

Introduction

When I announced our next sermon series would be in the book of Judges, the most frequent reply to this was, “Ugh...the book of Judges is so *depressing*.” Our text this morning is why so many think this. We do not read it in isolation, however, but in light of the apostle’s words in Romans and in light of the fullness of God’s revelation.

Rom 15:4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4

What we’re seeing in this book is God’s desire to purify the land, but not all at once. He promised he would drive out the inhabitants little by little, so as to prevent the land that was suddenly freed of its idolatry when the people were driven out would not become overgrown with weeds and even with trees. Instead, as the people of Israel grew in size God would drive out the inhabitants more and more, thus Israel would inhabit built houses and plowed fields.

I am struck by the correspondence to New City. When we moved into this building we were not large enough to occupy it fully. It came with multiple occupants. One group fed Native American seniors twice a week, which is a wonderful ministry. Not long after we purchased the building one of the leaders offered to lead our church in a “smudge ceremony”. Apparently this involves burning sage and using a feather to move the smoke around and in this way chase out “evil spirits”. I asked him, “Why would we, a Christian church, let you come into our worship service to do this?”. If anyone is going to drive out evil spirits it will be the Lord Jesus himself. He told me the previous church invited him several times. *And where are they now?* God quickly had us purge “the land” of this evil.

The building also came with a church that met on Sunday afternoons. After we signed a lease with them we discovered they were not Trinitarian. This means they were not a Christian church for they denied God is who he says he is. The elders struggled with this but God seemed to say we were to honor the commitment—for a time. As you know, last April we informed them they had one more year. By April of 2025 they had to move out and find another place. About a month later they found a building of their own. God once again had us purge “the land”.

Over the summer the Lord urged us to create some space on our top floor though we didn’t know why. We sensed the need to be flexible with space so we moved some stuff around to create available space. Shortly after we cleared that “land” we found out Will and Sara would join us, and Will would need an office.

The problem wasn’t just wickedness, heretics, and wasted space. About five years ago God had to purge “the land” of problems the elders were experiencing. We had to be

changed. We had to be transformed. This was a difficult and painful process but we would not be able to shepherd God's people without this purifying work of God.

Here we are today, seeking the Lord for what he has for us next. We're excited, for each step of the way he has led us and continues to bless this church. I don't think it's any surprise that we find ourselves in the book of Judges where Israel is given the task of clearing the land of idolatry and false religion. I don't know what the Lord has for us next, but as we follow him we must be willing to enter the spaces he calls us to enter, to inhabit the spaces he calls us to inhabit, to conquer the spaces he calls us to conquer.

It is only through immediate and complete obedience to the Lord, both in our private lives and in our corporate life as a church, that we can expect to receive the Lord's blessing—the fullness of his promises.

We're in Judges 1.

Jdgs 1:22 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.

Judges 1:22–36

The Lord Was With Them

In verse 22 the author declares the Lord was with the tribe of Joseph. At the beginning of the book the Lord was seeking to elevate the tribe of Judah. The prophecy back in Genesis was Judah would one day rule over his brothers. The Lord was working to bring this about by having Judah—the largest tribe—bring the southern part of the land of Canaan under the rule and reign of YHWH God of Israel. They were to eliminate all resistance to the Lord by defeating armies standing opposed to him. As we saw, Judah worked against this by inviting Simeon to join in this part of the conquest.

The scene now moves north. The tribe of Joseph is called to subdue the land for the northern tribes. Joseph received a “double-portion” of the inheritance due to his role in Egypt in rescuing his family from the famine. His two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, each received an inheritance in the land. Technically, Manasseh received land east of the Jordan—outside the promised land—and west of the Jordan alongside the other tribes.

The tribe of Joseph, or more accurately, the half-tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim are called by the Lord to subdue the fullness of the northern territory. As with Judah there is a promise in the declaration “the Lord was with them”.

In verse 23 they scout out the city of Bethel. At the time the city was called Luz. It was about twelve miles north of Jerusalem, so at the southern end of the northern half of Canaan. Their spies saw a man coming from Luz. They offer the man a deal in verse 24: “Please show us a way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you.” Scholars Mark Boda and Mary Conway point out the language of “deal kindly with you” has overtones of a treaty—the very thing they were forbidden to make with those who are to be “devoted to destruction”.

It seems odd for them to ask to be shown a way into the city, as if they couldn’t find the gate. What they’re asking, however, is for a weak point to attack. Often in a city’s defensive walls there were such weak points whether due to terrain, or a sewer outlet or even a secret entrance. They saw the man leave the city; they clearly know where the main entrance is. The man takes their offer and showed them how to get inside the city.

The author states “they struck the city with the edge of the sword, but they let the man and all his family go”. The man showed them how to get in and they kept their side of the agreement. This sounds a lot like what happened with Rahab and her family at Jericho! However, this is nothing like what happened at Jericho with Rahab.

In Joshua 2 Israel sent spies into Jericho. It wasn’t a city the way we think of cities. It was the fortress that guarded the surrounding villages and towns. During war, many would retreat into the fortress since it was heavily fortified and had thick walls protecting it. Some lived in the fortress city as it was fairly large. One of those inhabitants was a woman named Rahab. She ran her “business” in the fortress. When the spies entered the city and found their way to her place of business, she hid them when the king’s men were looking for them. Here is what she said to them.

Josh 2:8 Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof ⁹ and said

to the men, “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. ¹⁰ For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. ¹¹ And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. ¹² Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father’s house, and give me a sure sign ¹³ that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.”

Joshua 2:8–13

She’s asking for a treaty or a covenant, similar to what they offered the man from Luz. Here we see, however, Rahab believes in the God of Israel. Hebrews 11 tells us she had faith in the Lord and this is why she was spared. Though this takes place more than 40 years after the exodus, she knows all about it, all about the Lord’s power and she declares in faith that he is the one true God. She is thereby rejecting all other gods and swearing her allegiance to the God of Israel. *This was always the purpose of the conquest!* All who would join them in worshiping the Lord God of Israel were free to do so.

For this reason she was spared. She was spared because in this moment she showed she was no longer a Canaanite known as Rahab the prostitute. Now she is an Israelite and would soon after marry the son of the tribal chief of Judah. Now compare her faith to that of the man from Luz. He showed the spies how to get into the city past its fortifications. As with Rahab his entire family is allowed to leave, presumably with all their belongings. Then what happened? Did he join Israel? Did he begin worshiping the God of Israel?

Jdgs 1:26 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.

Judges 1:26

He simply moved his idolatry to a new location. The Lord was with Joseph. Joseph had the power to overcome the resistance of Luz. Joseph could have asserted God’s authority and God’s authority over the land would have been demonstrated powerfully, yet Joseph used human wisdom—and disobedience!—to win against Luz. Rather than strip him of his idols and his carved images and such, they allowed him to simply move where his idolatry would occur.

The author then points out the half-tribes were not successful. In verse 27 Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean, Taanach, Dor, and Megiddo. These cities start on the east side of the land and form a line across to the west side, to the coast. The northernmost tribes were, essentially, cut off due to this. The author says “the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land”.

By what authority? Who gave the Canaanites the right to persist to dwell in YHWH’s land with all their idolatry, their altars, their carved images, their Asherah poles? The Lord

was with Joseph yet Joseph did not drive them out. In verse 29 Ephraim, the other half of the tribe of Joseph, did not drive out the Canaanites in Gezer, so they, too, persisted in the land.

In verse 28 the author says when Israel grew strong, they put those Canaanites to forced labor. That is, they placed a very heavy tax on them in the form of labor. They had to quarry stone or had to cut down and mill lumber for them. Or they had to plow fields and harvest crops and such. If they had sufficient power to do this, they had sufficient power to drive out their idolatry. After all, *the Lord was with them*. To drive out their idolatry simply means destroying their false religious furniture—their altars and carved images and such. To drive out is to bring them under the rule and reign of YHWH God of Israel.

The Border of the Amorites

In verse 30 Zebulun does not drive out the Canaanites in his territory, yet the tribe was powerful enough to put them to forced labor. Understand what is happening here. Israel, the people upon whom God poured out his kindness and generosity, his love and mercy, his grace, are choosing financial prosperity over obedience to the God who rescued them—a prosperity, by the way, he has already promised them. God offers them blessings and they reject obedience as the means to this blessing and instead pursue this blessing through forcing the Canaanites to labor for them.

In verse 31 the tribe of Asher does not drive out the inhabitants. Look closely at verse 32. In such a seemingly straightforward account with little commentary, the author writes of a profound reversal.

Jdgs 1:32 ...so the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out.
Judges 1:32

The Asherites—God’s people—lived among the Canaanites. Rather than allowing the Canaanites to remain in the land of Israel without their idolatry, the Canaanites are allowing the Asherites to remain in the land of *Canaan*.

The Lord was with his people, yet his people were living in defeat. It is a strange thing that far too often God’s people will live in a state of defeat rather than in God’s victory, when his victory is right there, being handed to them. All they need to do is take it! Asher has the promise that God is with him. If he would simply engage in the battle placed right before him, he was assured of victory, yet he remained an immigrant—an outsider—in his homeland given to him by God himself.

Naphtali did not drive out the Canaanites, either. In verse 33 he refused to do so yet has sufficient power to put the Canaanites to forced labor. Understand this amounts to a treaty with the people. If they would provide so many tons of stone or so many tons of lumber or so many bushels of grain, etc., they would be allowed to remain as they are. We see in this another reversal: those who had been oppressed and put to forced labor in Egypt are now the oppressors! What did God tell them, however?

In Deuteronomy 7 they were told they were to make no covenant with them, to show mercy to them. What this means is they were to break down their altars and dash in pieces

their pillars. They were to chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images. If the Canaanites were to remain living *among Israel*, they were to give up their idolatry. In response to Israel's faith, God promised he would bless them and he would multiply them. He promised to increase their prosperity with great crops and massive flocks and herds. He promised them physical wellness and fertility.

Rather than obey him and thereby receive these things, they sought these things from the very people they were to rule over. I know the battles they faced would have been frightening. As we've seen, they were not a large people. The Canaanites were physically larger and more numerous than they. In that same section in Deuteronomy is the promise for the battle, however!

God specifically tells them they had already seen his power to save. In the midst of several promises that he will be victorious for them, he makes this simple declaration:

Deut 7:21 You shall not be in dread of them, for YHWH your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God. ²² YHWH your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you. ²³ But YHWH your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed.

Deuteronomy 7:21–23

Do you get the sense God wants them to know who is responsible for the outcome of any battle? Do you get the sense God wants them to know the true source of their blessings? In these few verses he identifies himself repeatedly! Over and over again he says, "YHWH your God will do this"! All that remains is their obedience. All that is necessary for YHWH their God to bless them and to give them victory is their faithful obedience. *That's it.*

Rather than walk in confident faith in order to receive these things, they walked in desperate disobedience for the chance they *might* receive these things. In verse 34 the tribe of Dan *were not allowed* down into the plain. By what authority? God had given them the land. God had promised that if they simply entered into the battle the victory would be his! They weren't allowed to go down into the plain by the enemy who had no power whatsoever to enforce it. God had already declared the defeat of the Amorites yet Dan would not receive that victory.

Despite Israel's refusal to obey the Lord, the tribe of Joseph's hand "rested heavily on" the Amorites, and they—the Amorites, the defeated enemies of God—were put to forced labor. Then we read the saddest verse so far.

Jdgs 1:36 And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward.

Judges 1:36

Whose border? Whose land was it? The land of YHWH, the land he promised to Abraham on oath, swearing by himself for there was nothing greater by which to swear, was defined not by the borders he promised, but by the border of idolaters who refused to worship him.

YHWH's Strength

The purpose of the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the land was never about destroying people groups. It was never about destroying cultures or ethnic identities. It was about removing idolatry from God's good world. It was about inviting those God created in his image to live out their true purpose which is reflecting his glory by enjoying him forever. Israel's role in the world was to be a missionary role. Even keeping the law of Moses, which would result in Israel's material blessing, was to be a witness to the world. Israel would show the nations around them what life under God's authority was like.

Through their faithfulness the worship of YHWH would expand and grow. The nations surrounding them would embrace faith in the God of Israel. The world itself would be transformed. Daniel Block explains the problem quite succinctly.

Even when the Israelites gain the upper hand over the Canaanites, they refuse to carry out Yahweh's agenda. Instead of reshaping the world after the image of Yahweh's will, they live in and with the world, and before long they have taken on the characteristics of the world. Instead of making this the land of the people of God, they become like the people of the land. At the same time, the chapter announces that if anything positive is accomplished by God's people, it is because of his gracious presence and his action on his people's behalf.

Daniel I. Block, NAC

The amazing thing in all this, the thing that gives us hope in the midst of a terribly depressing opening to the time of the judges, is God is at work in the midst of their sin and rebellion. God knew Judah would fail to drive out the iron chariots—not because the means for doing so were unavailable to him, but because Judah lacked faith and therefore refused to obey—yet *God was with Judah*. God knew Joseph would not drive out the Canaanites in the north—not because the means for doing so were unavailable to him, but because Joseph lacked faith and therefore refused to obey—yet *God was with Joseph*.

Even in the various tribes' refusal to walk in obedient faith, the Lord was with them. Even when roles were completely reversed and the land was measured by the border of the Amorites, the Lord was with them. Even when the Asherites did not conquer the Canaanites but instead *lived among them*, the Lord was with them. God remains true to his word even when no one else will.

Remember they had seen God's strength. They saw the power of YHWH God of Israel in the exodus from Egypt, a power to crush the world's only superpower. God destroyed their economic system in an attempt to get Egypt to obey by letting his people go. Then God destroyed their military in a decisive act in the rescue through the Red Sea. God repeatedly showed his power in the days of conquest. Walls fell down because Israel marched in circles and blew some horns. *The walls of Jericho did not fall down because they marched in circles*. The walls fell down because they marched *in faith*. God's power and strength were on full display.

After handing them this easy victory, the people assumed it was their power and might that knocked down the walls. I know this because the very next fortress to be conquered was Ai. In their arrogance they sent just 3,000 men to conquer this much smaller fortress—and they got thoroughly whooped.

Why does God give them such an easy victory one day, essentially handing it to them, only to make them work for the next one? God gives us the easy victories so that we can pursue the harder victories in faith. God shows us he could do it all by himself so that we can approach the obstacles in our path in faith and through us God will still give the victory.

Think of the exodus story. Every Israelite alive in our text would have known all the details of that event, even if they were not yet alive at the time. Their parents and grandparents would have told them. When they first encountered Rahab 40 years after the exodus, all the Canaanites knew of it! Think of the army Pharaoh sent after Israel as they crossed the Red Sea.

Ex 14:5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?”⁶ So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him,⁷ and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.⁸ And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly.⁹ The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

Exodus 14:5–9

Pharaoh took his “six hundred *chosen* chariots”, plus all the other chariots. What are the chosen chariots? They may not have been covered in iron plating, but these were still tanks on the battle field. They could chase down everyone on foot and destroy them with arrows and swords and spears—or just run over them. These 600 chariots were Pharaoh’s elite commandos. How many “regular” chariots did he have? How many soldiers on horseback? How many foot soldiers were marching against the Israelites? To stop them God pushed back the waters of the Red Sea, allowing Israel to cross on dry ground, then as this massive army pursued them, God let the waters fall back over them.

Why would Judah not realize that the same God who did this to a much larger and much more powerful army wouldn’t do this to chariots with iron plating? On the one hand God just deadlifted a thousand pounds, yet when Judah sees a 300-pound boulder in his path, he assumes God cannot lift it. Just a few years prior to our text they saw what God did to the massive armies that joined with Hazor. When Israel obeyed God in faith and attacked, this much larger army ran in fear and the Israelites were given overwhelming victory. Yet somehow the Canaanites *persisted in dwelling* in Manasseh’s land.

In all of this, God was still with them. God remains true to his word, even when no one else will. When they moved in faith, he gave them victory. When they refused to move in faith, he allowed them to struggle, for this is what they were choosing to do.

Application

Old Testament scholars Mark Boda and Mary Conway explained the real problem for Israel in the conquest.

The implication is that, although YHWH's strength was available to them, the Israelites did not avail themselves of this resource.

Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, ZECOT

The fullness of God's divine power was available to the people of Israel, yet they simply chose to not trust him and rely on him by entering into the battle. When we read the book of Judges we see the same thing over and over again: Israel forgets God and refuses to trust him; God allows their enemies to rise up against them; they cry out to the Lord for rescue; God remains true to his word and rescues them. Then they do the same thing all over again.

Think of how differently this book would have been if Israel had simply chosen to enter into the battle God placed before them. If Judah had simply remembered all God had done to the much larger Egyptian army and then the much larger army at Hazor, when he saw the chariots of iron he would have just entered into the battle and those chariots would have been destroyed. If Joseph had remembered God's promise of victory, he would not have sinned against the Lord by making a treaty with the man from Luz.

If Manasseh had trusted the Lord he would have driven out the idolatry from the land. If Ephraim had trusted the Lord he would have driven out the idolaters. If Zebulun and Asher would have remembered all that God had done, they would not have lived among the Canaanites but would have lived in victory. If Naphtali and Dan had remembered God's power and God's promises, the Amorites would not have defiled them and their freedom. Instead, God's victory would have been trumpeted to the nations around them, causing them to fear and perhaps worship the God of Israel.

It's really easy to say this long after the fact. It's really easy to dunk on the Israelites for their obvious foolishness, but consider God's promises to us:

² Pet 1:3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

2 Peter 1:3–4

The promises of God offer to us the ability to partake of his divine nature. God has given us everything necessary to become more like him, to become more and more like Jesus, to put on his righteousness and allow it to permeate every molecule and atom in our bodies. The question is simple: if God's divine power *has been granted to us*, why is it we so often live in defeat? It is because we do not move forward in faith. It is because we so often look at the obstacles, whether financial stress or physical health or our personal struggle with sin rather than looking to Christ. When our gaze turns from Christ to the obstacle—whatever it is—we begin to allow God's victory to just sit on a shelf.

Peter wrote something just as profound in his first letter.

¹ Pet 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power

are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:3–5

He has caused us to be born again. This new life comes with an imperishable inheritance. That means it cannot rot away. It is undefiled. That means it cannot be spoiled. It is unfading. That means it will never go away. Why? Why is it the promises of God are so sure? He says we are being guarded by God's power through faith. Yes, it's your faith and it's my faith, yet in our faith God is the one who is actively working to bring about his purposes in us. This is because God remains true to his word, even when no one else will.

God has given us the task of driving out the things that occupy the space in our lives that ought to be reserved solely for him. It may be literal idols or the idols we fabricate—things like money and pleasure and power and influence. It may be guilt or regret or pride or worry. God has given us precious and very great promises that he—*he* can drive out these inhabitants from our “land”. The answer to the problems we all face is to spend more time looking at Jesus than we spend looking at the obstacles we face. When we do we will see that God remains true to his word, even when no one else will.

This is why you and I do not need to repeat the mistakes in the book of Judges, a cycle of endless failure after endless failure. We do not need to look at our lives and think, “Ugh. My life is so depressing.” Church, cling to the promises of God. Cling to the victory that is already his. Live in victory by looking to Christ.