

The Book of Judges

Lesson 1: An Unfinished Conquest and a Compromised People -- Judges

1:1-2:5

The book opens with a funeral and a question. Joshua is dead. The man who held the staff, who stood at the Jordan when the waters piled up, who circled Jericho and watched its walls fall flat, is gone. And now the tribes of Israel are standing in a half-finished land, surrounded by Canaanite cities they have not yet taken, and they ask the only question that matters: 'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?' It is a good question. It is the right question. You can almost feel the momentum, the readiness, the holy resolve. The Lord answers, 'Judah shall go up,' and off they march. If the story stopped there, you would close the book and say, here is a people who finished what God started.

But watch what happens as the chapter unfolds. Judah wins. The Lord is with Judah, and the hill country is theirs. Then you come to a phrase, and then another, and then another, and a chill settles in. 'But the inhabitants of the valley they could not drive out, because they had chariots of iron.' 'And the Benjaminites did not drive out the Jebusites.' 'Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants.' 'Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer.' Over and over, like a bell tolling, 'did not drive out, did not drive out, did not drive out.' The verbs slow down. The victories thin out. And somewhere in the middle of that chapter you realize you are no longer reading about a conquest. You are reading about a compromise.

Here is the part that should make you lean forward, because it is the part that sounds like your own life. Israel did not lose these battles in some dramatic, smoking defeat. There is no great catastrophe. The Canaanites are not driven out, but neither are the Israelites driven into the sea. Instead, the text says, when Israel grew strong, they 'put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely.' They found an arrangement. They struck a deal. Why fight to the finish when you can live side by side and even profit from it? It felt like wisdom. It felt like strength. It felt manageable. That is exactly how compromise always feels, right up until the day it owns you.

And then comes Bochim. The angel of the Lord goes up from Gilgal to a place that will be renamed for what happens there, and he speaks for God: 'I brought you up from Egypt... I said, I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land... But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?' Then the verdict: 'I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.' The people lift up their voices and weep, and they name the place Bochim, which means 'weepers.' We begin our study of Judges at this place of tears, because everything that goes wrong in the rest of the book is already hiding here, in the small, reasonable, comfortable decision not to finish obeying God.

Group Discussion: Trace the repeated phrase 'did not drive out' through Judges 1. What does it tell us about how Israel's failure actually happened, and why might a slow drift into compromise be more dangerous than a single dramatic act of rebellion?

Personal Reflection: Where in your own life have you stopped short of full obedience, made an arrangement with a sin you were told to remove, and quietly told yourself that managing it is good enough?

Read Judges 1:1–2:5

Study Questions

1. According to Judges 1:1–2 and 1:19, what was the relationship between Israel's victories and the Lord's presence, and what does the text mean when it says the Lord was 'with Judah' yet Judah 'could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley'?
2. Israel began this chapter by asking God 'Who shall go up first?' before they acted. When you face a new season or a hard decision, do you genuinely seek the Lord first, or do you tend to move and then ask Him to bless what you have already chosen?
3. Judges 1 repeats again and again that various tribes 'did not drive out' the Canaanites but instead settled for coexistence and forced labor. What does this teach us about the nature of partial obedience, and why does Scripture treat it as real disobedience rather than partial success?
4. Name a specific 'Canaanite' you have chosen to put to forced labor rather than drive out, a sin or habit you have decided to manage and profit from instead of removing. What has that arrangement cost you so far?

5. In Judges 1:7 Adoni-bezek confesses that what he had done to seventy kings has been done to him, and in 2:1–3 the angel ties Israel's coming troubles directly to their disobedience. How does this passage display God's justice and the principle that we reap what we sow, without teaching that God is cruel or arbitrary?
6. Compromise usually feels like strength, not weakness, as it did when Israel 'grew strong' and made deals with the Canaanites. In what area of your life are you most tempted to mistake a comfortable arrangement with sin for spiritual maturity?
7. At Bochim the angel of the Lord recounts God's covenant faithfulness ('I brought you up from Egypt... I will never break my covenant') before naming Israel's failure. What does this reveal about how God confronts sin in His people, and what does it teach us about the relationship between His kindness and His warnings?
8. When the people heard God's rebuke at Bochim, they wept and named the place 'Weepers.' When God's word exposes something in you, what is your honest first response: tears that lead to changed obedience, or sorrow that fades by the next morning?
9. The angel warns that the nations Israel refused to drive out 'shall be thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you' (2:3). Drawing on the whole passage, explain how incomplete obedience opens the door to entanglement and idolatry, what this reveals about God's holiness and covenant faithfulness, and how the gospel both takes our compromise seriously and provides the only real deliverance from it.

10. Looking back across the whole passage, from Judah's bold start to the tears at Bochim, name one specific compromise in your life that the Lord Jesus is calling you to stop managing and actually drive out, and describe what taking the first concrete step of obedience would look like this week.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Joshua 23:12–13, Joshua's warning that intermarriage with remaining nations would become a snare and a scourge, fulfilled here; Deuteronomy 7:1–5, God's original command to make no covenant with the Canaanites and to tear down their altars; Numbers 33:55, the prophecy that nations left in the land would be thorns in Israel's sides; Ezekiel 18:20, each person bears his own guilt, framing why the consequences here flow from Israel's own choices; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18, Paul's call to come out and be separate, the New Testament echo of the same principle of refusing compromise.

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