

# Judges 1:1-2:-5

Intro January 7, 2007 Patterns of Partial Obedience

Geography has fallen on hard times. At a recent geography convention there gathered teachers of topography and map mavens whose common interest was to know the world. At the convention they bemoaned widespread geographical illiteracy and the minimal attention geography receives in the educational schema. Geography was in a proverbial sinkhole. And the newspaper article covering this geographical gully of knowledge provided their point, as the headline read: "Geology Courses Get Low Grade". Geography is so low that when editors read the word, it just doesn't show up on their maps.<sup>1</sup>

Now for a map junky like me, who gets giddy with Google Earth, I shake my head at the confusion. If you don't know the world in which you live, you will easily get lost. But what that 40% of the 18-24 Americans surveyed who could not find the Pacific Ocean and that almost 60% who could not locate India with its 17% of the world's population on a map, how much more trouble are we going to have as we begin our new series this morning in the Old Testament book of Judges.

This book details events covering 340 years at the close of the second millennium before Christ. There are numerous place names and tribal peoples whom we barely know and can hardly pronounce. Yet God thought it wise that we have this book, not just to learn ancient geography, but to know our place in this world. Judges takes place in that dark period of God's people, who, after the exodus from slavery in Egypt and the wilderness wanderings, come to the Promised Land. The book before, Joshua, tells us of their initial conquest of the land and Judges tells us of the troubles they had in that new land when they did not obey fully.

Like partial knowledge of geography, partial obedience will get us lost. So as we open this book and this new series, paying attention to geography will not just make us trivia hotshots, but understand how God worked among His people 3300 years ago and how He works in our lives today. We need to know geography – we need to know our place in this world, how to relate to it and how to avoid getting lost in the world so that we no longer see or know God's direction in our life.

Listen as I read portions of Judges 1:1-2:5. Don't glaze over the geography. This ancient book is a map for us today to know what the Christian life looks like today. READ 1:1-7, 17-19, 28-30; 2:1-5.

This book begins like so many others, with the death of a leader. Exodus begins reminding us that Joseph has died; Joshua begins with the death of Moses and 1 Kings with the death of David. Here we are told that Joshua has died. But God is not dead. Despite the absence of a leader, God is at the helm and will guide his people.

Specifically here God's guidance through the treacherous territory ahead, God will raise up judges. Although none are mentioned in this first section, they'll come later. The Hebrew word judge (*shaphat*) is not one who sits on the bench dispensing legal decisions, but a heroic leader who rescues God's people.

The leaders God raises up will need to know the geography; they will need to know the land which they are to conquer. Knowing the world in which they live, they will know how best to move forward.

Just as this was a struggle over 3000 years ago, it's still a struggle for today. How do we to live in this world, influence our world, without it influencing us to our detriment? It takes knowing geography.

This is especially hard for us as God calls us to obey him fully in a fallen world. While the world makes living for God a challenge, our chief problem is not the world itself. It is our own hearts. We live in a world created by God, ruled by God, yet a world that we are told in 1 John that friendship with this world is hatred toward God. So as we know the world in which we live, we must walk carefully, not giving partial obedience.

## **PARTIAL OBEDIENCE FOLLOWS THE WORLD**

1:1-7

God's people began well

With Joshua's death, they people did not remain frozen with fear. Having entered the land and seen God's hand from Gilgal to Jericho and beyond, they knew what to do – they sought God.

Judah is called and steps forward. From the time of Jacob it was known that Judah was the leader of the tribes. He held the scepter and from him would come David as king and from whom the Messiah was to be raised.

Judah enlists the aid of Simeon, who will eventually be enfolded into his territory. But the leadership belongs to Judah. Although sin and rebellion are themes, partial obedience seems to be the pattern, this sub theme is seen – victory will come through the line of Judah. God will fulfill his promise to bring a savior no matter what happens.

God's people do not completely obey, but follow the world's examples

God gives success to Judah and they defeat 10,000 at Bezek, but right away we see compromise.

They capture the king, Adoni-bezek, and cut off his thumbs and big toes. Why?

This was never a practice commanded by God, but was practiced in the ancient world to humiliate the enemy. Without opposing thumbs, he could never wield a sword and toes he would hobble, making escape unlikely. Historians say the Romans amputated their own sons' digits to prevent them from being conscripted into the army.

Adoni-Bezek appears to accept his fate with aplomb, for he so humbled 70 kings. But as geography is important, we should not miss how Bezek plays in Israel's future.

Bezek, which means to strike down, was a place where God's people first strike down the inhabitants of Canaan in this book. But the town is mentioned again in 1 Samuel 11. When the town of Jabesh-Gilead was besieged by future generations of otherwise undefeated Canaanites, they were threatened with having all their right eyes gouged out. Saul, hearing of their brothers' plight, sends word to all Israel to meet at Bezek and they mustered an army to defeat the Ammorites, an act which culminates in Saul being crowned king.

How do we partially obey by following the cue from the world?

Not all we see in the world is inherently wrong. But where and when God speaks in Scripture we must obey. The humiliation of Adoni-Bezek was not what God commanded. We see the first crack in their character.

A contemporary example would be if the United States responding to terrorist activity by taking hostages themselves and tormenting and terrorizing them in kind. This was a failure on the part of Judah.

What about for us personally? One example can be when Christians take on the litigious mindset of our culture. With little objection by the world or within the church, we imbibe the culture of personal rights and the use of the courts to obtain by law what we have by grace.

I read this story that puts a perspective on not following the world into partial obedience. Author Leonard Sweet tells of a time when he flew to Arizona for a speaking engagement. He was picked up at the airport by Tom Wiles a chaplain at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix in his new Ford pickup and whisked me away to keynote a leadership conference at the university. Sweet was still mourning the trade-in of his Dodge truck, so they bonded, sharing truck stories and laughing at the bumper-sticker truism: "Nothing is more beautiful than a man and his truck."

The next day, climbing in that new Ford for a ride back to the airport, he noticed two big scrapes by the passenger door. "What happened here?"

"My neighbor's basketball post fell and left those dents and white scars," Tom replied with a downcast voice.

"You're kidding! How awful," Sweet commiserated. "This truck is so new I can smell it."

"What's even worse is my neighbor doesn't feel responsible for the damage."

Rising to his newfound friend's defense, Sweet said, "Did you contact your insurance company? How are you going to get him to pay for it?"

Tom replied. "After a lot of soul-searching and discussions with my wife about hiring an attorney, it came down to this: I can either be in the right, or I can be in a relationship with my neighbor. Since my neighbor will probably be with me longer than this truck, I decided that I'd rather be in a relationship than be right. Besides, trucks are meant to be banged up, so I got mine initiated into the real world a bit earlier than I expected."<sup>2</sup>

When we follow the world, we can fall into their tactics and in so doing, give partial obedience to God.

## **PARTIAL OBEDIENCE FEARS THE WORLD**

1:17-19

Partial obedience defines where obedience begins and ends, letting the geography dictate morality.

Judah and Simeon continue in obedience, defeating the enemy, devoting them to complete destruction as God had commanded. Yet in v19 there is another problem – they stopped short of complete obedience. They possessed the hill country, but not the plains. Why? Fear.

There were iron chariots which terrorized armies in the open plains, but were useless in the hill country, so where it was easy to defeat the enemy, they engaged, but where it was hard due to their superior weaponry, they shrunk in fear.

History confirms the terror faced by Israel. Out flanked by advanced technology on the plains, they resorted to tactics they knew best. But in so doing, they allowed the geography, the world, to set the agenda, not God's command.

Are there some areas just too hard for Christians to engage?

The church still has to face the challenge of a secular world which does not want to know about God, or about the Bible, or about the claims of absolute truth. There are as many '-isms' in contemporary culture as there were '-ites' in ancient Canaan. And the waves of enmity and hostility still crash down on the people of God.<sup>3</sup>

Many Christians live in fear of the world's command in science or philosophy, that they consider the iron chariots of the university to daunting to confront, so that they have free reign through our culture.

God calls and equips men and women to engage this world, we have no reason to ever think the gospel is compromised because the task looms too large. And when we engage, we need not fear the taunts so that we capitulate to their agenda.

## **PARTIAL OBEDIENCE DOMESTICATES THE WORLD**

1:28-30

The rest of the chapter gives us the downward slide of the more northern tribes whose partial obedience paved the way for future heartaches. Obedience seemed to come at too great a cost and disobedience too advantageous. They obeyed God's command by conquering the Canaanites, but instead of removing them from the land, they enslaved them for their own benefit.

Why waste good human life when they can serve me? This appears to be their motive.

This utter destruction raises obvious moral problems for us today, and we will address this in more detail in the future, but suffice it to recall that this was not an example of a bully Israel picking on innocent Canaanites. While we may not see this destruction as palatable, it is nevertheless just. Anyway, contemporary western church members who vicariously and avidly gorge themselves on violence via television and cinema have forfeited any right to throw the first stone at the biblical conquest.<sup>4</sup>

The assumption of these northern tribes was that slavery was more tolerable for all concerned than genocide, but in time the tables would be turned and as the Canaanites are absorbed into culture, they will enact revenge on God's people for generations to come.

The place names, the geography that means so little to us, would sound alarms in the ears of ancient readers. A cost was paid when Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Bethshan, which guarded the Jordan and Jezreel valleys, as well as the other cities listed.

Like a surgeon who leaves just some cancer in the body but calls the procedure a success, Israel thought complete obedience was not necessary. Domesticating sin, taming it was thought best, but you can't tame rebellion.

Where do we do this? What we read of in Judges 1 is what Paul writes of in Romans.

Today we speak of the mortification of the flesh. We don't try to make our sins acceptable, domesticate them so that they no longer are a problem. Complete eradication is mandatory. We know immorality is wrong, would never think of doing some of the things the world does, but we play with fire nonetheless.

We may complement ourselves for the great strides we've taken in subduing evil, all the while the cancer resides within. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Water Street in Milwaukee was whore house row, today it's mostly tame bars, but immorality still exists ... in our hearts. The gospel has made great inroads in this area in our nation, but it seems all we've done is privatized our sin. We've retreated to a two-dimensional adultery.

Listen to what D.A. Carson says of our domestication of sin:

We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated. D.A. Carson

Even if that is not your specific temptation, so many of us play with the images of a more acceptable kind in the movies we choose to watch, the shows that entertain us. But sin can not be controlled, it must be eradicated. But how?

**PARTIAL OBEDIENCE FINDS HELP IN THE ONE WHO HAS COME INTO THE WORLD** 2:1-5

It is into this world that the angel of the Lord comes.

When this pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ comes we see that God does not just communicate his displeasure, but expresses himself with a tangible reality. The world in which we live, that gives us such grief and troubles is a world that God not only made, but he enters into to aid us.

But again, geography matters here, as the angel of the Lord goes from Gilgal to Bochim.

Gilgal was the place where Israel first crossed the Jordan, where they set up 12 rocks as a memorial to God's faithfulness, where they circumcise themselves in covenantal faithfulness, so that the name Gilgal means to roll back, as that sign pictured God rolling back their sins. It was there they first celebrated the Passover in the Promised Land. It was to Gilgal that Israel during Joshua's life constantly returned.

Bochim, on the other hand, means weeping. In the book of Joshua, the people lived in victory, but here in Judges they are miserable and sorrowful.

Whenever we partially obey, we find ourselves at Bochim, weeping.

We think that by doing this or having that that we will enter into life, but then we discover that we are defeated and controlled by sin. Sorrow, not victory, becomes our portion. If we want something badly enough, God will give it to us. Our dreams become nightmares as disobedience leads us into slavery.

The answer is found in God's covenant of grace

God's initiation is the foundation

The angel rehearses what has been done for them already. God is faithful to them, no matter how unfaithful they are. He has given them an abundant land of promise; He has given them a covenant that He will never, ever, break.

Before confronting the sin God reminds us of our status before him. He is faithful to us and will never break that promise

God's stipulation is expressed

But part of that covenant which God will never break is the understanding that they to make no covenants, agreements with the inhabitants of the land. That they have done. They have broken their end of the covenant.

Israel's problem is not that they lacked military power or technology. Their problem is spiritual, they did not obey

God's accusation is laid out

While God's punishment is forever set on another, as Christ took on our punishment, yet his Fatherly discipline is ours.

What is about to unfold through this book, over the next 340 years will illustrate for us the nature of God's work of sanctification in our lives. This narrative paints the picture of what God does in our lives to show us our sin, our need for a savior and his deliverance in our lives, especially when we don't deserve his goodness.

The people respond with weeping and sacrifice

As the nature of their sin is shown to them and the consequences of their sins are put forth, that these other peoples will be a thorn in their sides, they express the sorrow for their sins.

Some doubt this is true repentance, for so soon do they engage in only partial obedience. Yet in such few pages the years tick by so fast. I think their repentance was real, but like ours, we must repent constantly, for we sin constantly. The evidence of their repentance is seen in their sacrifice. They know the only place they have to go is to God.

You and I are also covenant breakers. We have sought to obey, but partially, conveniently. But the good news of the gospel is that God works with covenant breakers like us for he is the one who makes the promise, keeps the promise and applies it to our lives.

That is why we have this table before us this morning. It is an emblem of God's promise to feed us, but we, like rebellious children have come to partake, but have stuffed ourselves on the world's junk food this past week and feel self satisfied. Yet, God calls us to come and we weep because we see again and again how we have not obeyed and how he continues to give us good things. So I invite you to come, to eat, to be filled, for your partial obedience is made complete by the obedience of your Savior who died for you and was raised so that you can enter the Promised Land of heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*, Dale Ralph Davis, p15.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question...Into the Mystery* (Waterbrook Press, 2004), p. 91-92

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.backfreechurch.co.uk/studies/judges/judges\\_0001.jsp](http://www.backfreechurch.co.uk/studies/judges/judges_0001.jsp)

<sup>4</sup> *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*, Dale Ralph Davis, p16.