

## WEEK ONE

# A BIBLICAL GEOGRAPHY LESSON WITH A PURPOSE

*JUDGES 1:1–3:10*

⇒ Read Judges 1:1–26.

## We need a tour guide.

Wandering around an old castle without a tour guide leaves its most interesting stories undiscovered. When my family and I were in the United Kingdom for three years, we were occasionally taken by friends to visit castles. We lived in the city of Cardiff, Wales, which boasted a castle with walls that originated as a Roman fort. When you walk into this ancient building, you must make a choice: do you spend the money at the visitor center for the official tour, where a guide explains the strange and archaic history; or do you jump right into exploring on your own? I never regretted spending the extra cash to get the most out of the visit.

Judges is a book full of strange and ancient events. How should we approach it? Proper understanding requires the right guide. God is, of course, the only one qualified to guide us. He has provided crucial information for us in the opening chapters of Judges (1:1–3:10). Leaping over early chapters which do not initially appear spiritually significant might be tempting, but it would be a mistake. These early chapters are essential to understand the unusual events encountered later in this book. Rushing into Judges without considering these early chapters would be like wandering through an ancient castle without a tour guide. But instead of missing a few interesting facts, you may miss truth that has the potential to change your life.

## WHY IS THERE A GEOGRAPHY LESSON IN JUDGES 1?

Judges opens with a geography lesson that has a theological point. Judges 1 divides easily into two sections:

- **1:1–26** An account of the general, though imperfect, obedience of the southern tribes
- **1:27–36** An account of the general disobedience and failure of the northern tribes

Through Moses, God commanded Israel to take possession of the promised land (Deuteronomy 1:21). Fear of the inhabitants was forbidden. After all, God would fight for them. Nevertheless, Israel disobeyed God and forfeited the chance to enter the land, until forty years later when they, under Joshua's leadership, took the promised land.

Following the final chapters of the book of Joshua, where God is said to have given “rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side,” the early chapters of Judges may raise a few questions.

## THE BOOK OF JOSHUA TELLS US THAT ISRAEL DEFEATED HER ENEMIES AND TOOK THE PROMISED LAND, SO WHY IS THE NATION STILL AT WAR?

In Joshua’s record of Israel’s victory over the inhabitants of the promised land, we learn that Israel broke the strength of her enemies and controlled the land. Judges 1 summarizes Israel’s obedience and disobedience by recording the places they did and did not conquer. Because of Israel’s disobedience, small pockets of resistance remained.

## WHY DOES GOD REQUIRE ISRAEL TO REMOVE ALL THE ORIGINAL INHABITANTS OF THE LAND?

⇒ Consider Deuteronomy 7:1–6.

*When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you. But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.*

Although the Canaanites are no longer a military threat, they are a spiritual threat. If Israel allows the idol-worshipping nations to remain in the land, eventually the Canaanites’ interaction with Israel will tempt them to add cultural idols to the worship of the true God. When that happens, God Himself will fight against Israel. Judges repeatedly records this bitter reality.

Additionally, Israel’s inhabiting the land is but a small part of God’s larger purposes. Completely taking the land isn’t merely about Israel’s security and comfort; it is about God’s plan of redemption and God’s covenant promises. God is keeping His promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; 17:1–8) and establishing Israel as a nation with a land and a king. Through this nation

God will bring the “seed” of Abraham, Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16), who will accomplish the rescue foreshadowed in the old covenant. He will put all things right.

Israel too often forgot the bigger picture. Thinking only of personal benefit as they tried to clear the land of enemies, they stopped short when they reached a place of personal satisfaction. They quit when they felt like it because they did not understand that their lives were caught up in something far bigger than their personal welfare.

## Israel failed to understand a basic principle: obedience is never merely about us.

If you are a Christian, you have been given a new life, brought into a new realm, and given a new standing before God in Christ. Yet, like Israel, your life still has remnants of an old enemy. The Bible refers to this enemy under a number of titles: sin, self (that tendency in you to ask “what’s in this for me?”), the flesh (this bodily existence through which we are often tempted), and the world (the fallen system of thinking and living that forms our present environment). Christ has brought you out from under the tyranny of spiritual darkness and into His kingdom (Colossians 1:13). The great strength of sin and the fear of condemnation are broken once and for all by union with Christ. While we are not waging wars with foreign nations over a plot of land, enemies remain. We must daily battle the old habits and the old ways. Making peace with sin is unthinkable.

⇒ **Read Romans 6:1-2 and copy those verses.**

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War with the old sinful habits and desires is the only choice for the Christian.

Paul writes in Romans 8:12–14,

*So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.*

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*Consider, it is impossible that your idol sins and you can go to heaven together; and that those who will not part with these do not indeed love Christ at the bottom, but only in word and show, which will not do the business.*

—SAMUEL RUTHERFORD

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Every Christian has a great deal in common with God’s ancient people who were commanded to take *all* the land. They were never allowed to call a ceasefire as long as even the smallest pocket of resistance remained. Do not misjudge the Christian’s war. Though it is spiritual, it is no less violent or costly than physical battles which have taken lives and scarred the earth.

Let’s ask a significant question.

### **HOW FAR ARE YOU DETERMINED TO GO WITH CHRIST IN THE PURSUIT OF PUTTING YOUR SIN TO DEATH?**

Be honest with yourself: How much progress in sanctification (being transformed into the moral image of your Savior) is enough for you? Would 90% of your life transformed be sufficient for you to stop the fight? If we are honest, most of us are settling for much less than that. We tend to stop at the level of holiness that is expected in our religious culture. In other words, we get about as Christ-like as the people we go to church with—perhaps even a little more—and then we relax. We avoid the major *thou shalt not*s, and we fulfill the expected *thou shalt*s. Beyond that, sanctification appears optional. We can be sure that if we fight against temptations and old sinful patterns *only* as far as they affect our happiness, we will stop long before God intends.

Like Israel, we must keep the greater work of God before our eyes. God has given each believer and each church instruction regarding the fight against sin. Step back and consider how God’s overarching plans should determine how we wage war against sin in our lives, homes, churches, and world.

⇒ Copy the following verses that speak of the bigger picture:

Romans 8:28-29

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1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

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Colossians 1:28

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Ephesians 4:11-13

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Whether we view God's purposes from the perspective of His activity (Romans 8, 1 Thessalonians 5) or from the perspective of our response (Colossians 1, Ephesians 4), every believer has been chosen for the purpose of being made completely like Christ.

God has promised Christ that His adopted brothers and sisters will one day look like Him. Christ has purchased all aspects of each believer and therefore has the right to rule over every area of our lives. If we forget this, we will stop short in the fight. If we fail to remember that every church member is obligated to help other members reach that full measure of maturity in Christ and be conformed to Christ's image, we will stop short in the fight.

The moment we forget the big picture, personal preferences guide our pursuit of Christlikeness. So, the question for every follower of Christ is: what is guiding your effort in the war? Is it God's great plan of redemption which includes your transformation into His Son's image? Or is it personal comfort and security, leading you to stop short and give sanctuary to thoughts, desires, attitudes, or patterns that are at war with your Savior?

⇒ **Take time to earnestly consider the following questions:**

- Is there any part of your life in which you have been willing to stop short in following Christ's pattern?
- Have you forgotten that every area of your life relates to the honor of your Lord?
- Have you viewed sanctification as nothing more than an exercise in spiritual self-improvement or personal fulfillment?

Let's take a closer look at how Israel's personal preferences led them to stop short of full obedience. The failure of the northern tribes demonstrates this.

⇒ Read Judges 1:27–36 and list the times God mentions Israel’s failure to drive out the enemies from the land.

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⇒ Notice the progression in the severity of consequences for the Israelites as they refused to fully remove the enemy:

1. Enemies are allowed to stay but become forced labor for Israel when Israel is strong (1:28, 30, 35).
2. Enemies remain and are allowed to live among the Israelites in the land (1:29, 32–33).
3. Enemies remain in control of a portion of the land, and the Israelites are allowed to live among them (1:32, 33).
4. Enemies drive the Israelites into the hills, not allowing the Israelites to live among them (1:34).

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*Where God multiplies His mercies and men multiply their sins, their God will multiply their miseries.*

–SAMUEL CLARK

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### WHAT ABOUT THE PRACTICE OF USING THE REMAINING ENEMIES AS FORCED LABOR?

This common practice appeared desirable for Israel. In truth, it was a dangerous and deceptive option. Although God commanded them to remove all the idolatrous nations from the land, it was initially easier to allow small pockets of the original inhabitants to remain. This practice

seemed a sensible choice, because they could be forced to work without pay. In other words, when Israel was strong, they thought it more beneficial to enslave the Canaanites than to obey God. Of course, when Israel became weak the enemies that they spared would rise up and trouble the region.

As individual Christians, weary of fighting our own sin, we can convince ourselves that continuing to fight isn't worth much. Some of the culturally acceptable sins around us may promise to be profitable if kept under control. We will be told that variations of pride and selfishness (self-confidence, self-assertion, self-centeredness, self-sufficiency) can be useful. This kind of thinking is short-sighted; in a matter of time those sins will rise up and rule us. Most importantly, this thinking dishonors God.

⇒ **Ask yourself: can you think of any culturally acceptable sins that you are tempted to allow in your life because they appear useful at the time?**

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## The divine explanation

⇒ **Read Judges 2:1-5.**

In this passage, God explains what He thinks of Israel's military strategy.

⇒ **Summarize what God says to Israel about their choices.**

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Have you ever stopped and asked why Israel failed to drive out the Canaanites? Was it a lack of military strength? Think back on the history of Israel and her dealings with enemies, from the exodus until this time under the judges. At what point did they ever have sufficient strength for their enemies?

- Did they escape Egypt by their own strength or by depending upon and following God?

- Did they persevere for forty years in the wilderness by their survival skills or God's provision?
- Did they conquer superior enemies by Joshua's military skill and their well-trained armies or by God fighting for them?

The root of Israel's failure to fully drive out the nations had nothing to do with their military. God had engaged Himself, by covenant promises, to do everything required for Israel to occupy the land. Israel's cowardice and subsequent indifference demonstrate their persistent unbelief in God. They did not trust God enough to continue to risk their lives and remove all their enemies. Sadly, the following generations had to live with the effects of their forefathers' unbelief.

Discussing the failures of ancient Israel doesn't cost us anything. Perhaps it is time to turn our thoughts toward ourselves and our churches.

⇒ **Ask yourself:**

- Is Christ enough for me to live obediently today?
- Is Christ enough for me to put to death the old sinful patterns today?
- Are Christ's claims worth risking another attack on the culturally accepted sins that have slipped back into my life, home, or church?
- Do I view grace as a reason to let sins live untroubled in my life?
- Or do I see grace as daily fuel for a successful war against sin?
- Which occupies your thoughts more: the magnitude of sin and sorrow around you or the covenanted provisions you have in Christ for daily obedience?

We cannot answer these diagnostic questions in a workbook. Our lives and choices are already answering them.

Thankfully, the grace of God is at work in every believer to guarantee we have all we need.

⇒ **Read the following verses and copy them in the blanks:**

**Philippians 2:13**

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**Romans 6:11-13**

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**Romans 8:12-13**

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⇒ **Read Judges 3:1-4.**

Remember the nations listed here; we will see many of them in the following chapters.

**BEWARE SPARING ANY SIN, IT WILL NOT SPARE YOU**

There is a spiritual principle in this passage for the Christian. If you find sin in your life, small and unnoticed by others, and you spare that sin, do not be surprised if one day that sin ruthlessly rules over you in a way that everyone notices. Think of it this way: if there are personal sins that you are at peace with, you are presently writing out your own list of enemies, like the list found in Judges 3:1-4, that may one day rule you.

Samuel Rutherford gave the following illustration of our careless attitude toward sin. Imagine children on a ship as the sea becomes choppy. They lean over the edge of the deck and play in the

white foam of the ocean waves. They do not understand that these waves are only the beginning of a terrible storm that will sink their ship and take their lives. Unaware of the coming doom, they continue to laugh and play with the waves that will soon destroy them.<sup>1</sup> Any sin that we knowingly spare in our lives is like toying with an ocean wave, unaware that it may soon destroy us.

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*Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work? Be always at it while you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.*

–JOHN OWEN

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## THE OVERRIDING MERCY OF GOD

Israel was disobedient, stopping short of removing the pagan nations and later intermingling with them (3:5–6); but God used even these sinful choices in a way that would accomplish His overarching purposes. He used the remaining nations as instruments to teach Israel to depend upon Him, to walk with Him, and to obey Him. We find this truth explained more fully in Paul’s well-known words:

*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)*

This truth is precious to the Christian—the one who loves God and has been called according to His purpose. While Romans 8:28 does not teach us that full obedience is optional, it does explain that God will accomplish His great plans of mercy despite our costly and sinful stumbling.

## You are studying Judges for more than you.

⇒ **Read Judges 3:5–10.**

The generation that fought with Joshua and witnessed the miraculous deeds of God had passed away. The next generation did not know God in the same way. They failed to learn essential lessons from their parents.

Surely the older generation would have talked about the “good old days” when God fought for Israel. Surely the younger generation heard about the living God and His miracles. Yet they

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Rutherford and Andrew Bonar, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford: With a Sketch of His Life and Biographical Notices of His Correspondents*, (United Kingdom: Religious Tract Society 1894), 43

somehow never really took it in. These two great realities—who God is and what God has done—were not effectively passed to the next generation.

God may teach us things in this study that we need to learn, but we need to do more. We must pass the truths we learn to the next generation. Although there is no guarantee that everyone will embrace the truths about our Lord's person and work, we are still responsible to teach younger people and to reinforce our words with our lives.

As you study Judges, seriously consider the stewardship given to you. God will teach His children His truth through His Word using His people. He intends to pass His truth to the next generation in part through your daily response to the book of Judges.

