They will be thorns in your sides

Judges 1:1-2:10

“Now 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." (2:3)

Today we start with the study of the book of Judges. During those days, Israel did not have a king; everyone did as he saw fit. (17:6, 21:25) Nevertheless, God’s people were to fulfil their calling by being faithful to the covenant in the land God had given them. The leadership of Joshua had set them up to do just this, and yet we will see in today’s passage that success was not automatic. They had to fight for it. Now the main theme of Judges is the downward spiral of Israel’s national and spiritual life into chaos and apostasy[[1]](#footnote-1). Yet despite Israel’s repeated falling away, God faithfully kept His covenant his people and rescued them through His Judges. That is why, the format of the book of Judges is a collection of individual “hero stories” about how 12 judges each delivered God’s people. Today and next week’s studies, are both introductory studies. After which we will begin to specifically look at how each of these Judges saved God’s people.

But before we start our study of Judges today, let’s first briefly look at Israel’s history prior to the opening of the book. This will help us to understand the context, not only of today’s passage, but also of the entire book of Judges.

It all began about 600 years earlier, when God called a man named Abraham. (Gen 12) **(SLIDE 1 Christiaan will explain for a while)** At the time, Abraham was 70 years old, had no children, his wife Sarah was barren and he lived in Ur of the Chaldeans Abraham did not know God but like everyone else, worshipped other gods. (Joshua 24:2) Yet, amazingly, God chose Abraham as the ancestor of the Israelite nation. God allowed Sarah to conceive and give birth to Isaac. To Isaac God gave a son called Jacob. Jacob then had 12 sons of his own and together with their father Jacob, 70 people in total, went down to live in Egypt. (Gen 46:2-3, 27) There in Egypt they were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. (Exo 1:7) In fact, during a period of 430 years, God multiplied 70 people into the Israelite nation of about one million people. (Ex 12:37 – Six Hundred thousand men). But they were enslaved by the Egyptians. So God destroyed the Egypt along with their Pharaoh with ten mighty plagues. And God brought them out of slavery to Himself at Mt Sinai in the desert, to **establish His covenant** (an agreement) with them. This is the covenant that God referred to in today’s passage, in chapter 2:1 when God said: ‘I will never break my covenant with you. **Understanding this covenant, between God and Israel, is key to understanding, not only today’s passage, but also the whole book of Judges. So let’s just stand still here for a moment to consider the content of God’s covenant.**

In the beginning, when Abraham was still alive, God said to him: **(SLIDE 2**) “I will confirm my covenant with you and your descendants after you, from generation to generation. This is the everlasting covenant: I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you. And I will give the entire land of Canaan, where you now live as a foreigner, to you and your descendants. It will be their possession forever, and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:7-8) From these verses we can identify 3 very important things about God’s covenant with the Israelites. **(SLIDE 3)** **Firstly**, it is an everlasting covenant that never ends. **Secondly**, God agrees and commits Himself to give the entire land of Canaan (Map) to the Israelites as their possession forever. **Lastly,** God agrees and commits Himself to be the God of the Israelites. Looking at these three components, what do you think is the best aspect of God’s covenant with the Israelites? It is the part where God says: I will always be your God. Because here, the living and Almighty God committed Himself to the Israelites in a very special and intimate manner. In fact out of all nations on the face of the earth, the Israelites would be God’s **treasured possession.** He would love them, take care of them, bless and prosper them as His most precious and valuable possession. He would raise and use them as a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation, through which God intended to bless the whole world! (Ex 19:6) So we can see that the Israelite nation was extremely special and precious to God.

Then, as part of the covenant, what did God require from the Israelites in return? **(SLIDE 4)** **They had to obey God fully** (19:5a). This was a very important component of God’s covenant with the Israelites. God would be their God. He would fully commit to them. God would honour them and bless them as His Holy Nation and Kingdom of Priests. Yet, in return, God wanted them to likewise fully commit to Him. God wanted the Israelites to also honour Him and treat Him as their most treasured possession. How could they do this? Through full and absolute obedience to God**. Here we can learn what God’s new covenant through the blood of Jesus, also means for you and me. As God committed Himself fully to the Israelites there at Mt Sinai, God also committed Himself fully to you and me at the Cross of Jesus. There He promised, that should we accept Jesus’ blood as the price for our sins, that He would forgive our sins and be our God. That He would love us, take care of us, protect us and bless us as His most treasured passion. That He would even use our lives to advance His salvation work on earth. Yet, in return, God requires only one thing from us: that we honour Him and treat Him also as our treasured possession. How can we do this? By obeying Him fully with our lives.**

I am sure, that if I ask any believer whether they are willing to obey God fully – that person will say ‘most definitely!’ The same goes for the Israelites. In fact, there at Mt Sinai, after God gave them His laws and commands they responded with one voice, “Everything the Lord has said we will do.” (Ex 24:3) However, when we look at the book of Judges, we see they did just the opposite. They completely disobeyed God and fell into downward spiral of national and spiritual chaos and apostasy. Sadly, this did not only happen to the Israelites, but also happens to many believers these days; including you and me. Though the LORD is our God, we disobey Him so many times. Only to find ourselves in state of spiritual chaos and unbelief. The question is, why does this happen? Why did the Israelites, so openly and blatantly disobeyed God in the Promised Land? It all had to do with their failure to completely drive out the Canaanites from among them.

Look at verse 1.It begins with the phrase: After the death of Joshua. Which indicates, that the book of Judges commences at a time, when Joshua and the Israelites already conquered the Promised Land. **(Slide 5 CLICK ONE BY ONE as Christiaan explains** – Map) As we can see from the map, the Israelites already took possession of the majority of the land and drove out most of the Canaanites living in the land. However, though the land was conquered….. the war was not over yet. There were still areas of land and cities to conquer. Which meant, there were still Canaanites living among the Israelites. These Canaanites were the main cause for Israel’s downward spiral into a state of spiritual chaos and apostasy. They did not know God. Rather, they were an idol worshipping people who believed in the goddess Asherah and her son Baal. **(Slide 6)** This meant, that their value system and beliefs were drastically opposite to that of the Israelites. For example, to worship Ashera the Canaanites openly performed ritual sex under trees and near poles (Deut. 7:5, 12:2-3; 2 Kings 16:4, 17:10; Jer. 3:6,13; Ezek. 6:13). Also, Baal's followers sacrificed their children, apparently the firstborn of the community, to gain personal prosperity. These detestable acts of worship, testifies just how different their beliefs and value system was from that of the Israelites. These two peoples simply could not live together.

Now interestingly, many of us would think that once the Israelites entered Canaan, they could influence the Canaanites in a good way until they abandon their wicked ways to instead follow God; just like them. However, this could never happen. Simply because the Canaanites were enjoyed their lives of sin too much. To them, performing ritual sex and offering their children to God was way more exciting, than living an obedient life to God. This made them to be huge stumbling blocks for the Israelites. Who in contrast, was very vulnerable to succumb and follow the deceptively wicked ways of the Canaanites.

God knew this from the day He made His covenant with the Israelites at Mt Sinai. He knew, that His people would not be able to resist the bad influence of the Canaanites. So He commanded them, before they entered Canaan: **(SLIDE 7)** 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. (Exodus 23:33) Do not look on them with pity. (Deut 7:16) 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. (Deut 7:3) Instead Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. …..you must destroy them totally. (Deut 7:5)

Why does God sound so serious and strict here? Because, God knew that unless the Israelites drive out the Canaanites from among them, they would not be able to obey Him fully and live as His covenant people. When we read the book of Joshua, we see that Joshua clearly accepted and understood God’s urgency. When he entered Canaan and fought against the Canaanites, he left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded. (Joshua 10:40) And because of Joshua’s leadership, the Israelites could gain a strong foothold in Canaan. But there was still large areas of land and people to be conquered. It was crucial that after Joshua’s death, each tribe in Israel maintained the same level of commitment and devotion to God; by driving out the Canaanites from among them.

They started very well. In verse 1 we see that they all came to LORD and eagerly asked Him, “Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?” Look at verse 2. The LORD answered, “Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands.” At this, Judah along with the Simeonites, obediently attacked the Canaanites and Perrizzites at Bezek. And as promised, the LORD gave them into their hands. So they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek. In the process, they found a very powerful king called Adoni-Bezek, which means “lord of lightning”. He was a mighty king with 70 other kings under his power. But the men of Judah determinately fought against him. Then Adoni-Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him, and cut of his thumbs and big toes. The men of Judah did not stop there. Look at verse 8. After the battle at Bezek, the men of Judah attacked Jerusalem also and took it. They put the city to the sword and set it on fire. And still they were not done. Look at verse 9. After that, the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites living in the hill country, the Negev and the western foothills. Now, interestingly, there were real giants called the Anakites who lived in the hill country. 45 Years earlier, when the Israelite spies first saw them, they Anakites looked so huge, that the Israelite seemed like grasshoppers in their own eyes, and looked the same to them. (Num13:33) That is how huge these Anakites were. What is more, their cities were large and fortified. Yet, under the leadership of Caleb, the men of Judah obediently went down there to fight against them. They advanced against the three biggest and fiercest giants living in Hebron, called Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai. And with God’s help defeated them. But still, they were not finished. Look at verse 11. From there they advanced against the people living in Debir. At this stage, Caleb was already very old and physically unable to fight against the Canaanites anymore. Yet, this did not diminish his obedience to God, to drive out the Canaanites. Instead of going there himself, Caleb looked to send someone to fight in his place. So he said: look at verse 12. “I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher.” Then Othniel, Caleb’s younger brother, went out to fight against the Canaanites and took the city. Then the men of Judah went with the Simeonites their brothers and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath, and they totally destroyed the city.The men of Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron—each city with its territory.

Wow………. we are amazed by the commitment and absolute obedience of the men of Judah. To go fight against the Canaanites time after time after time. Their firm determination really pleased God. Look at verse 19a. For the LORD was with the men of Judah. And He gave them one victory after the other. **Here we can learn a very important lesson. The hardest thing for the men of Judah was not to defeat the “lord of lightning”, or break down the walls of Jerusalem, or conquer some giants living in a fortified city. That was God’s job. Instead, the hardest thing, was to persistently and faithfully go out and fight against a people who were stronger and bigger than them. Like Caleb! Personally, I believe that Caleb’s wholehearted devotion to God, was the driving force behind Judah’s fighting spirit. Surely, it was so easy for him to in his old age simply sit back and enjoy retirement in the Promised Land. Yet, because he followed the Lord His God wholeheartedly, he never stopped fighting. He never stopped obeying. Then God could work mightily through Caleb to drive out the powerful Canaanites from among His people. (Joshua 14:6-15) And so establish Judah as a kingdom of priests and holy nation, from which centuries later, Jesus was to be born.**

What about the other tribes? Unfortunately, after Caleb’s death the men of Judah were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots. This seemingly minor compromise on the part of Judah, marked the beginning of a rapid downward spiral of Israel’s spiritual life into chaos and apostasy. Look at verse 21. The Benjamites failed to dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem. Was it because the Jebusites were any different from the enemies Caleb fought against? Not at all. It was simply, because the Benjamites failed to actively fight against the Jebusites, like Caleb. Instead of fighting against the Jebusites, the Benjamites made a covenant with them. Then God could not drive them out from among them. The same goes for Manasseh. Look at verse 27. 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. If Caleb was still alive, he would have been more determined than the Canaanites and attack them day and night, until God drove them out. Because, he wholeheartedly followed God. Sadly, however, instead of driving them out completely, the men of Manasseh disobeyed God and made a covenant with the Canaanites, by pressing them into forced labour. This meant that they not only ended up staying among the idol worshipping Canaanites. But they worked with them day and night. This was exactly what God warned the Israelites against. It was the same for Ephraim, who did not drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them. Look at verses 30-31. Neither 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. At this stage the hearts of the Israelites were already captured by the wicked ways of the Canaanites who lived among them. Things became so bad that it was no longer the Canaanites who lived among the Israelites. Instead verse 32 tells us that the people of Asher lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. This was exactly what God did not want. As no doubt, by this time, His people were worshiping the Canaanite gods and following their ways. The same went for the people of Naphtali. Look at verse 33. Neither 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. Finally, chapter one ends with the Danites, who were pushed around by the Amorites. We can only imagine what kind of covenant the Danites made with the the wicked Amorites and the wicked lives they lived among them.

We must ask ourselves, what was the main difference between Caleb and the other 11 tribes? Caleb was a man who wholeheartedly followed God. He personally understood who God is and what God had done for him and the Israelites. So just as he was God’s most treasured possession, so God was most definitely Caleb’s most treasured possession. Therefore, no matter who the enemy was, Caleb faithfully and obediently kept God’s covenant in his life. The other 11 tribes, on the other hand, did not care enough about God to fight the Canaanites. Instead, God and His covenant meant so little to them, that they were quick to make a covenant with the Canaanites and live among them. Yet, their disobedience brought much suffering and pain on them and many generations to come. Look at what God told them in chapter 2:3. Can we all read today’s key verse together? Now 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.” The best thing God could do for the Israelites, was to drive out the more powerful yet wicked Canaanites from among them. In doing so, God would help them live in a spiritual healthy and pure environment. An environment in which they could boldly serve God and live as His covenant people. But as we learned from Caleb, God could only drive the Canaanites out if the Israelites actively fought against them. Yet, the Israelites passivity and compromising attitude, made it impossible for God to help them. The consequence was, that these wicked and detestable Canaanites lived among God’s covenant people. And became like thorns in the side of the Israelites. As we will see in the rest of Judges, this meant, the Canaanites became a source of continual annoyance and trouble for the Israelites. Moreover, and as we will come to see in the next 17 studies, the Canaanites was the main cause for the downward spiral of Israel into a national and spiritual life of chaos and apostasy.

Then what can we learn from this? (And with this, we will conclude) When we studied Luke gospel, we learned that God has established a new covenant with you and me, through the blood of Jesus. By this covenant, God committed Himself fully to us. He promised, that should we accept Jesus’ blood as the price for our sins, that He would forgive our sins and be our God. That He would love us, take care of us, protect us and bless us as His most treasured passion. Moreover, that He would graciously use our lives to advance His salvation work on earth. Yet, in return, God requires only one thing from us: that like God did to use we likewise commit ourselves wholeheartedly to Him, like Caleb, and obey Him fully. This requires us to actively fight against the Canaanite-like influences; both in our personal life and our ministry. There are so many things and people around us that, like the Canaanites did to the Israelites, seek to turn our hearts away from God. If we truly want to be a covenant person…and if we truly want to have a covenant ministry, then we must drive the out from our lives and ministry. Just like Caleb. If we do so, and actively and persistently fight against anything and everything that seeks to steal our hearts, then God will most definitely be with us. He will help us to live as His covenant people and each time give us the victory. However, if we fail to fight against Canaanite-like things in our lives and ministry, God cannot drive them out from our lives and ministry. But instead, these things will become like thorns in our side that causes us continual annoyance, trouble and pain. Therefore, as we hold on to God’s wonderful love in Christ, let us repent for our passive and compromising attitudes towards the things of this world. And actively and consistently fight to drive out all that seeks to turn our hearts from God. Just like Caleb. Then God will surely be with us, to bless our individual lives and our ministry. Amen.

1. The abandonment or renunciation of their religious belief in God [↑](#footnote-ref-1)