

JUDGES—WEEK 1

FAILURE 101



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

The book of Judges is about failure, and the failures get off to a great start. The tribes of Israel repeatedly fail to finish the job of driving out all the Canaanites. Some failures are worse than others, but there are very few successes.

This book will be one long downhill slide.

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Joshua, Week 1 — Failure 101
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1 Judges 1:1–7 (ESV)

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?” The LORD said, “Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand.” 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. 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. They found Adoni-bezek at Bezek and fought against him and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. Adoni-bezek fled, but they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and his big toes. 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.

It's hard for a modern reader to put themselves into the ancient mindset that Judges is written for. Today's reading has two bits that nudge the reader toward that mindset.

First, Judah is preeminent because Reuben, Simeon and Levi were demoted over 400 years ago.

“Reuben, you are my firstborn, ...

Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; ...

“Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords.

Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company.

For in their anger they killed men, ...

I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.” — Genesis 49:3a, 4a, 5–6a, 7b (ESV)

This needs to be understood in terms of Exodus 34.

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, ... but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” — Exodus 34:6a, 7b (ESV)

The line “*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children*” is serious, and God has a loooong memory.

The second bit is the cutting off of Adoni-bezek's thumbs and big toes. While that's “cruel and unusual”, the passage makes clear that this was an “eye-for-an-eye” punishment.

If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. — Leviticus 24:19–20 (ESV)

They could have just killed Adoni-bezek. They did this instead as “just deserts.”

Our challenge is to absorb the Biblical concept of righteousness. Life back then was, by our standards, unbearably cruel, but right and wrong were still fundamentally the same.

Basic biblical justice is that wrong begets consequences. That's the foundation upon which grace is built.

2 Judges 1:8–15

Now the children of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it; they struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire. And afterward the children of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who dwelt in the mountains, in the South, and in the lowland. Then Judah went against the Canaanites who dwelt in Hebron. (Now the name of Hebron was formerly Kirjath Arba.) And they killed Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai.

From there they went against the inhabitants of Debir. (The name of Debir was formerly Kirjath Sepher.)

Then Caleb said, “Whoever attacks Kirjath Sepher and takes it, to him I will give my daughter Achsah as wife.” And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, took it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah as wife. Now it happened, when she came to him, that she urged him to ask her father for a field. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, “What do you wish?” So she said to him, “Give me a blessing; since you have given me land in the South, give me also springs of water.”

And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs.

Again, we see many things that may not make sense to us. Judah burns Jerusalem. What a waste, right?

Well, not really. Canaan was a horribly wicked and corrupt place. We saw in yesterday’s passage that Adoni-bezek had cut off the thumbs and big toes of 70 kings and reduced them to picking up scraps from under his table. That’s not just evil; it’s insane. Think about the worst, nutzoo tyrants of our time. Do any of them compare to this cuckoo-bird?

So, the burning of Jerusalem wasn’t just a waste of perfectly good resources. It was a sterilization.

Then we get to an arranged marriage. Caleb, who is quite old at this point, hands off the task of conquering Kirjath Sepher. Whoever conquers the city gets his daughter *Achsah*.

Again, this is tough for us to grasp, but arranged marriages were normal in that age. Isaac and Rebekah married virtually sight unseen. Rebekah was picked out for Isaac by a servant! (See Genesis 24:1–67.)

Achsah actually makes out quite well in this. *Othniel* seems a pretty good catch and the two of them get a nice piece of land and *the upper springs and the lower springs*. It’s not clear how many springs that makes total, but it sounds like a lot. That’s important; the *land in the South* is a desert.

https://www.weather-atlas.com/en/israel-climate#climate_text_1

Beware, this is going to get even rougher, and it won’t be easy to make sense of. We’re used to living in a place with a constitution that provides a consistent form of government that’s designed to work with fallen human nature—using things like separation of powers, balance of powers, and enumerated rights.

Things weren’t like that back then. Totally corrupt human nature produced totally corrupt government.

The book of Judges is about how things go wrong. It’s a horror show.

3 Judges 1:16–21

Now the children of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up from the City of Palms with the children of Judah into the Wilderness of Judah, which lies in the South near Arad; and they went and dwelt among the people. And Judah went with his brother Simeon, and they attacked the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath, and utterly destroyed it. So the name of the city was called Hormah. Also Judah took Gaza with its territory, Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. So the LORD was with Judah. And they drove out the mountaineers, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland, because they had chariots of iron. And they gave Hebron to Caleb, as Moses had said. Then he expelled from there the three sons of Anak. But the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who inhabited Jerusalem; so the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.

Oh, no! Chariots of iron! Run away!

Too bad Joshua is dead, because he could have told them about how he felt when the commander of the army of the LORD suddenly showed up right in front of him holding a sword (Joshua 5:13). After prostrating himself and worshipping, Joshua asked him, “*What does my lord say to his servant?*”

The response is surprising and a great lesson—“*Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy.*”

The commander of the army of the LORD doesn't give a fig about iron chariots.

The Israelites shouldn't either.

The book of Judges is about failure, and the failures have gotten off to a great start.

Judah could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland. Also, the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who inhabited Jerusalem.

Notice the difference between *could not* and *did not* here. The ESV, NIV, NKJV and the old King James Version all translate these verses this way. So, *could not* really does mean *could not*.

But we know that they actually could. God keeps His promises. How can it be that they *could not*?

Actually, they never could in the first place. God could. They only could in the sense that they could be successful if they turned to God for success. Welcome to Failure 101.

They *could not* because they thought they could. If they understood the truth that they *could not* and leaned on God's promises, they would.

Thus begins the direct application of the lessons of Judges to us. We face *could not* situations all the time. That's often what drives us to our knees. The trick is to hit our knees every time we think, “We could.”

The beginning of could is understanding our couldn't.

4 Judges 1:22–26

And the house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the LORD was with them. So the house of Joseph sent men to spy out Bethel. (The name of the city was formerly Luz.) And when the spies saw a man coming out of the city, they said to him, “Please show us the entrance to the city, and we will show you mercy.” So he showed them the entrance to the city, and they struck the city with the edge of the sword; but they let the man and all his family go. And the man went to the land of the Hittites, built a city, and called its name Luz, which is its name to this day.

In the midst of a litany of failures, we get one solid success story. Since Jacob declared Joseph’s two sons to be his own, they fathered separate tribes (Ephraim and Manasseh). Thus, “the house of Joseph” seems to be a reference to both tribes working together. That’s nice, but it won’t last.

It’s working now though. Together, they send spies to Bethel. What happens next is remarkably providential.

The spies encounter a random *man coming out of the city* and say to him, “Please show us the entrance to the city, and we will show you mercy.” That’s nuts. They’ve just jeopardized the mission by revealing to a perfect stranger that they’re going to do something where he’ll need their mercy. This looks ridiculous, but it ultimately works. Clearly, God blessed them.

And I just love that they said, “Please.” In all the annals of war, this might be the only example of the use of “please” when asking someone to betray his country.

They’re going to kill everyone in the city, but at least they’re polite about it.

The takeaway from this passage is that this “random” encounter with the man coming out of the city was anything but random. God was blessing this mission, and the spies knew it. They did things that showed that they were counting on God’s blessing.

That’s the true definition of faith. If you really believe something, you’re going to act like it. If you say you believe one thing, but act like you believe something else, then the something else is what you actually believe.

My favorite example of this is someone who says, “I know I have to stop smoking,” but they’re not doing anything to stop. The contradiction could be with the word “know”, or maybe with the words “have to”, but there’s a contradiction in there somewhere.

And the statement, “I know I have to stop smoking,” can be totally honest. The person isn’t lying, he or she is just not taking it seriously.

This horrifying principle even applies to confessions of faith in Jesus as Lord.

It’s possible to not know that you don’t really believe.

5 Judges 1:27–36 (ESV)

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. When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely.

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived in Gezer among them.

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.

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, so the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out.

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.

The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. 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. And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward.

Manasseh failed. Ephraim failed. Zebulun failed. Asher failed. Naphtali failed. Dan failed. All six failed.

But some failures were worse than others. All of the tribes *did not drive out the locals*, but Dan almost got driven out themselves. Everyone allowed some locals to remain, but four of the six tribes subjected the locals *to forced labor*. Only Ephraim and Asher failed to do even that. Also, only Asher and Naphtali *lived among the Canaanites* instead of the Canaanites living among them.

So, Asher wins the “beta” award for not being top dog in their own region. They weren’t subjecting the Canaanites *to forced labor* plus they *lived among the Canaanites* instead of vice-versa.

All the others were alpha in one way or the other.

This first week in Judges has hit on some significant “mindset adjustment” themes for us. We’re not accustomed to the brutality and extreme evil of that era. We need to get used to these things.

But there’s another adjustment needed. Just as it was with Sodom and Gomorrah, we need to see the death of everyone in a city as a normal outcome. God made all people and He can do with them what He wants.

If we can cheer total destruction of the bad guys in a movie, why not in reality?

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When is eye-for-an-eye good and when isn't it?
2. Do you know of any real arranged marriages?
3. Have you seen failure rooted in overconfidence?
4. What things do we often say unseriously?
5. Who's your favorite evil character or actor?

Items for prayer: