

Introduction

I love food. I love trying all kinds of different foods from all over the world. I don’t eat it often but Ethiopian food is quite delicious. So is Indian food. I really enjoy Mediterranean food. Some cultures are so strange and so foreign to me that I cannot imagine eating that culture’s food. Take Canada, for example. They put gravy on *French fries*.

While we expect other cultures to have different foods, the truth is the distinctions in culture are far beyond food and drink, clothing and hair, music and art. How other cultures see the world and interpret the world and other cultures’ fundamental understanding of the world can be very different from ours.

As we begin in the book of Judges we enter into what may be the most strange world. Ancient Near Eastern culture was utterly unlike any culture on earth today. The truth is we have more in common culturally with first-century Jews than first-century Jews had in common with their ancestors just five or six-hundred years prior. The Ancient Near East began to end around the time of the exile and by the year 330BC when Alexander the Great conquered Persia the culture of the Ancient Near East was forever gone. The Near East was still there; the values and default assumptions about the world had forever changed.

The Ancient Near East was a strange world with strange beliefs and strange practices— at least to us. It was the world of the Patriarchs, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was the world of the exodus, of Moses and Joshua and the conquest of Canaan. It continued to be the world of the judges and the monarchy of Israel and later Israel and Judah.

This may raise a question in your mind: if the Ancient Near East is so utterly foreign to us, why would we spend time studying a book of the Bible that is set entirely in this cultural perspective? We would do this because in spite of the vast *cultural* differences between us, people are still people and still struggle with the same things. The *form* of the struggle changes, but the struggle itself does not. Surely no one in the Ancient Near East spent too much time on social media, yet they just as surely struggled with whether others *liked* them. Am I funny enough? Am I pretty enough? Am I smart enough? Am I successful enough? These are hardly problems restricted to our modern day.

We can look to the past to see what God has done about the problems ancient people faced and we can see what God is doing about the very struggles you and I have. We can see God’s grace and mercy on display in events that took place more than 3,000 years ago and from that lens see God’s grace and mercy on display in our lives today. Just as people are still people, God is still God.

As we begin to dive into the book of Judges we need to understand that while the Bible was not written *to* us, it was written *for* us. As Paul said in Romans, the Scriptures that came before were written for our instruction and for our hope. Even in a book that many describe as depressing there is hope for in the midst of the depravity and sin and rebellion against God that will be on display in Judges, we will see shadows of the King who is to come. We’re in Judges 1.

Jdgs 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.

Judges 1:1–7

Missionary God

Verse 1 begins with the exact words that began the book of Joshua, but a different name: “After the death of Joshua”. When Moses died Joshua had already been appointed his successor. Moses led them out of Egypt and through the wilderness; Joshua would lead them into the promised land. The book of Joshua generally describes the conquest in terms of overwhelming victory while acknowledging not all the land had been subdued.

As we saw last week, the idea of *herem*, of “devoting to destruction” the Canaanite population, did not mean genocide or slaughter of entire peoples. Rather, it meant removing the false religion in the land. Because the various people groups in the land closely identified with their various false gods, destroying these false gods would remove their false identities from the land over which YHWH God of Israel was now reigning. Lawson Younger put it this way:

In other words, *herem* was not concerned with the eradication of Canaanite clothing fashions, pottery styles, music, diet, and other types of particular cultural preferences. But it was deeply concerned with the eradication of the Canaanite religion: its gods/idols, rituals, divinatory practices, uses of magic, worldview, and so on.

K. Lawson Younger, Jr. NIVAC

Devoting the people to “destruction” was not about killing them, but about destroying their religious identity in the land. The land itself was to be purified as the place where YHWH God of Israel would be worshiped. Near the end of his life Joshua warned the people of Israel about those people who—hear this!—*who would remain in the land*:

Josh 23:6 Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, 7 that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or

make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, ⁸ but you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day.

Joshua 23:6–8

We see the prohibition against “mixing” was not an ethnic issue, but a religious issue. The mixing that is prohibited is joining in with the idolatry of the people of the land. The nation of Israel was sent into the land to *Israelize* the land. That is, the law of God would apply to all the inhabitants who remained. Many people would have left the land, seeking to continue to worship their gods. Many, however, chose to remain. Those who chose to remain were submitting themselves to the law of Moses, at least in terms of not bowing down to idols.

The conquest of the land of Canaan was about defeating armed resistance against Israel and then removing the idols from the land. The altars of the various gods of the people and their Asherah poles and their carved images and such were to be destroyed. All who would worship the God of Israel were welcome to join the people of Israel as full-fledged members of the covenant.

In this way Israel’s entrance into the land of Canaan served a missionary purpose. The law of Moses would apply to them. It also applied to those who did not join the people of Israel but chose to remain in the land. They were protected by the law of Moses.

Lev 24:22 You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the LORD your God.”

Leviticus 24:22

This included rules such as the Sabbath:

Ex 20:10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

Exodus 20:10

Sojourners are any non-Israelites living in the land of Canaan. The laws concerning worshiping only the God of Israel applied to everyone. Again, the conquest was primarily about removing idolatry from the land. This included sacrificing to any other god. Leviticus specifically instructs Israel regarding such sacrifices:

Lev 17:8 And you shall say to them, “Any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice ⁹ and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from his people.”

Leviticus 17:8–9

Do you see the invitation to worship the God of Israel? Just as Israelites could bring their offerings and sacrifices to the tabernacle to worship YHWH God of Israel, *so could any Canaanite living in the land*. They could receive circumcision and submit to the God of Israel and become part of the covenant people of God. Even if the people would not submit to the entirety of the law of Moses, they could become something like a partial member.

Ex 12:48 If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it.
Exodus 12:48

Here we see the rite of initiation into the covenant people of God must come before participation in the covenant-renewal meal. Passover functioned much as communion today functions; it is a covenant-renewal meal. Only those who were circumcised could participate in the Passover meal. Those who had not gone through the rite of initiation—circumcision—could not participate in the Passover. All who would receive circumcision, however, even Canaanites living in the land, could then participate as if they were native Israelites.

What we see here is the law of Moses served as an invitation to the nations to worship the one true God. Yes, worship of the one true God was exclusive. No other gods may be worshiped. To worship YHWH God of Israel required the complete and total rejection of all other gods. It required the destruction of carved images and all other practices associated with those false gods.

Israel's role in the world was to show the world what life would look like under the rule and the reign of the one true King of the universe. In the final verse of Judges the author declares, "In those days there was no king in Israel". There should have been, and I don't mean a human king. YHWH God of Israel was their King. They were to look to him and were to serve him and were to show others what life in his kingdom was like. Their lives were to be an invitation to worship God and experience his salvation. Their lives were to reflect the glory of the God of Israel. As we'll see, however, their lives were—at best—mere *shadows of the King*.

Incomplete Obedience

Verse 1 shows us a good beginning for the people of Israel after the death of Joshua. It says the people "inquired of the LORD". They sought the word of their true King. *This is what they were supposed to do*. Remember the promise given at Mount Sinai!

Ex 19:5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;
⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

Exodus 19:5–6

Israel was to be a kingdom of priests. Kenneth Laing Harris explained:

By keeping the covenant, the people of Israel would continue both to set themselves apart from, and also to mediate the presence and blessing of the Lord, to the nations around them.

Kenneth Laing Harris

Without Joshua to lead them, Israel began functioning as a nation of priests, as those who would seek the Lord and mediate his presence to others. Because the land was not yet fully subdued, they asked the Lord, “Who shall go up for us first against the Canaanites, to fight against them?”

What a great start! They seek the Lord not merely for advice, but for his instruction. They seek obedience to him, just as he requires of them. In verse 2 the Lord tells them Judah should go up against them. Here we see the beginning of the shadows of the King, the one who is to come. Judah was the largest and most powerful tribe. Judah received the birthright.

The tribe of Reuben—Israel’s firstborn—lost the birthright because of his sin against his father. That tribe would not have preeminence. Simeon and Levi, the next two in line, were also disqualified from receiving the birthright because of their violence against the men of Shechem. The tribe of Levi, however, would later make amends and receive the priesthood for their actions after the incident of the golden calf, demonstrating a profound zeal for the Lord’s holiness. Thus the birthright fell to Israel’s fourth son, Judah.

All the way back in Genesis, long before the sons of Israel had grown into tribes, Jacob—Israel—prophesied over his sons and said, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah”. Judah would one day have preeminence over his brothers. Eusebius tells us in the fourth century that by selecting Judah to go up against the Canaanites, God was indicating something significant: his choice of Judah to be the tribe through which he would reign over all. Headship of Israel was given to Judah, thus the tribe’s prominence here at the outset of Judges.

Notice in verse 2 when God says Judah shall go up against the Canaanites that he declares, “I have given the land into his hand.” He doesn’t say, “I *will* give it into his hand”, but “I *have given* it into his hand”. When God makes a promise, it is true the moment he utters it. God’s promises are true the moment he utters them, even if they take time.

While Israel started out well, inquiring of the Lord and seeking his direction, when God tells them the tribe of Judah is to engage in battle, in verse 3 Judah invites Simeon to join in. From an earthly perspective, this makes sense. Simeon’s allotment in the land was wholly inside Judah’s territory. If Judah is victorious, Simeon would also be victorious. If Judah subdued all the people in its territory, Simeon would be secure as well. But notice God told them *Judah* was to go up. God didn’t mention Simeon. Here we see an imperfect obedience to God. They went beyond what God told them to do.

The narrator, however, ignores the fact that Simeon joined the battle. He says in verse 4 that *Judah* went up and the Lord gave *Judah* victory over the Canaanites. In fact, they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek. Bezek is in the vicinity of Jerusalem. In verse 5 they found a man named Adoni-Bezek. That is more a title than a name. It means “Lord of Bezek”. He appears to have been a very powerful man, likely ruling over several cities given how large his army was.

When Judah came up against him at Bezek, the Lord gave them over to Judah and they defeated this army of 10,000. Surely some men died, but Israel did not slaughter 10,000 men. Once the battle was decided, they were disarmed and their military leader—Adoni-Bezek—was to be killed. This would prevent any further organized and armed resistance against the rule of YHWH over the land.

Adoni-Bezek fled from them, of course, and when they caught him, notice how they

treated him.

Jdgs 1:6 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.

Judges 1:6–7

It’s interesting that Adoni-Bezek interprets his defeat *theologically*. He was defeated because the God of Israel was stronger than his god. He also sees in this defeat a sense of karma—what goes around, comes around. He himself had humiliated and defeated “seventy kings” by cutting off their thumbs and their big toes and forcing them to sit under his dining table to eat scraps he would throw to them.

This was common in the Ancient Near East. When defeated, enemies would be disfigured and humiliated. Think of Samson when the Philistines were finally able to defeat him: they gouged out his eyes. The entire purpose of this was to humiliate. In a real sense, Adoni-Bezek got what he deserved. In this, however, Israel disobeyed. God had given them instructions concerning kings—military rulers.

Deut 7:24 And he will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven. No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them.

Deuteronomy 7:24

The word “destroy” here is not *herem*. The only people who were to be killed for certain were kings. Anyone who persisted in armed resistance were to be met in battle, but after a battle when the people were declared *herem*, they were to be left free to either leave the land or stay under the law of Moses. Kings—military leaders—were to be killed so as to prevent any further uprising.

Rather than kill Adoni-Bezek, Judah chose to humiliate and disfigure him. To be sure, this accomplished the goal of preventing further fighting. Without thumbs he couldn’t grasp a sword or spear. Without big toes he couldn’t stand and fight. This is not what Israel was commanded to do, however.

Verse 7 ends by saying the disfigured and humiliated Adoni-Bezek was taken back to Jerusalem where he would die, whether from his injuries or from infection or some other reason. What had started out so promising—Israel seeking the Lord—had resulted in them acting like the Canaanites they had just defeated.

God Is Ever At Work

The entire purpose of the law given by God to Israel was to reveal himself to them. Israel wasn’t to keep the commandments *per se*. Rather, the commandments were given to give them as a measuring stick to see if they were, in fact, becoming like God. Because the law was God’s self-revelation, the aim of the law was for his people to become like him. This is

so much more than keeping a list of rules. They were to learn to *think* like God. They were to learn to love what God loves and to hate what God hates. Even more, the law was to lead Israel to faith in the Lord. They were to trust in him as he has revealed himself.

This is why God instructed Israel, “Be holy, for I am holy.” They were to become like him. Their thinking was to be brought in line with his. Their values were to be brought in line with his values. This is why the opening verses in Judges are so promising: Israel *inquired of the LORD*. They sought out his plans. They wanted to align themselves with him. But they compromised their obedience and went beyond what the Lord said, and then refused what the Lord said.

It was logical for them to invite Simeon to join them. While the founders of all the tribes had Jacob as their father, they had different mothers. These two tribes were closely related as Simeon and Judah had the same mother. Further, Simeon’s territory was completely inside Judah’s territory. Simeon would benefit directly from Judah’s victory; it made all the sense in the world to fight alongside Judah. The Lord, however, was seeking to establish Judah as the preeminent tribe, the one through whom God would send his Messiah, the true King. Inviting Simeon to join in the battle was working contrary to God.

God would not be thwarted, however. In spite of their disobedience, God gives the victory to *Judah*. There is no word of rebuke here. God patiently endures their partial obedience, which is disobedience. He had already declared he *had given the land into his hand*. Though Judah would disobey by inviting Simeon, God would keep his word.

God had a purpose in making promises to Abraham all those centuries before. God had a purpose in leading Jacob and his sons to Egypt. God had a purpose in rescuing them from slavery in Egypt centuries later. God had a purpose in gathering them together at Mount Sinai and making a covenant with them. God had a purpose in leading them through the wilderness for 40 years. God had a purpose for leading them into the land of Canaan. God had a purpose in sending Judah into battle first. Any actions or thoughts or desires contrary to God’s purpose is rebellion against God, even when it may seem logical.

It doesn’t take a genius to know if one tribe would be successful in battle, two tribes would be even more successful on account of having a bigger army. If 1,000 men would win a battle, then 2,000 men would have a much easier time winning that same battle! When has God ever acted in a way that truly lined up with the wisdom of men?

Think of Israel’s own history. Think of the Lord’s decision to make *them* his people:

Deut 7:7 It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 7:7–8

How does this make sense? Human wisdom would have suggested the Lord choose *Egypt*. They were a superpower; he could have made them even more powerful. They were prosperous; he could have made them even more prosperous. Why not make *them* a great nation? What does God himself say? It is because the Lord *loved Israel* that he rescued them from

Egypt and made a covenant with them and made them his people. Think of what the apostle said to the church in Corinth about their calling.

^{1 Cor 1:26} For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 1:26–29

God’s wisdom is not human wisdom. Paul is saying, essentially, it makes no sense for God to have created a church in the city of Corinth with these particular people. They weren’t special—except for this: God loved them and chose to save them.

When God raised up Judah to go to battle against Adoni-Bezek, he had a purpose in mind—a purpose that he did not reveal to them. They inquired of the Lord a specific question: “Who shall go up *first* for us against the Canaanites?” God said, “Judah shall go up first.” “Got it. Judah and Simeon.” This seems like such a small and insignificant detail, but as Aristotle once said, “The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold.”

If you take a laser beam just five inches long and raise the end of it just a single inch—that’s not much!—the beam will have moved over 1,000 feet a mile away. It seems so insignificant to move that beam an inch, just as it seems so insignificant to invite Simeon into Judah’s battle.

Even though God did not reveal the fullness of his plans to them, their responsibility was to obey in faith. God said Judah should go up first; Judah should have gone up first even with no further explanation. God does not always reveal the fullness of his plans, but he always expects faithful obedience. Think of how God led Abraham!

^{Gen 12:1} Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

Genesis 12:1

He didn’t tell Abraham where he was going. He told him to go and he would let him know when he arrived there. The responsibility in the moment is to obey with the whatever details you have for that instruction. When God says, “Go”, you start walking. If you’re walking in the wrong direction, he will tell you, “No, turn that way”. When you arrive he’ll say, “You’re here”.

Israel’s initial act of faith was to inquire of the Lord. They immediately allowed human “wisdom” to interfere with that obedience and they failed to embrace the mind of God.

Application

What is the mind of God? What is it that God desires? What did Paul write to Timothy? “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”. Our response to this, our default reaction

is no different from that of Israel. We want to do the most logical thing. We want to strategize and plan and come up with ways to *enable* God to save sinners.

There isn't a problem with thinking strategically. The problem is when we begin to rely on human wisdom. Human wisdom says we must *attract* people to the church. This is how you end up with zip lines and fog machines and colorful lights flashing. This is the entire reason for the so-called "seeker-sensitive" movement. By being cool and hip and "relevant"—whatever that means—you can, in fact, attract a crowd. This is how we end up with sermons about living your best life now instead of hearing how great our God is. Instead of sharing how Jesus rescues us from sin and death we hear about ten things to improve your life and three ways to a more satisfying marriage. So long as you continue to entertain the crowd sufficiently, you can even *retain* a crowd. Nowhere in Scripture are we called to build a crowd!

There's nothing wrong with being cool and hip. I even tried it once. I promise you that if, God forbid, you should ever find yourself in an emergency room at 2:00AM, you would not be comforted by the cool tattoo your pastor had, or by the light show last Sunday. What will get you through tragedy is not edginess or "relevance". What will get you through is having been reminded again and again of the Lord's faithfulness, and then seeing it lived out in the faithfulness of his people who would sit with you in your grief.

As Israel conquered the land and removed all traces of false religion from it, their strategy for being God's people was simple and straightforward: they were to live faithfully, worshipping the Lord God of Israel and only the Lord God of Israel. As they did so the nations would see the glory of the God of Israel on full display and would seek to worship him. This is why, even in the conquest, the nations were invited to participate in their Passover celebrations! If they would receive circumcision and would reject their gods and their idols and worship the only God, they were free to do so.

Israel's part in this was to faithfully serve the Lord. That's it. Over and over again God calls them to faithfully serve him and to reject the gods of the nations surrounding them. By refusing to worship the false gods and refusing to bow down to idols, they were, essentially, indicating how utterly worthless those idols were and how great and worthy of worship the Lord is. By keeping the law, which really means by loving the Lord with all their heart and soul and mind and strength, they would reflect his glory to the nations, and the nations would be drawn to the God of Israel.

The truth in all this is we become like what we worship. When Israel began to worship the gods of the land, they became like those gods. In these opening verses of Judges they began embracing the world's wisdom, which resulted in disobedience to the Lord. Today many bow down before the idol of power, thinking that if they can control things they can make the world better. We hear this in the language of "winning back this country for Christ", only what is meant by this is electing the people who appoint the right judges. We're seeing another push for putting the Ten Commandments in schools.

I'm sure that when Moses came down from the mountain after having given the Ten Commandments to Israel and seeing them worship the golden calf he did not think to himself, "I shoulda put 'em in schools." Here's the problem with this sort of thinking: it doesn't change the heart. This is why we cannot proclaim the gospel of Jesus through the ballot box. No one will be drawn to Christ because of your take on tax policy.

It might seem strange to advocate faithfulness and not the pursuit of power when consid-

ering the conquest. We've seen the conquest was not really about killing, but about removing idols. Once the land was subdued, Israel was not to have an expansionist philosophy, seeking to dominate all the nations around them militarily. They were to go about their lives, faithfully following the God who rescued them.

The great African theologian Augustine said it well. In his day many still had literal idols they bowed down to.

Many pagans have these abominations [idols] on their estates. Do we march in and smash them? The first thing we try to do is break the idols in their hearts. When they too become Christians, they either invite us in to perform this good work or else they get in first with it before us. The thing we have to do now is pray for them, not get angry with them.

Augustine, Sermon 62.17

We don't break their idols with power, but with the gospel of Jesus. We proclaim the gospel of Jesus *as we faithfully follow the Lord*. The world's wisdom says this is it. This is the life you've been given. Grab life by the horns and go for it. Don't miss out. FOMO! The Fear Of Missing Out! God's wisdom is quite different. God's wisdom says this present life is the shadow. The reality is coming. Eternal life begins now, but it is not here in its fullness. Church, grab *that* life by its horns and go for it. Don't miss out on *that* life. Embrace *that* life. Pursue life in the kingdom where the King promises to live with his people forever.