

Judges | When All Hell Breaks Loose

A Generation That Did Not Know the Lord

Ephesians 6.10-12; Romans 8.13; Judges 2.8-12, 1.12-15
9.15.19

(Ephesians 6.10-12) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

(Romans 8.13) For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

(Judges 2.8-12) Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred and ten. ⁹ And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. ¹⁰ All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. ¹¹ Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, ¹² and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger.

(Judges 1.12-15) And Caleb said, "The one who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will even give him my daughter Achsah for a wife." ¹³ Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah for a wife. ¹⁴ Then it came about when she came to him, that she persuaded him to ask her father for a field. Then she alighted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you want?" ¹⁵ She said to him, "Give me a blessing, since you have given me the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water." So Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

Today we begin a new series, a terrible, dismal, bleak and gloomy series of unfortunate events. "It is my sad duty to tell these unpleasant tales, but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing." (That's Lemony Snicket.)

This is the Book of Judges which, along with the Book of Ruth, we hope to consider together from now until Christmas...and one more time, I warn you: GET OUT WHILE THERE'S STILL TIME!

This is NOT a salacious or sensational book – it's a history book – not full of gratuitous sex and violence but it is full of sex and violence, an "R-Rated" book of the Bible. It tells what happened after the Exodus and after Joshua (not Moses!) after Joshua led the Israelites into the Land God had promised them and what happened after Joshua and his generation died.

“There arose a generation after them who did not know the LORD.” (2.10)

We begin today with two short texts from St. Paul and then two short texts from the introduction of Judges. The main idea is the big paragraph (2.8-12) that sets up the whole series of unfortunate events.

The difficulties begin when the Israelites (especially the tribe of Judah!) make a good start at driving out the Canaanites (as God had commanded) but then one tribe after the other...they tire. They come to believe that the Canaanites and their gods are NOT so different from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Maybe a mixture/synthesis is possible. Thus the repeated refrain “but the sons of Israel did not drive out the inhabitants of the Land.”

Today I want to consider: 1) **Holy War?** (What do we make of this apparent call to genocide?)

2) **Means Matters Most**

3) **Tenderness In the Turmoil (or Grace Incognito)**

As we look at this section, it’s only natural that someone would object and ask, “Uh? Are we saying that God’s people were killing and displacing the people who lived in the land? Stealing their land?”

So how ARE we to understand this?

Let’s look at: a) What Holy War **WAS** THEN,

b) What HOLY WAR **ISN’T** NOW and

c) What HOLY WAR **IS** NOW

I could tell you that the Canaanites practiced child sacrifice (and that is totally true; historically verified and proven both by the Biblical record and by archaeology) and we would all agree (I hope) that to kill babies if evil and deserves punishment.

But that’s really a kind of humanistic defense of this ancient strategy of holy war... The truth is, and you may find this hard to swallow, but the truth is that what made this holy war the right thing to do is NOT so much that it was a response to human-rights violations (the murder of innocent children) but that God said it. That’s what made it the right thing to do.

If you don’t believe in the God of the Bible then it’s only a military response to corporate injustice but if you DO believe in the God of the Bible you can rest in the fact that WE DON’T KNOW THE WAYS OF GOD and we don’t know the whole story but we trust that God does.

If we took modern doctors to the stone age tribes of Irian Jaya (Papua) and a medical team found a contagious infection that required amputation – the tribal leaders wouldn’t

understand... And the distance in the knowledge of THOSE tribal leaders and modern doctors is much smaller than the distance between God and us.

There was a spiritual, moral, contagion in the Canaanites and only God could see it and only God knew how utterly destructive it would be to His people and to the whole world. It required a collective amputation, as horrible as that sounds to us.

And that LAND that God is stealing from the Canaanites never belonged to them in the first place – it's God's land. It's ALL God's land ("the earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it" Psalm 24). Woody Guthrie wrote a great song – but it's really not true.

God wanted a "staging area", a sterile-field, devoid of spiritual infection from which He would launch His mission to the whole world, the Land of Promise – that's how God planned to save the world and that's what was happening at this dark moment of "salvation history" (Heilsgeschichte).

But what about today? Well, if someone today tells you that the God of the Bible told him to kill people or carry out a holy war in His name using guns or bombs, "please hang up and immediately dial 9-1-1".

That is NOT the "Misseo Dei" the Mission of God in the era in which we live. The first passage makes it crystal clear: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood." Today, the people of God do not use physical weapons in the mission God has given us. Christians differ in their views of "Just War Theory" and the use of force by civil authorities...and capital punishment but NO ONE THINKS THAT THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IS TO BE CARRIED OUT WITH PHYSICAL WEAPONS.

Well, T.J., I'm sooooo glad that we, after the Cross and Resurrection, are no longer at holy war! Phew!

Oh, no! I didn't say we weren't in a holy war! Just that it's not carried out with physical weapons. "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh" (2 Cor 10.4) but that's not to say that we are not at war – we are! We fight spiritually ... "against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places". (Eph 6.12)

Please don't mistake this – our opponents are NOT people (not flesh and blood) but ideas (systems of thought/philosophies/world-views/ideas/desires).

The classical formulation for this is the "evil triad" the World, the Flesh and the Devil. The world's ideas (as we've seen in Galatians) that tell us that Christianity is basically the same as any religion, that it's about doing your best and being good...and lots of other false ideas the world-system teaches. The World.

And the flesh: our own selfishness, this inherited, innate, aversion/hostility to God, our common desire to dethrone God and rule the universe. The Flesh.

And the Devil: there's a world of spirits... We've done our best in the Western World to deny this and explain everything in scientific terms but our friends in other parts of the world may be more acutely aware that there are "powers" at work: the Devil.

And we are called to WAR. And we too must be aware that in this holy war the next generation is vulnerable and we're called to engage the triad of enemies – the world the flesh and the devil – to fight for God's glory and for the sake of our children and grandchildren and our own souls.

Jesus Christ made this clear (John 16.33) and the NT writers all pick up the theme. St Paul points to this perpetual war against our own flesh/sinful desires: "If you live by the flesh you must die but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live".

I read a book almost 25 years ago by the great 17th C Anglican writer John Owen; over 100 dense pages in Elizabethan English on this one verse – *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. (I was so into Owen that our daughter named her guinea pig Owen... and...) ANYWAY, John Owen points to the very serious nature of this holy way – putting to death that God-Complex in the life of every Christian.

And at the end of that heavy book where he wrote "Be killing sin or IT WILL BE KILLING YOU!"...and at the end he makes the final and most important point: there's only one way you can possibly succeed at this holy war: "if BY THE SPIRIT you put to death the deeds of the body you will live..." BY THE SPIRIT!

He says if we substitute anything else – if by your will-power, if by fear of getting caught, if in a hope of fitting in, if by secret rituals or ecstatic experiences – if you try to wage war by any of these means YOU WILL FAIL... The thrust of the verse is "if by the Spirit, you are putting to death the deeds of the body you will live." By the Spirit...by the Spirit...by the Spirit. The Means Matter Most!

And how, pray tell, do we get the Spirit by whom we wage war against our own inner God-Complex? Owen is crystal clear (just like Paul was in Galatians): you get the sin-killing Spirit by looking to Jesus Christ as He suffers and dies... as He takes your guilt upon Himself and suffers in your place...as He, the ultimate Judge/Savior (the True Joshua) fights for us, dies and rises for us as our Champion.

To bring your struggles, your temptations, your sin and weakness and failings before Jesus Christ and to trust in Him – to hear and believe the Good News of His death and resurrection THIS IS HOW WE GET THE SPIRIT and how He, the Spirit of Holiness drives out the Canaanites from the Dark Continent of our Souls.

This is really the application of the Book of Judges for our modern context... It reminds us of the intensity of the battle (Holy War) and it points to a Judge, a Champion who fights for us.

And through the journey we'll meet these outcroppings of grace in the midst of this series of unfortunate events, little whispers and pictures of redemption. Like a tender shoot out of parched ground (Isa 53.2) AND we find one even in the introduction.

Old Caleb shows up. He was one of the two believing scouts/spies who urged the Israelites to believe God and take the Land He would give them.

And now in his very old age... as a sign and help to the next generation, Caleb offers the hand of his daughter (Achsah) to the worthy warrior who will take a difficult plot of land (giants). And Othniel rises to the occasion. He lays down his life for the bride and he defeats the enemy and wins her hand.

Then the Bride asks her Father (Luke 11.13) for her inheritance and for streams of living water to make the desert (the Negev) bloom and come to life. She sits on an unclean beast the way the Church will reign over the nations in the world to come – and she is given the upper and lower springs of life-giving water.

We're being trained in how to read the Bible (this story is repeated from Joshua 15; twice so we won't miss it) ...trained to see grace even in the darkest dark – we get a little whisper of God at work, of Tenderness In the Turmoil (of Grace Incognito) and ultimately when we add up all these little pictures (in Judges and in the whole Bible) we eventually come to see: this IS the Story of Everything, the Sacred Romance.

A Warrior comes to fight for us (to defeat our enemies) – to win us as His Bride (the Church) and the Church, gathered at Pentecost, asking the Father for the Promise of the Spirit – and the Father pours out the Promise of Living Water, the Spirit of the Living God who empowers us to live and fight... to make our dry hearts bloom with life so the next generation WOULD know the Lord... so that we might deny our old selves and walk in the Newness of Life...so that by the Spirit of grace we might put to death the deeds of the body and LIVE.