

GOD TRAINS HIS PEOPLE

Judges 1:1-3:6

Key Verse: 3:4

They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses.

The book of Judges covers the period of Israel's history from the death of Joshua and establishment of the kingdom of Israel. The book characterizes this period as a vicious cycle of sin, oppression, repentance and deliverance. Both 17:6 and 21:25 read: *In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.* God had helped the Israelites to enter the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, under the leadership of Joshua. After settling in Canaan, however, they lost their spiritual commitment and motivation. When Joshua and the elders died, the nation experienced a leadership vacuum. There was no central government. There was no prophet who could teach the people the word of God. Without a spiritual leader or shepherd, and without the word of God, the people had no clear direction.

Everyone did as he saw fit. The Israelites were influenced very much by the Canaanite culture. They even worshiped the pagan gods. They were in danger of losing the Promised Land. This happened time and again. Each time, God removed his hand of protection and allowed hostile neighbors to oppress them. When they turned to God in repentance and cried out to him for help, he would raise up a judge—a shepherd—to deliver them from their enemies. Then, for the rest of the judge's lifetime, they would have peace. But when the judge died, they fell into sin again.

The book of Judges spans a period of over 325 years, recording six successive periods of oppression and deliverance, and the lives of 12 men judges and 1 woman judge. Their enemies included the Mesopotamians, Moabites, Philistines, Canaanites, Midianites, and Ammonites. God's deliverance through the judges is a powerful demonstration of his love and mercy toward his people.

Judges is a book about sin and its consequences. Like a minor cut that becomes infected when left untreated, sin grows and soon poisons the whole body. We must fight against sin and drive it out completely with the help of our Lord, instead of compromising with it. The book of Judges is also about spiritual leadership. The judges were spiritual leaders who had faith in God and who cared about their people and their nation. God used them to deliver his people from their enemies and to lead them to freedom and true worship. May God raise up many spiritual leaders among us! May God help us fight against the enemies in and around us to secure the Promised Land!

I. WHO WILL BE FIRST TO GO AND FIGHT? (1:1-18)

Look at verse 1. *After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?"* God had given the land of Canaan to the Israelites. Under the leadership of General Joshua, they had crossed the Jordan River by faith. They had conquered many enemies and overcome

many difficulties. But their work was not yet finished. They still had to deal with the neighboring Canaanites, the people of many wicked nations. They still had to fight their enemies to possess the Promised Land.

In many ways, the gift of the Promised Land is similar to the gift of salvation. In both cases, the initiative was with God. The Israelites did not deserve to receive the Promised Land. We sinners did not deserve his grace of salvation. Both gifts rose out of his love for his people. Deuteronomy 9:6 says: *“Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.”* The land was also beyond their power to acquire, just as we were helpless before the power of sin and Satan. The Canaanites had superior military forces than the ragtag army of the Hebrews who had been slaves in Egypt for more than 400 years. Some of the Canaanite armies had iron chariots (19), which were perhaps equivalent to the Abrams tanks of the U.S. army today. Despite its 63-ton weight, the M-1A1 can attain a top speed of 45 miles per hour. Maybe we can compare the Canaanite military forces to that of the U.S. during the Gulf war while the Israelites were like the helpless Iraqis. So the Israelites had no power to take the land on their own, and God had to give it to them as a gift. Indeed, the land was given to them freely by God. But they still had to conquer the land. Likewise, none of us had power to deal with our sins. None of us could earn salvation on our own. It was given to us as a free gift from God. And yet, God wants us to challenge to enter our promised land.

Why was it necessary for them to continue to fight against the Canaanites? Surely it wasn't because God did not care for the Canaanites. Our God is the God who loves everyone who comes to him. In fact, God had given many opportunities to the Canaanites but they refused to come to him. They chose to worship idols. So now God was bringing about their judgment through the chosen people of Israel. It was God who did battle on Israel's behalf, but the people of Israel were to join him in the battle. Likewise, we Christians are called to fight against our spiritual enemies. We have been given the grace of salvation freely. We are given a new life and called to enter into that life. But just as the Israelites had enemies to conquer, we also have enemies in our life. And God wants to fight to possess the Promised Land.

So how did the Israelites do in their fight against their enemies? They got off to a pretty good start. The tribes of Judah and Simeon teamed up together and defeated their enemies with God's help. The Israelites won their battles against the Canaanites in the southern territory, including Bezek, Jerusalem, the Negev, Hebron, Debir, Zephath, and the three Philistine cities, Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron. They also won Bethel in the northern territory, the place in which their ancient father Jacob had met God personally. God helped them to fight their enemies. Look at verse 4. *When Judah attacked, the Lord gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek.*

God really wants us to conquer the remaining strongholds of sin in our lives. When we struggle to fight against sin, God helps us through his Holy Spirit. Our enemy is strong. We cannot deliver ourselves from the power and dominion of sin. Just like Israel, we need a deliverer. And God indeed provided a deliverer for us. His name is

Jesus. Matthew 1:21 says, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Now some Christians may not like this analogy of fighting and killing. They may say, “I don’t like fighting. Can I just live a peaceful life in Christ?” But the spiritual reality is that we must fight our enemies until we enter the kingdom of God, because we are still in this sinful world. Our final victory is assured, as Jesus won the victory on the cross. Jesus has mapped out our inheritance land for us as a gift. But the enemies are still with us, trying to take that away from us. They don’t run away from us. They challenge us to abandon God and worship idols. May God help us to fight a good spiritual fight!

II. THEY FAILED TO DRIVE OUT THE ENEMIES (1:19-2:5)

In conquering the land of Canaan with the help of God, the Israelites made a big mistake: they failed to obey God’s clear instructions given to them about how to deal with their enemies. God had told them not to compromise with the enemies. Exodus 23:31-33 reads: *“I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.”*

Deuteronomy 7:2-5 says: *“... and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.”* Also Deuteronomy 20:16-18 says: *“However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them-- the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites-- as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.”*

From these Scripture verses, it is clear to see why God commanded his people to drive out the Canaanites completely out of their lives. It was not based on some racial differences. It was not based on nationalism. In fact, God used some Canaanite women of faith in his redemptive history (e.g., Rahab, Ruth). God wanted his people to root out all their enemies for their own benefits. God knew that the Canaanites were morally corrupt. God had given them time to respond to accept his love. But they chose to worship idols. God was deeply concerned that the Israelites might be influenced by their idol worshiping culture. Indeed, he was saddened when his people abandoned him and worshiped the Canaanites idols.

It seems some of their failures were caused by their inability. For example, their enemies had superior weapons. God also allowed the enemies to remain for the purpose of training his people in their war skills (3:1-2). But most importantly, the failure came from their disobedience of God's words. They disobeyed God by making treaties with the Canaanites (2:1-3) and violated the covenant God made with their forefathers (2:20-21).

For example, the tribe of Joseph took Bethel, but they let the man and his family go free. What was the result? "And the man went into the land of the Hittites and built a city and named it Luz which is its name to this day" (1:26). They let him go; so he went someplace else and built a city, even calling it by its original name.

Look at verses 1:27-28. *But 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. When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely.*

Some of the tribes thought they had victory. They thought they had control because they put the Canaanites into forced labor. They thought that it was economically more sensible to use the Canaanites as free work force rather than destroying them. But 1:34 says: "The Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country, not allowing them to come down into the plain." They were not in control. Rather their enemy was controlling them. Sin inhibits, limits, and restricts our movement. If we let it live in our lives, then we end up in idolatry, just like the nation of Israel. Soon they would intermarry with the idol worshiping people and worship their idols. This is the reason why God had told them to root out the enemies completely.

So what are the enemies we are called to drive out today? What is your enemy that you are yet to drive out completely from your life? Why can't God and the enemy live together in our lives? The enemies that we must drive out from our lives are called sin and sinful desires, including lust, greed, ambition, anger, jealousy, fear, etc. What happens when we allow our sin to live with us? We compromise. We become complacent. When we failed to drive out sin from our lives, the result is a gradual deterioration of our relationship with God. In our battles, we may grow tired and want rest, but we need more than a break from our work. We need to know that God loves us and has given us a purpose for life. Victory comes from living according to his purpose.

III. THE PATTERN OF NATIONAL DECLINE (2:6-3:6)

What was the vicious cycle of sin or pattern of national decline during the period of the Judges? Look at verses 2:10-15. *Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.*

The cycle of Israel's sin can be broken down into four stages.

The first stage is apostasy, that is, abandonment of their faith in God. Look at 2:11. "Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals." They lost their identity as God's people. Instead of driving out their enemies completely, they attached themselves to the Canaanite morals, gods, culture and lifestyle. How could this happen to the chosen people of God? It was mainly caused by their complacency. Look at 2:10. "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel." Obviously they did not study the word of God. They forgot the grace of God who delivered them out of their slavery in Egypt. The second generation Israelites in the Promised Land could not inherit the faith of their fathers. God does not have grandchildren.

Could this happen to us? Yes, it can easily happen to us if we allow our relationship with God slip. If we stop studying the word of God carefully and live according to its teachings, we quickly forget his grace. If we stop repenting our sins and allow them to live with us, they begin to control many aspects of our lives. We tend to follow our sinful desires than the word of God. We place our priority on something other than God. We begin to be influenced by the idols around and even start to worship them—idols such as money, power and ambition. Yes, what happened to the Israelites can certainly happen to us.

The second stage is slavery. Look at 2:14. "In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around whom they were no longer able to resist." The Israelites became the slaves of their enemies. God gave them over to the Canaanites by lifting his hand of protection for his people. Forgetting God and not driving out the enemies led them to idolatry, and idolatry led to slavery. Paul uses the phrase, "God gave them over," to explain the consequences of following sinful desires. He also says in Romans 6:16, "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey?" The truth is, we cannot decide to sin just once. Have you try to eat one potato chip? If you sin just once, you will enter into slavery. Sin begins to take control. This happened to the Israelites and it will happen to us.

The third stage in the cycle of sin is supplication. In bondage to their enemies, the Israelites were in great distress (2:15). They groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them (2:18). It was at this point they cried out to God in repentance. This is why God had delivered his people to his enemies. Likewise we often have to be in a lot of pain before we are willing to surrender and look to God. When we become so miserable, we tend to cry out to God. And this may be the reason why God sometimes gives us trials.

The fourth stage is God's deliverance. Look at 2:16. "Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders." Also look at 2:18. "Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them." When the Israelites

turned to him in repentance, God raised up a shepherd for his people who saved them from their enemies. God is faithful to his covenant. He does not abandon us. We may abandon God and worship an idol, but God never leave us. When one of our friends betrays us, we are tempted to write him off, but God does not do that. He is merciful and compassionate. He is always there, ready to deliver us from our enemies. All we have to do is come to him in repentance.

Look at 2:19. *But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.* It was *deja vu* all over again. This vicious cycle repeated six times in a row in the book of Judges. God was angry because Israel violated God's covenant and did not listen to him. They enjoyed the Canaanite lifestyle and worshiped Canaanite gods. They intermarried with the Canaanites, shutting God out of their marriages (3:5-6).

It is easy to see how this pattern operates in practice. Let take the sin of resentment as an example. Suppose you allow resentment toward someone to live in your life instead of driving it out according to the word of God. Soon this resentment may turn into anger toward the person. And this unchecked anger may take control of your life. It will dominate you and hold you captive. You become a slave to your emotions and may do something against your own will. Then you feel miserable. You cry out to God, and he is faithful to deliver you through the Lord Jesus Christ. But if you do not deal with the root problem of this sin, sooner or later the problem may resurface and the vicious cycle is repeated.

How can these patterns of sin be broken? The chain of sin has been broken when Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins and was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. Galatians 5:16 says, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can live a life in the way God wants us to. But first we must find out the patterns of sin in our life by carefully studying the word of God. The word of God is the true light that reveals the truth. Then we must come to God in repentance so that God may deliver us from the vicious cycle.

How did God train the Israelites? Let's read 3:4. *They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses.* God decided to leave the Canaanites in the land to train the new generation of Israel to fight, and to test the Israelites to see if they would obey the Lord's commands. God allowed some enemies to remain so that his people may learn how to fight. Likewise, God gives us challenge of life so that we may learn to fight spiritual battles.

In conclusion, we live in a real world in which spiritual battle is going on. There is no neutral ground in the Christian life. If we are not going forward, we are going backward. We must learn not to seek an easy-going, comfortable lifestyle, but to obey God's word and fight spiritual battles. May God help us to fight a good spiritual fight to the end!