

JUDGES: The Pattern of Defeat

by Ray C. Stedman

There is hardly any book of the Bible that can compare to Judges in color and intrigue. You wince as you read how Ehud the judge went to visit the king in his summer palace and slid his dagger between the fifth and sixth ribs of the king so that the fat closed around it and he couldn't draw it out again. You cringe when Jael drives the tent stake through the skull of Sisera and pins him to the ground – and worry with Gideon when God cuts his army down from thirty-two thousand to three hundred, and sends him into battle. As you go through the book, you watch the terrible prophecy of the orphan Jotham fulfilled in God's strange and mysterious workings against Abimelech, the false judge.

Perhaps your heart sinks with mine when Jephthah's daughter comes out to meet him coming back from the battle and he remembers the vow that he had made that the first person he met as he came home he would sacrifice to God, and he has to fulfill that vow. Perhaps you glory with Samson as he wreaks havoc among the Philistines with that tremendous God-given strength of his, and yet wonder at his naive folly in allowing the Philistine maiden to worm the secret of his strength out of his heart, and finally destroy him. Doubtless you turn with revulsion from the story of the Benjaminite perversion that marks perhaps the darkest and blackest chapter in all the history of Israel.

It is, to say the least, a very interesting book to read. But in broader perspective it is essentially the story of a deteriorating nation, and, as such, it is a picture for us of deteriorating Christian life.

Now the interesting thing about the books of Joshua and Judges is that they both take place in the land of Canaan. In the light of the New Testament revelation that is given to us, all these things – although they are reputable accounts of actual history – nevertheless also serve a dual purpose as pictures of the spiritual encounters that we will be up against. “These things,” as the Apostle Paul says, “were written down for our instruction” (1 Cor 10:11 RSV), God retraces in our lives the very circumstances, the very battles, and the very conflicts that we find Israel going through.

In Joshua, the land of Canaan is the picture of the Spirit-filled life. The land signifies the understanding and application of the principles of victory over sin through the risen life of an indwelling Lord. God's whole purpose for the believer is to get him out of Egypt – the world and its ways, the place of slavery and bondage – through the wilderness with all its defeat, barrenness and fragmentary enjoyment of God's resources, into the land with its promise, supply and victory.

This is brought out so clearly in the book of Judges. While Joshua is a book of victory (under Joshua – which means “Jesus” – there was consistent victory when the Israelites faithfully obeyed him). Judges is a book of defeat and of failure. It is the first in a series of books which sets before us the warning spots, the danger signals, and the perils that lie along the pathway of a believer. The pattern of defeat that is described in the book of Judges is presented to us over and over again.

The principle that always meant defeat in the lives of the nation of Israel is given to us in the very

last verse of the book. If you miss that, you miss the key to the book:

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 RSV)

Notice that it does not say, "Every man did what was *wrong* in his own eyes." These people were not trying to do *wrong*. They were not essentially rebellious people determined to thwart the will of God in their lives. At this stage of Israel's history these people were very determined to do right, but they were trying to do what was right in their own eyes. The pattern of peril in this book of Judges can be simply put this way: They were given over to the folly of consecrated blundering. They were consecrated, dedicated blunderers – meaning to do right but ending up all wrong.

I can tell you that no pattern repeats itself more frequently in my counseling sessions than this. Many, many times I have heard people say, "Oh, I don't know what went wrong. I meant to do right. I did what I thought was best. But everything seemed to go wrong."

This was the problem with Israel in the book of Judges. As the verse says, there was no objective authority in their life. There was no king in Israel in those days. Actually they did have a king: Jehovah was their king, but they did not take him seriously. And when they did not take him seriously, they had nothing else to do but to take themselves seriously. So they did what they thought was right, guided by their conscience, dedicated to an earnest effort to do what was right, but always ending up wrong.

In the first two chapters of the book we see **the pattern of defeat** that will repeat itself again and again, in cycle after cycle of frustration. Each time God in his grace comes in and delivers the people, only to have them enter another cycle of defeat. It begins in the first chapter:

Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Bethshean and its villages, ... {Judg 1:27a RSV}

The discouraging story of defeat contained in the book of Judges also takes place in the land, which is simply an indication that victory in the Christian life is not an automatic thing. Just be-

cause you know the great truths of deliverance through a risen Christ doesn't mean that you automatically enjoy them. This is one of the greatest problems Christians struggle with. They think that because they have come to a place where they understand, perhaps for the first time, the great delivering truths of Romans, Chapters 6 through 8, that these truths are automatically working in their lives. It is a great shock to them to discover that although they know the truth, it isn't very visible in their experience. There can be a great gap between what we know and what we actually experience.

The tribe of Manasseh failed to obey God when he had commanded them (as they came into the land) to drive out all the tribes of the Canaanites. Look at Verse 29:

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer; but the Canaanites dwelt in Gezer among them. {Judg 1:29 RSV}

Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites dwelt among them. {Judg 1:30a RSV}

Again in Verse 31:

Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, ... {Judg 1:31a RSV}

Or the inhabitants of other villages. Look at Verse 33 referring to Naphtali (that's not soap; that is the name of a tribe of Israel):

Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Bethshernesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, {Judg 1:33a RSV}

The Amorites pressed the Danites back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain; {Judg 1:34 RSV}

That was just the beginning of the story of the defeat of Israel. They did not take God seriously about the threat their enemies posed to them, but instead, moved in among them. God had said that they were to drive out every inhabitant of these Canaanite villages. They were not to mingle with

them or have anything to do with them. They were not to marry with them or associate with them.

But when Israel came to some of these villages, instead of mounting armed warfare against them, they went in and investigated the towns. What they saw seemed quite innocuous. The villages did not seem particularly dangerous and the people seemed to be very fine people. So they said, "We will let you stay in this village. We'll start another town right next door." They allowed these tribes to retain their villages in among the cities and villages of Israel. They settled for less than total victory.

Have you ever done that? As a Christian, have you ever settled for less than total victory in your life? Did you stop smoking, for instance, or drinking, or wearing overshoes in bed, or all those other terrible habits that you had as a non-Christian? But when it came to other matters such as a hot temper, or worry, or self-confidence, or pride, you said to yourself:

- "Oh, I have improved so much over what I used to be that by comparison these are just trivial things. Surely God is not going to make an issue out of these." And you allow them to stay there, with defenses protecting them:
 - "After all, I am Irish,"
 - Or "I am only human."
 - Or "My whole family does this. This is just the way I am, and you are going to have to accept me this way."

You are settling for less than total victory.

Now look at **the next step in this process**. In Chapter 2 we see God's grace as he warns them about results of this practice:

Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land which I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my command." {Judg 2:1-2a RSV}

God warns them. He continues:

"What is this that you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you." {Judg 2:2b-3 RSV}

And what did Israel do?

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were round about them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. {Judg 2:11-12 RSV}

The next step was open idolatry. The Baals and the Ashtaroths were the gods of the Canaanite tribes. Baal was a male god. Ashtaroth was a female god. These were fertility gods. You can almost see how easily this idolatry came about. The Israelites didn't mean to do it. They knew that God had commanded that they were not to bow down before any idols. They knew the Ten Commandments. They didn't intend to get trapped like this.

But what happened? They had been farmers in Egypt where irrigation was a means of watering the land, so they weren't used to dry land farming. They didn't know quite how to handle the crops nor what to do. When their crops came up the first spring, then, they were of rather poor quality and straggly. In contrast, the Canaanite tribes had wonderful fields of grain. The Israelites said to them. "Well, what do you do? What is your secret?" The Canaanites said, "It is very simple. We have certain fertility gods and we bow down to them and offer them sacrifices. Then they bless our crops. If you ever expect to get abundant crops in this land, you are going to have to adjust to our ways."

- Have you ever had any pressure like that put on you?
- Does anyone ever say to you, "Look, if you are ever going to get ahead in this company, you are going to have to give up some of your relig-

ious ideas. You'll have to come around to our way of doing things"?

So the Israelites gave in.

Of course, along with this advice the Canaanites taught them how to plant their crops properly, how to fertilize the soil and so forth, so that next spring, sure enough, after they had bowed down to the gods of the Canaanites, they found the crops were wonderful. The Israelites said, "There must be something to this fertility business. We'd better worship these gods after all." They forsook the God of Israel and bowed down to the Baals and Ashtaroths. Now what is not recorded here is that these were sex gods and worshipping them involved not only bowing down before dumb idols that could not speak, act, or think, but also involved the Israelites in licentious practices. Thus they gradually drifted off into idolatry.

The next step in the cycle is God's grace again. The whole pattern is of man's unutterable folly in disobeying the simple Word of God. God in his arresting grace puts block, after block, after block in the path of these people trying to alert them to what is happening. In Chapter 2, we read how God dealt with their disobedience:

They forsook the Lord, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them; and he sold them into the power of their enemies round about, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them; and they were in sore straits. {Judg 2:13-15 RSV}

Have you every had the Lord's hand against you? Have you ever sensed that he was against you in everything that you did? What you thought you were doing in dedication and sincerity was so against what he had said, that since you hadn't taken him seriously, you discovered his hand was against you. This is what Israel discovered; nothing seemed to work out right. They found themselves in bondage. One after another of the tribes around them was allowed to rule over them. These tribes came in and made slaves out of them – sub-

jected them to servitude and bondage for year, after year, after painful year.

But God's grace comes in again for deliverance:

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them. And yet they did not listen to their judges; for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed down to them; they soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; {Judg 2:16-18a RSV}

That is why this book is called "Judges." Over and over this story is repeated. God raised up Othniel; and then Ehud; and then Shamgar – judge after judge until you come to the last judge, Samson. Twelve judges altogether, all representing God's intervening grace in attempting to keep these people from the folly of their own senseless disobedience.

God will intervene continually, again and again, in our own lives to stop us from the folly of not taking him seriously about these enemies that afflict us.

The revelation of man's perpetual folly is seen, as we continue in Chapter 2:

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them; they did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. {Judg 2:19 RSV}

The total result is that the book of Judges is nothing but a record of Israel's continuous decline. Look at the first verse of the book, where Israel is calling out:

"Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" The Lord said, "Judah shall go up; ..." {Judg 1:1b-2a RSV}

They were saying, "Lord, we are here to do battle against these enemies and we want you to

say who is to go up first against them.” In the last chapter of the book they are asking exactly the same question under exactly the same circumstances, except this time the enemy is no longer the Canaanites, but their own people, the tribe of Benjamin:

The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel, and inquired of God, “Which of us shall go up first to battle against the Benjaminites?” And the Lord said, “Judah shall go up first.” {Judg 20:18 RSV}

This marks the decline of the people from battling against their enemies, who were also the enemies of God, to battling against themselves. This happens so often in Christian experience. As you read through this book you’ll find in each cycle the pattern is exactly the same, bringing them lower and lower until they finally come out at that black and revolting episode which is described in the last two chapters, the perversion of the Benjaminites.

If you take this book and lay it along side the first chapter of Romans you will find that exactly the same pattern is followed:

1. First there is idolatry. Paul says, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them,” {Rom 1:19 RSV}. They had no excuse, ...
2. But what did they do? “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.” (Rom 1:22-23 RSV) – idolatry.
3. Then you will find that they turn so far from God that, as it is said, “God gave them up.” Three times it is repeated {Rom 1:24, 1:26, 1:28} that they gave themselves to their own licentious practices until they learned to practice perversions among themselves, marking the lowest stage of human folly.

The great lesson of this book, then, is that we must take God seriously about the enemy. Jesus Christ has come to save us from our sins – not to allow us to settle down to live all our lives with them. He has come to drive them out from us, and

to separate us from them. If we do not take God seriously about these things that we call trivial we will experience an inevitable sequence, taking us step by step away from the intervening grace of God, onward to a course that brings us at last to moral collapse.

I think this is the answer to those sudden moral collapses of men and women who have apparently been outstanding leaders for God, who present, on the outside at least, a fair and happy prospect that looks as though their spiritual life is strong. Then suddenly we read of some terrible moral collapse. What has happened? There has been an inward deterioration, exactly along the pattern of the book of Judges.

I think there is not one of us who isn’t asking himself, as I am asking myself,

- “Is this happening to me? Am I kidding myself?”
- In some area of my life am I saying, “Well Lord, this really isn’t very important. Why do you bother me with this matter of an impatient spirit, of an unforgiving spirit against someone, or a tendency to dwell on lustful things?”
- Or we say, “In this matter of my confidence in my own ability to do something – after all, there are lots of Christians you bless with that kind of a spirit – this isn’t very important, is it Lord?”

If this is my attitude, I am exposing myself to peril and will discover that unless I heed the intervening grace of God, and listen to his warning voice, I shall discover, sooner or later, that, as in Judges, so in my life, there will be moral collapse.

Now I trust that, as we read this book as God intended, we will see ourselves here. But let me remind you, also, that the book of Ruth is the next book.

Ruth, one of the loveliest books in the Bible, took place during the very same time as the book of Judges.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for your faithfulness to us. Lord, how rich is your grace; how in-

finite is your patience; how long you delay and warn, beseech and urge, and try to turn us back. How wonderful is your saving grace that sends again and again a Savior into our life to restore us and to bring us back. Lord, we pray that we will give heed to this voice, this blessed one who has come into our hearts and lives to redeem

us, to save us, and to deliver us. Help us to walk with him and know the glory of a life of victory, so that with the Apostle Paul we can say, "Thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere," (2 Cor 2:14). In Jesus' name. Amen.