unconverted man to destruction along with the city of Luz. He evidenced *no* repentance and faith. And by allowing him to go free, he simply rebuilt the pagan city that they *just* destroyed and presumably engaged in the *same* abominable practices in another part of the land.

And in verses 27-36, there is a rapid succession of the other tribes' *appearance* of success in terms of conquering the inhabitants of the land, but it's ultimately a *failure* because, rather than devoting them to *destruction*, they think it is better to subject them to *forced labor*.

And you begin to notice a *shift* in how things are described. Rather than saying that "the *Canaanites* lived among *them*" in verses 21, 29, and 30, it begins to say that "*they* lived among the *Canaanites*" in verses 32 and 33, giving the impression that the Canaanites are *still* in control of the land and are influencing *them* instead of the other way around.

So though there is the *appearance* of success, in God's eyes, all these tribes have *failed* miserably through their *incomplete* obedience.

<pause>

I wonder though: *why* did these tribes *not* carry out "the ban"?

There could be many reasons, but perhaps they thought it was the more *pragmatic* thing to do.

Perhaps they thought to themselves: "There's a lot of work that needs to be done here. Instead of carrying out 'the ban,' wouldn't it make more sense to put them to forced labor instead? Otherwise, we would have to do all that work ourselves!"

In many ways, this saves them time and effort; it seems to be the more practical, efficient thing to do—but they seem to neglect the fact that this is also the *disobedient* thing to do.

And if we're honest, aren't we tempted to think similarly at times as well?

At times, when obedience to God will cost us time, effort, money, relationships, comfort, status, lifestyle, or reputation, it's very tempting to think more *pragmatically* rather than *biblically*.

⁴ Some contributing factors may be being in settings that cultivate a strong attraction or emotional connection with an unbeliever; having trouble finding a believer to marry; experiencing family pressure to get married within your family's social circles regardless of the person's faith; wanting to influence the person towards faith in Christ; and fearing that you'll be lonely for the rest of your life if you don't get married soon, especially as other friends are getting married.

We don't start by asking, "What does God's Word say?" but we start with "What makes the most practical sense to me? What are other people doing?"

And then, we compromise. We rationalize. We think that somehow the *ends* justify the *means*. We think that if it appears successful at the *end*, then it doesn't exactly matter *how* we got there.

- If our church is growing in numbers, then it doesn't matter that they might not really understand the gospel or give evidence of genuine faith.
- If we're getting the "right" people into positions of leadership, then it doesn't really matter if we got them there through underhanded, questionable methods.
- If businesses are succeeding and shareholders are happy, then it doesn't really matter if we exaggerated the truth to get those investments.

So perhaps that's what went on here—they were thinking more *pragmatically* rather than *biblically*—and so they *disobeyed* God because, somehow, that just made more *practical* sense to them.

What might appear successful in *our* eyes and in the eyes of many *others* may ultimately show itself to be our biggest failure. And that's what we'll see next.

<pause>

So, the importance of leadership, the appearance of success, and third...

III. The consequence of disobedience (2:1-5)

In chapter 2, verse 1, "the angel of the LORD" speaks on *behalf* of the LORD as if he *is* the LORD himself (cf. Gen. 16:7-13; Exod. 3; Gal. 3:19; Heb 2:2).

And what does the LORD have to say to his people amidst all their *apparent* success?

He first affirms his *own* covenant faithfulness to them.

The LORD swore a covenant with "[their] fathers" Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to bring them into the Promised Land, and so that's *exactly* what the LORD has done. He has brought them out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land, just as he said he would do.

But it's not just the LORD's *past* and *present* covenant faithfulness, but he also reminds them of his *future* covenant faithfulness to them: "I will *never* break my covenant with you."

That is who the LORD is—he is the God who is faithful to fulfill his covenant promises, even with those who break their side of the covenant. And that's exactly what he brings up next.

In verse 2, he indicts, or prosecutes, or brings charges against the Israelites for their covenant *unfaithfulness*.

He reminds them of what he told them regarding "the ban" in Deuteronomy 7. They were *not* to enter into covenant with any of the seven nations in the Promised Land, but they were to devote them and their idols and their possessions to destruction.

And these next two lines are *piercing*. The LORD says, "But you have *not* obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?"

That question is the *same* question that the LORD asked Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden when they rebelled against him in Genesis 3: "What is this that you have done?" (Gen. 3:13).

So this scene here is basically the Fall happening all over again.⁵ The LORD brought his people into the Promised Land—a "new Eden" (so to speak). And he gave them commands regarding how they are to live in the land.

⁵ The language of "thorns" in verse 3 as punishment for their sin is also reminiscent of the Fall (Gen. 3:18).

Just as Adam and Eve should have driven the *serpent* out of the garden, the Israelites were told to drive out the *seven nations* from the Promised Land.

But just as Adam and Eve embraced the words of the *serpent* over God himself, the Israelites embraced the people of these nations over obedience to God himself.

In both cases, it's the same rebellious heart that sins against God by rejecting *him* by disobeying his *word*.⁶

And what is the result?

Look at verse 3: "I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you."

And if you think about it, this is actually a bit counter-intuitive and perhaps even surprising.

Remember, earlier in chapter 1, there was this phrase that was repeated over and over again; *eight* times, in slightly different way, it said that "the people did not drive them out" (vv. 21, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33).

Israel *could* have driven out the inhabitants of the land, but they *chose* not to; they thought it was a better idea to put them to forced labor instead.

And so, what is the Lord's punishment for their disobedience? He will *not* drive them out, but he will *allow* for them to stay, just as the Israelites *wanted*.

Just think about that for a moment. Sometimes, the *worst* thing God can do to us is to give us *exactly* what we want (cf. Rom. 1:18-32)—and just let sin have its natural, devastating consequences in our lives.

The Israelites *thought* that they could make these inhabitants of the land serve *them* through forced labor, but instead, what will end up happening is *exactly* what the Lord *warned* them of.

By allowing them to stay, the Israelites will eventually become ensnared (or trapped) or enslaved by them and will end up serving their false gods. And when we look at the downward spiral in the rest of the book of Judges, that's *exactly* what happens. The nations end up *oppressing* the different tribes of Israel, and they end up *serving* the false gods that the Lord called them to destroy.

Isn't that how sin typically works?

Sin entices you to think that you can handle it. You can sin here and there, but *you're* really the master of your sin; you can stop whenever you want to. It's something you have under control; you're just engaging in it every once in a while to *serve* you in some way—some comfort, some pleasure, some escape, some reassurance.

But before you know it, you are no longer the master of your sin, but you're *enslaved* to it. You're *ensnared* (or trapped) by it. You *can't* stop like you thought you could. It now demands *more* from you. It's not every once in a while anymore, but it's creeping in more and more into your thoughts and your life—and the thought of being free from your sin seems almost like an impossibility.

Ask anyone who feels that they cannot stop engaging in sexual immorality, and it began with them thinking that they had it under control.

Ask anyone who struggles with some addiction, and it began with them thinking that they had it under control.

⁶ This time, it was not a sin of commission (that is, doing what God told them not to do), but it was a sin of omission (that is, failing to do what God told them to do).

You cannot play with fire and expect not to get burned. Sin is not your friend or your servant. Sin will not be satisfied to be anything in your life but your *master*.

That's why Jesus talks about gouging out your eye or cutting off your hand to *flee* from sin.

Or as it's been said, "Be killing sin, or it will be killing you" (John Owen).

<pause>

So one of the *worst* things that God can do in our lives is to simply give us over to the sin that we *want*—and just let it have its devastating effects in our lives.

But thankfully, that's not the end of the story.

In chapter 2, verses 4-5, the people *respond* to God's Word.

And how do they respond to the LORD confronting them of their covenant *unfaithfulness*? How do they respond when they recognize that their apparent *success* was actually willful *sin* against the LORD?

They repent *immediately* ("As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words").

They don't try to justify their actions or explain their thought process, but they "lifted up their voices," presumably in prayers of *confession*.

They "wept," presumably mourning or grieving over their sins against the LORD who has been so faithful in keeping his covenant with them, despite how sinful they are and how they have broken covenant with him.

"[T]hey called the name of that place Bochim," which means "weepers." Essentially, they permanently named the place to remember that this is where they experienced the consequence of their disobedience (cf. Ps. 51:3).

And lastly, "they sacrificed there to the LORD."

We're not told what kind of sacrifice this was, but given the context, this was perhaps a burnt offering, where the animal was completely consumed for the forgiveness of sins. Because sin deserves death, the animal sacrifice was the *substitute* who stood in the people's place—the animal died *in their place* for their sins.

And given the fact that the LORD did not *destroy* his people (as he did in the flood) or *expel* them from the Promised Land (as he did with Adam and Eve from the garden), but he allowed them to stay in the land, it shows that the LORD *accepted* their repentance and substitute sacrifice, and he *forgave* them of their sins.

And when we look at the rest of the book of Judges, it is *astounding* how the LORD just *keeps* doing that.

They'll rebel again and turn to idolatry, he'll discipline them by turning them over to their enemies, they'll cry out for mercy, he'll deliver them through an appointed judge and give them rest, the judge will die, and the people will go back even deeper into their sins—and that's just repeated over and over again.

And yet, repentance is available even to *them*.

<pause>

I think we hear this so much that it's easy to *assume* that this is *normal* or to be *expected* of God.

But imagine that there's someone that you love whom you've cared for, provided for, and protected all their lives. Everything they have is because of your love and kindness towards them. You have done them no wrong; you've never been anything but faithful to them.

And yet, they distrust you, they accuse you, they forsake you, and you watch them turn to those who are intending to harm them over and over again.

And just when it seems like they finally come to their senses and they cry out to you for help—and you quickly come to their rescue—they just as quickly return to distrusting you, accusing you, forsaking you, and returning back to those who harm them.

They seem to have a way of ripping your heart out, spitting on it, and then stomping on it—over and over again. And yet, you remain *faithful* to them and continue to *love* them.

That is a picture of what our God is like. It's not something *normal* or to be *expected* of God, but it is a costly, unimaginable kind of love and faithfulness that he has for his people.

And the more we dive into the book of Judges, the more we'll see that come out.

Conclusion

As we close, I want us to see *ourselves* in this passage.

- We often reject God's appointed King in our lives by rejecting his word.
- We often do what appears successful and right in our own eyes rather than what is truly obedient to God's Word.
- And we often experience the consequences of our own disobedience.

But even to *us*, repentance and forgiveness is available.

And on this side of the cross, we know that it's *not* because of any animal sacrifices. Those never *truly* forgave sin, but they only pointed to the perfect sacrifice who would come as our substitute and *truly* provide the forgiveness of sins that we need.

And *who* was that perfect sacrifice? It was none other than God's appointed King from the tribe of Judah, the greater Son of David, Jesus Christ.

At the cross, all the consequences of our disobedience against God fell upon *him*. He *led* his people by *representing* his people.

He lived the perfect life we could not have lived, and he died to take the penalty of sin that we deserved, so that whoever repents of their sin and believes in him as King and Savior can know that we are truly forgiven.

God's people need God's leader to experience God's blessings—and there is no greater Leader who is as *faithful*, as *just*, as *merciful* as King Jesus.

So turn to him, acknowledge your need of him, and trust in him, for there are no true blessings to be experienced apart from him.

Let's pray.