

## What Went Wrong?

Judges 1:1-2:5

21 February 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

**Big Question:** What went wrong?

**Big Idea:** Trusting God's promises rather than our own methods allows us to be obedient to him.

### Introduction

10, 9, 8... It's the 28 January 1986. 11:38 a.m.

7, 6, 5... Seven astronauts are sitting in the Space Shuttle *Challenger* waiting for launch.

4, 3, 2, 1... This includes a teacher, destined to be the first civilian taken into space.

BLAST OFF!

There's lift off and the rocket rushes into the air.

What a testimony to humanity's ingenuity that we are once again able to defy the gravitational pull of the earth to leave our atmosphere.

But 73 seconds later, the shuttle is engulfed in flames before falling back to earth.

Tragically, there aren't any survivors from this disaster.

What went wrong?

That's the question that everyone has: What went wrong?

As you can imagine, a special commission is set up to find out.

Their long and intense investigation discovers that the right solid booster failed.

That's what went wrong.

But if you dig a little deeper, you'll find that an O-ring – a relatively small piece of rubber – failed.

That's what went wrong.

Going deeper still, it was an unusually cold day at Cape Canaveral and the O-rings weren't designed to work at those temperatures.

That's what went wrong.

For years, experts at NASA had warned that this was a possibility, but nobody acted on it because management said it wasn't a problem, ignoring their own safety protocols.

That's what went wrong.

What went wrong?

It's the question that opens the book of Judges.

Even though it's a simple question, just like with *Challenger*, it turns out that the answer is more complex than it first appears.

When you start to dig into it, you find out that it was lots of things that went wrong.

## Book Outline

Judges is the seventh book in the Bible.

In our English Bibles, you'll find it between Joshua and the book of Ruth – two books that are like chalk and cheese which go together because they happen at the same time.

In the Hebrew Bible though, you'll find Judges between Joshua and Samuel.

That's because Judges covers a period of something like two hundred and fifty years between the end of Joshua and the start of Samuel.

You know how sometimes at the beginning of a TV show they give you a quick recap of everything that's happened so far?

The Bible's an epic story and lots has happened up to this point.

Here's Ben's quick, edited highlights.

We could go all the way back to Adam and Eve, but we're going to start in Genesis 12.

God chooses a bloke named Abram and makes a whole bunch of promises to bless him.

God's going to give him more descendants than stars in the sky and they'll be a great nation who'll bless the world.

God shows Abraham the land Canaan and tells him that this is the land his descendants will live in, but it's not the right time yet.

So Abraham's family wander all around the Middle East, setting up camp wherever they can, generally doing well but also making a bit of a nuisance of themselves.

Some of his great-grandkids – the sons of Israel – don't like their brother so they have the great idea of selling him off as a slave.

Joseph does really well in Egypt, even becoming the head honcho apart from Pharaoh, and eventually he's able to use his position to save his family from starving.

Life in Egypt goes from awesome to awful when the new Pharaoh makes them into slaves.

But God hasn't forgotten his people or the promises he's made to them.

He raises up a bloke named Moses to rescue them from slavery.

God uses Moses to lead the Israelites through the Red Sea and out of Egypt.

In the desert, God gives them his law, telling them how to live holy lives in response to his grace.

He instructs them how to worship.

God leads them up to the land of Canaan that he promised to give them, but they trust the word of the spies they sent out rather than God.

The consequence is that they wander around in the desert for forty years.

Moses has been leading the Israelites all this time, but he carks it right at the edge of the promised land.

Before he died though, he handed the leadership over to his off-sider, Joshua.

Joshua's job's really pretty easy because God's going to give them the land he promised.

God's with them and so all they've got to do is stick with God.

**Joshua 1:7–8** NIV11 <sup>7</sup> “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. <sup>8</sup> Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

The book of Joshua's pretty upbeat and as it unfolds, things seem to be fairly successful.

The land is full of Canaanites, yet all they had to do was go into the land and take it.

Defeating the city of Jericho is a breeze – blowing on some trumpets and shouting.

That's not to say that there aren't a few hiccups along the way with people doing naughty things.

But under Joshua's leadership, cities and kings can't top their progress.

Joshua always points the Israelites to God and trusts him to lead them to victory.

Joshua spends a long time outlining God's plan for the land.

Each tribe that's descended from each of the twelve brothers of Israel will get their own area to live in.

But Joshua dies before the job's done and he leaves them to finish off the task.

God's going to be with them and all they need to do is follow him.

How hard can it be?

The last chapter of Joshua has this massive high where the Israelites commit to following God:

**Joshua 24:16–18** NIV11 <sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! <sup>17</sup> It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we travelled. <sup>18</sup> And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”

And then you turn over to the book of Judges.

You quickly start to wonder whether you’re reading the same Bible.

It’s got famous stories about blokes like Gideon and Samson, but it’s also got a dark underbelly and a shocking end.

It’s full of violence and abuse.

There’s stuff in this book that will make you want to cry and other things that should make your stomach turn.

Some of it’s depressing, much of it is immoral and most of it is disturbing.

One person said, “Judges is not a nice book.” and another, “Judges is the worst book in the Old Testament.”

Clearly, something went terribly wrong.

When you think of these judges, don’t think of someone in a wig and a black cloak sitting in a courtroom.

These judges get their hands dirty.

Actually, it’s probably better to say that they get their hands bloody.

They often do less judgin’ and more bludgeonin’, doing their talking with whatever object happens to be lying around.

In some cases, you really wonder if the violence is plain senseless, but there is a purpose to it.

God raised these judges up to rescue his people from external threats.

The judges deliver the Israelites from their enemies.

So, some people have suggested that we should call it the Book of Deliverers rather than the Book of Judges.<sup>1</sup>

There were twelve judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson.

Some of them get a few chapters and one of them – Shamgar – only gets a single verse.

They go from Othniel, the perfect judge from Judah in the south through to Samson, who was a downright rogue from Dan in the north.

We get their stories in the middle chapters of the book.

On each side, there's an introduction and a conclusion – actually TWO of each – which help to explain the book.

The whole book has a movement to it, which is basically, let's be honest, down the toilet.

It goes from good, to bad, to worse, to even worse still.

Judges is like a reversal of everything that came before.

It starts out okay, but reading it is a bit like watching a car crash happen in slow motion.

Instead of being a holy people following God, it's an account of how the Israelites became more and more corrupt until they're pretty much like the other pagan nations.

It's a book that's all about the disaster of forgetting God and yet it's also a book that shows the abundance of God's grace.

In the midst of all the tragedy, God doesn't give up on his people.

Whenever they realise that they've reached the point of no return, God sends someone to rescue them.

I'd sum up judges like this: Faithless people. Faithful God.

## Outline

In the first chapter, we see what happened after Joshua died.

God was on their side so all the Israelites have to do is go into the land and take it.

This was God's grace, not depending on themselves but on the fact that God would do it for them.

The Israelites had been largely successful up until this point, but everything's about to go downhill.

It's a classic case of snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory.

Joshua ends so full of promise that the mess of Judges makes us ask the question, "What went wrong?"

This first chapter gives us the lens that brings the rest of the book into focus.

The Israelites disobeyed by trying to do things their own way, rather than trusting in God's promises.

Rather than trusting in God and his promises, they wanted to trust in their own methods and instincts

The big idea is **trusting God's promises rather than our own methods allows us to be obedient to him.**

## Success (1:1-21)

In our first point, we're going to see that things start off okay with the Israelites having success.

What will happen after Joshua dies, verse one?

The Israelites get off to a good and successful start because the first thing they do is go up and ask God what to do next.

That's always a good plan.

They didn't need to ask IF they should go up, but WHO should go up first.

The Lord gives an answer that should fill them with confidence: Judah will be the first tribe to go up and God is with them

The people of Judah ask for help from the tribe of Simeon.

It's a shrewd move because Simeon's land is completely surrounded by Judah.

Their ancestors were brothers from the same mother, Leah, which in Israel's family, that was no small thing.

It seems like a sensible strategy, the idea being that they'd all work together – it's a "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" situation.

Simeon helps Judah and Judah helps Simeon.

They attack the Perizzites and they win.

This's a massive battle, with ten thousand men struck down near the town of Bezek.

I find it hard for that to be meaningful on paper and so I think it's worth stopping for a second to think about what that actually means.

That's ten thousand men, most of whom I expect had wives and children.

This was a significant victory for is and also a really significant loss of life by the Perizzites.

Perhaps you're in two minds about whether to cheer or not.

It's a tricky one, isn't it? Is it a dream or is it a nightmare?

On the one hand, the Israelites are getting the land that was promised to Abram so long ago.

On the other hand, the loss of Canaanite life is really significant.

How could a God of love really do this to people?

Violent seizure of Canaanite lands, the killing or expulsion of the former inhabitants and the destruction of their culture feels wrong.

God seems to be directing them to break two commandments – do not steal and do not kill.

It's a difficult question that we need to wrestle with, but God's Word gives us answers that certainly help.

Firstly, we need to be careful not to over-exaggerate what's going on here because there are some very clear limits set.

This isn't a generic call for people to engage in a holy war in the name of the God of the Bible.

Conquering the Land is confined to very particular people in a very particular place at a very particular time.

There's no hint in the New Testament that Christians are permitted to drive out their neighbours.

Jesus' command to love our enemies, do good to them and not harm them.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, this wasn't racial genocide.

This was directed to people in a particular place, not a particular culture or people group.

Canaan was a pretty multicultural place at this time.

There were lots of people with different cultures and gods living there: Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites, Philistines, Sidonians, Hivites and Hittites.

This is very different to Hitler wanting to wipe out the Jews or the Chinese trying to get rid of the Uighurs.

The third thing we need to see is in the little story about Adoni-Bezek that we get starting in verse five.

At this time, there were lots of city states in Canaan which were all ruled by local princes.

Adoni means lord and Bezek is the name of the city.

He's the lord of the city of Bezek.

The Israelites attack and he tries to hide.

When that doesn't work he runs for it, but they catch up with him and cut off his thumbs and big toes, verse six.

That's pretty disgusting, isn't it? Definitely against the Geneva convention.

It also seems like a really random way to torture people, but it's designed to humiliate people by dehumanising them.

With no opposable thumbs, he would've had trouble eating like a civilised human being.

Adoni-Bezek himself gives the reason why this happened, in verse seven, and he doesn't seem to have the same problem with it that we do.

This's exactly what he did to others and not just once, but seventy times.

He treated the leaders of his enemies like dogs getting the scraps from under his table.

It's not revenge because he didn't do this to the Israelites, but it is retributive justice – suffering for crime that you've committed.

This pagan even recognises, in verse seven, that he has to give account to God for his actions.

To make sense of what's going on here, we need to understand God's perspective on the situation.

If we come to this thinking of the poor, innocent Canaanites who were just living their lives without doing anyone any harm, then it's unfair of God to overthrow them.

But, the Canaanites were far from innocent.

The Canaanites had cultures that were rebellious and idolatrous.

The Israelites were bringing about God's just judgment on them for their sin.

Moses told the Israelites not to boast when they went into the land because they weren't getting the land because they were so righteous.

There's no reason for them to boast.

But God is right in bringing his judgement on the Canaanites because of their wickedness.

**Deuteronomy 9:4 NIV11** <sup>4</sup> After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you.

This's a graphic picture of what it looks like for sinners who receive the judgement of a holy God.

What happened here is a very graphic reminder of what every, single human being deserves because of our sin.

The wages of sin is death.



God's judgment came earlier for these people than for many others, but one day everyone will need to give an account for their rebellion against God.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you'll survive that judgment on your own.

The only way of surviving God's judgment is through God's grace.

If you trust in your own righteousness, then you're sunk.

The only way to be saved is to trust in God's righteousness.

God the holy one stepped in by sending his Son, Jesus, so that our sins could be forgiven.

Jesus went to the cross to pay the penalty our sins deserve.

God's righteousness judgment fell on him, allowing us to be saved.

The only way wicked people can be set free is by Jesus dying in our place.

Even though this was God's just judgment, we also see the cracks begin to show with this same event.

The Israelites were never told to treat their enemies like this.

They're taking on the torture techniques of the Canaanites.

This is the first glimpse that they're starting to become a little bit like the people they're not meant to be, relying on Canaanite methods rather than trusting God's promises.

Then, they start going down to fight against the people in the hill country, the Negev and the western foothills.

They're basically spreading out and fanning into all the areas to the south and they seem to be having success.

It's story time again, in verse twelve.

This bloke named Caleb kind of appears out of nowhere, but this isn't the first time he's come up in the Bible.

There were twelve spies who were originally sent up to spy out the Promised Land.

Out of those ten, only Joshua and Caleb came back with a good report.

They were the only ones of that generation to get into the Promised Land.<sup>3</sup>

Caleb's the model Israelite.

He's pretty old by this point – 85 years old – but he leads the attack against the city of Hebron, verse 10, and they successfully defeat the three kings.

According to verse 20, this was the fulfilment of a promise made to Caleb by Moses.

The people in that city were the Anakim – the giants that the first lot of spies were scared of.

Caleb offers his daughter Aksar as the prize to whoever will capture the city of Kiriath Sepher.

You might think that sounds a little rough, raffling off your daughter like that.

But it's a sign of his hope in God.

He doesn't want some pansy to marry his daughter – he wants someone who wants to trust God's promises just like he does.

Othniel, who's the first judge and we'll meet again next week, takes the city.

He defeats the enemy and gets the girl.

She's also his cousin, which makes things a little interesting.

The Negev – the desert area at the bottom of Israel is her dowry.

But Aksar's not content with that.

She boldly asks for water rights as well because like her dad, SHE trusts in God's promises to make them prosper in the land.

Often women are treated terribly by the men in the book of Judges and yet women are really key, appearing frequently.

God often uses them so prop up the men who don't do what they should.

To quote My Big Fat Greek Wedding, "The man is the head, but the woman is the neck and she can turn the head any way she wants."

Aksah's using her position to help support her husband by adding water to the land they have.

Then the people of Judah do what they'd promised and they went with the Simeonites and totally destroyed extra cities, verse 18.

And it looks like a successful campaign.

They were living the dream, taking the land, just as they were supposed to.

All of this was possible because God was with them.

The Spirit of Joshua lives on!

But then there's a bit of a BUT in verse 19:

**Judges 1:19** NIV11 <sup>19</sup>The LORD was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had chariots fitted with iron.

God was with them, but they couldn't drive out the people of the plain.

The reason is because their enemies had chariots made of iron.

This is the first hint that they seem to be outgunned by better weaponry.

And while they managed to attack Jerusalem, verse 8, it seems like they didn't do the whole job.

Verse 21 tells us that the Benjamites didn't drive them out.

When you think of Benjamin, you probably already think of dodgy... and this proves it.

In fact, the narrator tells us that they were still there to that day and we know they didn't end up getting defeated until King David's time.

They had great success, but there are still some cracks starting to show.

## Shacking Up

Which brings us to our second point, which I've intentionally and provocatively named "Shacking up".

The focus shifts in verse 22 from the southern tribes to the northern tribes.

There's also a change of tone.

Instead of driving the Canaanites out, the northern tribes, shack up with them.

This time, the northern tribes go up to take the city of Bethel, the house of God.

And God really was with them because we're told that (in case we've forgotten) in verse 22.

They come up with a plan that they think will be effective.

They send men out to spy out the city for them, verse 23.

It seems to them like a good method.

It was also profoundly stupid.

This should be ringing some alarm bells, shouldn't it?

It feels like there's a glitch in the matrix or at least history repeating itself.

The last time spies were sent out, things didn't turn out all that well.

The spies meet a bloke coming out of the city and they offer him a deal.

Actually, they make a covenant with him.

**Judges 1:24b NIV11** they said to him, “Show us how to get into the city and we will see that you are treated well.”

The bloke accepts the deal and shows them how to get into the city.

Just like with Rahab, he and his whole family were spared.

There are some big differences between this situation and Rahab's though.

This man didn't risk his life trying to hide the spies.

He didn't agree to be part of God's people.

In fact, we find that he actually goes off and rebuilds the city in a different place:

**Judges 1:26 NIV11** <sup>26</sup> He then went to the land of the Hittites, where he built a city and called it Luz, which is its name to this day.

According to Yahweh's instructions, given by Moses, they were to leave no survivors when they attacked.<sup>4</sup>

But they thought that their method was better than trusting God's promises.

Here they are taking what looks like the easy option of making a deal.

The result was that Luz wasn't conquered, it was just moved.

As we head further north, we find that the tribe of Manasseh didn't drive the people out.

Remember that the people of Judah COULDN'T beat the chariots.

We're a step worse than couldn't now: they've gone from couldn't to wouldn't.

And the profound reason for doing this? The people wanted to keep living there!

So, they come up with a plan.

The people of Manasseh spotted an opportunity to make some money by forcing their enemies into slavery!

“They're no good to us dead, but think of the economic benefits of having slaves!”

Zebulun does the same thing, verse 30.

Except that again, God had specifically told them not to do this.

Ephraim didn't bother to drive the Canaanites out, verse 29.

Instead they allowed them to live with them.

Can you see the progression that's going on here?

Things are going from bad to worse.

Asher, well, they go a step further.

They didn't drive the people out, but they didn't allow the Canaanites to live amongst them though.

Instead, they do something that's worse.

We're told that THEY lived amongst the Canaanites!

One scholar has called this the Canaanisation of Israel and I reckon that's a good description.

Then you get Naphtali.

Dear, oh dear, Naphtali.

When all these places are mentioned, it's easy to skip over them.

But Beth Shemesh and Beth Anath are motioned twice in verse 33 and that's significant.

The Hebrew word Beth means 'house'.

Beth Lehem, Bethlehem, the place where Jesus was born, means house of bread.

In this case, it's house in the sense of temple.

Shemesh is the sun god and Anath is the god of war.

Naphtali didn't even bother trying to deal with their enemies' god of war!

Finally, you've got the Danites.

The Danites are confined to the hill country.

They're not even able to get down onto the plain, far less be able to take it over.

The Amorites didn't want to give up all that easily and it appears that the Danites powerless to stop them.

By the time we get to the end of chapter one, we find that the Israelites are well and truly in bed with the enemy.

It happens little by little, but that's how compromise happens.

It does happen, but mostly people don't wake up one day and decide to have an affair.

Sin's often far more subtle than that.

It happens little by little – starting with some knowing glances, a few quick conversations, then text messages and before you know it, full-blown sin.

It's the same with spiritual adultery.

They started with a little compromise and then it got deeper and deeper.

They went from being unable to not bothering to being well and truly shackled up with the enemy.

Friends, this is an important warning for people like us who live in the world.

We want to love our neighbours, being kind and compassionate towards them.

But in an effort to act kindly and gently, we can compromise.

God has called us to live as people who are holy and different, not people who are committing adultery with the world.

## Spiritual Adultery

Which brings us to what went wrong in our final point.

What went wrong was spiritual adultery.

By their unfaithfulness, the Israelites forfeited the full possession of what God had promised them.

Just like the southern tribes went up successfully and the northern tribes shackled up, now an angel goes up in verse one of chapter two.

The angel goes up from a place named Gilgal, near Jericho.

This is where the military campaign started and also where the angel appeared to Joshua.

Bokim is another name for Bethel, the place that they defeated in verse 22 of chapter one.

And significantly, the place where God promised to give Jacob the land Genesis 28:10-19.

We don't know who the angel was or what he looked like.

He's mysterious and we'll meet him a few more times in the book.

The angel's not the focus.

An angel is a messenger and it's his message that's important.

God speaks through the angel and reminds his people that he's kept his promise.

God brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

He led them through the desert and brought them to the land he promised.

And he kept his promise to go into battle with them and give them victory.

The real reason the men of Judah were successful wasn't their strategy, might, unity, or leadership.

It was the blessing of God upon them in fulfilment of his promise.

It was also part of the deal that the Israelites wouldn't make any deals with the people from the land.

Instead, they'd break down all of their idols and altars.

They were to be committed to Yahweh alone.

God's messenger says, in verse two:

Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?

What went wrong?

In the *Challenger* investigation, you could say that it was the rocket disintegrating.

Or you could say that it was the o-ring or the weather.

But when you press down, it was management ignoring a known problem against their own safety protocols that caused the disaster.

The same thing's true for the Israelites.

The problem wasn't really the iron chariots. They had God Almighty on their side.

It wasn't really the strong walls and military might that stopped them.

The problem isn't that the people were too big or too good at fighting.

The problem is their own unfaithfulness that resulted in disobedience.

They trusted in their methods rather than God's promises.

They could make verbal commitments before Joshua to do the right thing, but their hearts weren't really in it.

They didn't finish the job properly by allowing the altars to remain standing.

Any strife they suffer will be as a direct result of their disobedience.

Their crime is going to be the punishment.

Because they didn't want to get rid of the gods, God Almighty is going to leave them there.

They didn't want to clean up the religious mess, so he's going to allow it to stay there and get led astray by it.

The idols that they left are going to be traps and snares for them.

And we see the result in the rest of the book.

Well, when the angel spoke these things, they broke down crying.

In fact, the place itself is called the place of crying.

That's what Bokim means.

It's hard to know whether they were tears of repentance or just tears of sorrow.

What we do know, it that their problem wasn't a failure on God's part or enemies who were too strong.

Their disobedience sprang from their own disobedience.

## Conclusion

That's quite a downer and a difficult place to leave things.

We need to feel the weight of their disobedience and learn from it though.

They wanted to trust in their own ideas rather than trusting God.

But remember that grace is never too far away.

Even when things look bad, God hasn't and won't ever abandon his people.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Block, p.77

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:27.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 14:30

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 7:1–2; 20:16–17.



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**Big Question:** What went wrong?

**Big Idea:** Trusting God's promises rather than our own methods allows us to be obedient to him.

### Discussion Questions

1. What are some key events that help us to fit Judges into the wider story of the Bible?
2. Have a look at Joshua 24. How would you describe the way the book of Joshua ends?
3. What made Judah successful at the beginning of Judges 1?
4. As Christians, what can help us to make sense of God's command to remove the Canaanites from the land?
5. How does the short story about Adoni-Bezek (1:5-7) help us understand what's going on?
6. Are there any parts of the account of Caleb, Aksah and Othniel that make you feel uncomfortable? How does 1:12-17 and 1:20 help to understand what's going on?
7. How would you describe the progression of events in 1:22-35?
8. What are some of the features of compromising on holiness shown to us in this chapter?
9. What does the angel say went wrong?
10. What is the consequence of their disobedience?