**Change is Tough**

**Text:** Judges 1:1-10

**Introduction:** Good morning! Today we are going to begin a study of one of the least popular Books in the Bible. Let’s read Judges 1:1-10 and then we will pray and ask God to bless His Word to our hearts.

Some have called this the least Christian Book of Scripture. Those thoughts bely a dangerous ignorance of God’s Word. My purpose as a pastor is to see God’s people grow in the knowledge of His Word and so grow in usefulness to their Saviour. No matter how willing you may be, if you are ignorant of what the Bible says, you’re not going to be very useful to God. How equipped are you to respond to those who accuse the Scripture of endorsing genocide and brutal war? I hope you understand that the destruction of the Canaanite culture is an example of God’s grace. Did you know that God let the Canaanites dwell in the land far longer than He let Israel possess it? That is grace!

Others dislike Judges because they think it paints a picture of endless failures. They see Judges as an inspired, albeit tragic, history of failure after failure. I suppose whether one agrees with that assessment or not depends on your perspective. Considered from a more modern point of view, one that hates failure and loves a successful winner, it could be perceived as little more than a record of downward spirals of increasingly worse defeats. But that perspective fails to notice that each time Israel repented and sought the Lord their God, He was there to forgive and deliver them. That is comforting to those of us who are prone to failure. So, if think you have room for spiritual improvement, you might find help in a study of Judges.

Let’s be honest for a moment. Viewing any Old Testament passage as merely history denies the truth that all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God and therefore is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. We ought to expect more from the study of any Bible passage than to be merely enlightened historically. Instead of making Judges just an endless cycle of repeated failure, perhaps the Spirit of God intends us to try and apply its message to our situation. How can we do that, you ask?

*The Context (1a).*

Let me begin by pointing out something important in the context we are provided. Notice that Joshua had passed away. It is tough to lose those we love. Joshua was certainly one of the greatest leaders in the Bible. His success is even more impressive when you consider that he followed Moses who was probably the greatest human leader ever. Imagine always being compared to Moses! That could only make your job even tougher.

Sometimes we lose people we rely on through death, or maybe they move on to some other field of service, or maybe they become shipwrecked spiritually. In any case, that one who we followed and trusted is gone. I think Judges is good Book for a church to consider when they are seeking a new pastor. It won’t help them find a better pastor to lead them, but it might help them to remain what God wants them to be until He sends them a new pastor.

So Joshua died, and then the children of Israel sought the Lord. That was a praiseworthy action on their part! Their great leader was gone but they sought the Lord. Think about this: Exodus begins with Joseph’s death. Joshua begins with Moses’ death. Judges begins with Joshua’s death. And 1 Kings begins with David’s death. Yet despite the passing of those great men, the people of God, the kingdom of God, the plans and purposes of God all continued. Will you continue when tragedy interrupts your life? You could crawl into a corner and suck your thumb, but it won’t make your life any better. It doesn’t demonstrate any faith whatsoever on your part.

We all know God let Job suffer greatly. It wasn’t because God hated Job. No! Not at all! God loved Job and trusted in him! Have you considered that the devil might be accusing God that you only serve Him because He’s made your life so comfortable. Frankly, that is true of most believers. They serve God because it is expedient. But sooner or later the day will come when it hurts us to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and be an active and faithful member of the body of Christ. What will you do then? Will you blame those who hurt you? Will you demand a “time out” from the Christian life?

I have known so many Baptist people who only served Christ to please their pastor. Sadly, they do not understand that no treasure is laid up in heaven, no crowns are won, no rewards of gold, silver, and precious stone will be earned by those who sought to please their pastor. Serving to win the praise of a man is the stuff of wood, hay, and stubble.

We never do well to think that everything depends on some man. Baptists have a poor track record when it comes to thinking too highly of men. It is true that God’s people usually do better when they have a good man leading them. But we need to remember that all men are fallible. The Bible never hides their failures from us.

There was a great man in America who built a very large Baptist church and Bible College. But he had a sin problem, and it was a horrible, terrible sin that he kept committing. His church leaders spent years and tens of thousands of dollars to hide his iniquity. Eventually they sent him overseas as a missionary to try to keep him from being investigated and prosecuted. But he died in jail and that church and college no longer exist. Yet the work of God goes on. But is it going forward through your instrumentality?

(I think I should point out that in many Books of the Bible, historical chronology is not followed. The facts are accurately presented thematically, in many cases, but not in the order they occurred historically. I can’t say to what extent this occurs in Judges. Did everything written in Judges 1 take place after Joshua’s death or is it a parenthetical historical prelude that sets the stage for the record of the next generation’s departure from the faith?

Personally, I don’t think it matters too much. I think it is always safer taking God’s Word at its plain meaning unless that doesn’t make sense. Thus, I believe these events in chapters 1-2 happened after Joshua died. Plenty of good men believe otherwise and that is their right, but I’d rather just believe what God has said even if it appears contradictory. Any apparent contradiction in the Bible is not a fault with Scripture, the only fault is our understanding of it.)

We know from the Book of Joshua, that all the people had fought together for about seven years after they crossed the Jordan on dry ground and entered the land of promise. First, they fought a coalition of kings in the south. Then they did the same in the north. Both of those campaigns were successful. They had defeated the combined armies of many Canaanite city-states. But most of the walled cities remained intact with large populations of people within them. From that point on, the tribes were responsible for clearing out their own inheritances.

Our text today seems to be the record of the second stage of the conquest. Previously, both initial campaigns, north and south, had been successful, now we read that the second stage campaign in the south was largely, but not entirely, successful while the campaign in the north was largely unsuccessful. But why? There must have been some years that had passed between the initial campaigns under the leadership of Joshua and those of the second stage which were without his leadership.

In those intervening years, they would have improved their positions. They could have increased their preparations. Their armies would have been better provisioned, better trained, and more experienced. So, why did they not succeed as they had years earlier? It certainly wasn’t because of any lack of divine support. The God who had destroyed Egypt and sustained them in the wilderness for forty years was still on their side. He promised to deliver the land into their hands. Yes, Joshua died, but Jehovah was still their God. All their enemies had was stone idols of their own manufacture.

Do you know that God expects His people to trust in Him and courageously do what He has commanded. Our success, like ancient Israel’s, will not be because of our superior intelligence, our greater strength, our depth of wealth, or our amazing talent. It will be because we believed His Word enough to obey it without seeking excuses to disobey it. We could say, “We can’t support missionaries. There are only eight of us! We can’t be His witnesses. Our light is too feeble.” But God still expects us to trust His Word and to courageously do what He has commanded.

*The Concern (1b).*

Israel was entering a new stage as a nation. Change is inevitable. You might not like it, but you aren’t going to be able to insulate yourself from it. We are a brand-new church. There are lessons here we better not miss. To begin, I want you to note their concern in the second half of verse one. Joshua was gone, but the children of Israel were still in the fight. They were still good soldiers of the Lord God. Uncertain who should make up the point of the spear, as it were, they inquired of the Lord, “Who shall go up for us first?”

While it is always a good thing to inquire of the Lord, sometimes it might be nothing more than a stall tactic on man’s part. Evidently none of them had the spirit of a man like Isaiah. He let God ask the question, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then he courageously answered, “Here am I Lord, send me?”

Sometime our prayers weary God and test His longsuffering. Were they without knowledge of what should be done? No! Their task was not uncertain. They were to drive the Canaanites out! Not a soul was to be spared. Not an altar or high place was to remain standing. The land was to be utterly cleansed of the bloody, ungodly culture and religion of the Canaanites from deepest valley to highest hill. Considering the limited success of this second stage of the conquest, their prayer for direction evidently did not please God.

I am all for us being a people of unceasing prayer. But those prayers should not be a stall tactic. Let’s not waste God’s time by asking what we already know we should be doing. Rather, we should seek His power and enabling to do what His Word commands us. In other words, don’t ask God how much you should give. Ask Him how much over your tithe you should give. Don’t ask God to make your life better. Ask God to help you to be content with whatever situation God has sovereignly chosen to place you. Trust me on this: I know wealthy people who are utterly miserable! I have also known people who lived in genuine poverty yet who cheerfully thanked God every day for His blessings upon them.

Can I give you just a small bit of advice? Keep your eyes and your hearts fixed upward and your situation won’t seem so bad. This life is just like a vapor that appears momentarily and disappears. I will be 60 in a few months. It seems like such a short time ago I was getting ready to go to college where I would meet my wife. Neither of my parents lived to be 70 years old. I may have less than a decade of life left on this world till I stand before my Saviour. I have already served as a church planting missionary in Seoul for more than 26 years.

Don’t worry about the things you wanted that God did not give you. He gives you new opportunity every day to do something that will matter for all eternity. What could that be you ask? Loving, faithful obedience to the Bible! The world says if you don’t win a gold medal, or have a statue erected in your honor, or have thronging crowds that adore you, your life has meant nothing. But there is only One whose opinion matters! Obey His Word and you will have honor that will never tarnish!

*The Command (2).*

The nation had some concern which prompted their prayer and might have been commendable. God responded to their prayer that the tribe of Judah should go first. This is hardly surprising. Judah was Jacob’s fourth son. The eldest was Reuben. He forfeited his birthright by going in unto his father’s concubine. The next two, Simeon and Levi proved themselves unworthy when they slaughtered the helpless men of Shechem. That left the birthright and mantle of leadership to Judah, as indicated by Jacob’s dying words of prophecy in Genesis 49:8-12. With privilege comes responsibility. Since the sceptre would not depart from Judah, that tribe should stand in the front ranks when confronting a fearsome enemy.

Can you see a lesson here? Judah was fourth in line but got the prize. He didn’t get God’s respect because he was older. Joseph had ten older brothers who all bowed on their face before his feet. God isn’t a Confucianist. He blesses and rewards according to His grace. But He also blesses those who honor His Word by cheerfully obeying it because they love and fear Him. That doesn’t work for some people. They insist that God’s grace has nothing to do with the will of man. But the Bible says His grace is received through our faith. Do you know who God prefers? He prefers people with faith.

If it seems that God prefers some above others, it is because God has seen our hearts from eternity past. I do not say that to justify an attitude of fatalism. If God knew me before I was born, what difference does it make what I do? God did know me before He said, “Let there be light.” But I don’t know me that well. Faith is either active or it is dead (James 2:22-27).

Do you remember that the Lord Jesus occasionally marveled at the unbelief of His own disciples. Yet there was a certain centurion who sought the healing of his of servant. Christ marveled at that man’s faith! What was it about his faith that surprised the Lord Jesus? It was his humble faith in a man of authority. Friends, we might surprise God too. Go ahead and surprise with your faith in His Word. He enjoys being surprised by our faith! If you keep doing what is right, eventually people will wonder why God seems to prefer you.

*The Cooperation (3).*

Now let’s give some thought to the cooperation we find in verse 3. After being told that they would lead the nation in the fight, and that God would deliver the land into their hands, Judah asked Simeon to fight alongside them. What does the Spirit of God intend for us to learn from that? A survey of commentaries won’t give any consensus. Some think the men of Judah were unsure of themselves and thus looked for others to help them in the fight for which they lacked confidence. Of course, the text does not say why they asked Simeon to fight with them.

Sometimes God withholds judgment as to the actions of His people. Here we find no criticism nor praise for this cooperation. Since Simeon did not weaken the resolve of Judah, and they gained victory over all the area of the south except for certain plains where the enemy had chariots of iron (vs 19), it seems this cooperation was relatively good for both tribes.

You may not be aware, but Simeon’s inheritance in the land was surrounded by Judah’s inheritance, thus it makes some sense that they were asked to join the battle with Judah. In his prophecy, Jacob pronounced in Genesis 49 concerning Levi and Simeon, “I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.” And so it was that Levi got no tribal inheritance, and Simeon was scattered in Judah.

Also, Simeon was Judah’s full brother. Both were sons of Jacob through Leah. However, while Judah had grown to be the most powerful tribe in Israel, Simeon was one of the weaker tribes. Part of good leadership is to strengthen those who are weak. Simeon could have gained confidence by doing their share alongside Judah. There are always plenty of people in churches who need strengthening. They are good people and love Christ enough to be in church, most of the time. But with a little encouraging, they can accomplish a lot of good things for their Lord.

We should always try to help those with a weaker faith. It does no one any good to overlook them or to look down upon them or shame them. Compared to our Saviour, the strongest among us is utterly contemptable. God knows we all do best when we cooperate, encourage, and strengthen one another.

We do not help others or ourselves when we pick at the problems of those who are weak and browbeat them. I am not saying we condone sin, but why tear someone down when you can build them up. Maybe despite your best efforts they never grow stronger. I think God will bless us for trying. I don’t think he will bless us for shaming them and driving them away from church. Fighting Satan is enough for us, we don’t need to pick fights with each other when we could lift them up and let them fight alongside us! After Resurrection Sunday, we will get back to this passage and its important lessons.