

(( ( PREACHING *the* WORD )) )

# JUDGES AND RUTH

GOD *in* CHAOS



**BARRY G. WEBB**

R. Kent Hughes

*Series Editor*

“I have been instructed and often moved by these scholarly and pastorally perceptive expositions. Barry Webb opens up the texts carefully and accessibly, and does so with the sensitivity of an experienced pastor. Such pastoral scholarship is powerful and edifying.”

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“What happens when a society turns its back on God? *Judges and Ruth* opens up the era of Israel’s judges in a way that resonates in so many ways with the social, religious, and moral crises of our own age. This is a book worth recommending to anyone interested in leadership. Many commentaries are good for reference, but difficult to read. Barry Webb has given us one that you will find difficult to put down. Making Christian sense of Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and the rest of the judges and bringing them alive so that they “still speak” is a task beautifully executed by one who looks back over a lifetime of study of the Bible, experience of life, and observation of the world. It is a seamless blend of scholarship, devotion, life-wisdom, and understanding of modern society.”

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**Mark D. Thompson**, Principal, Moore Theological College

# JUDGES AND RUTH

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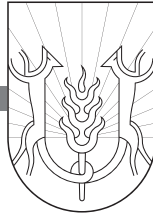
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**BARRY G. WEBB**

R. Kent Hughes

*Series Editor*

**CROSSWAY**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Judges and Ruth*

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To Abi, Jakey, Nate, Maggie, and Tom—  
five precious gifts from God



*And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, “I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.” Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.*

ACTS 13:20b-23

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# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes

out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

*R. Kent Hughes*  
*Wheaton, Illinois*

# Preface

Writing this book has been a real treat, not just because Judges and Ruth are so rewarding to study (so are all the other books of the Old and New Testaments), but because they belong so naturally together. It's not just that they are both set "in the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1), but that they complement each other so beautifully. I have always been aware of this in a general way, but haven't appreciated the full significance of it until now, and it has been a discovery that has delighted and uplifted me.

Judges is a very confronting book, especially for contemporary Christian readers. It is full of violence and has some horrifying stories of women, in particular, being abused. Worst of all, it is about the people of God behaving abominably again and again and again and suffering the consequences. There is chaos in Judges, caused by the almost unbelievable perversity of human beings, but there's also the powerful presence of God who intervenes again and again to pull them back from the brink of oblivion. But the chaos keeps returning, and by the end things seem to be going from bad to worse. There's a muted hope for a king who will be able to bring some order out of the chaos (21:25). But that's all—a kind of wistful longing that one day it might all be over, and Israel will be able to look back to the days of the judges as a nightmare from which they have finally awakened. And then we come to Ruth, with its message of redemption. It too, begins with pain—especially for Naomi and her family—but then it quickly turns into a story of love and inclusion, restoration and blessing. It's like moving from darkness to light and from chaos to calm. Judges ends with the faint hope of a king, Ruth with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem who turns out to be the ancestor of King David. And that, of course, opens out toward the New Testament and the glorious gospel of God's redeeming grace in Christ. Judges by itself is depressing, but Judges and Ruth together are full of hope. I have called this series of sermons "God in Chaos" as a way of distilling in one memorable phrase the struggle that is at the heart of these two books and the light that eventually breaks through because of God.

It's also been a treat for me to write this book because it's a contribution to the Preaching the Word series, and I'm a preacher. I'm other things as well, but I never feel as fully myself as when I'm preaching. This book has enabled me to be myself, and there's a special joy in that, especially when you believe, as I do, that what I am I am by the grace of God. I was converted

as a teenager under the strong preaching of the then young evangelist Billy Graham. It wasn't his rousing oratory that saved me, of course, but the gospel he preached, the message of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ. And with that went the quiet but powerful work of the Spirit, who convicted me of its truth and moved me to respond. I had never found it hard to believe in God or to conform to my Christian parents' expectations of me. I was already a cultural Christian. But that day I knew I had become something more—a disciple of Jesus Christ, heart and soul committed to him and his service. I had experienced the transforming power of the gospel and wanted nothing more in the years that followed than to tell that same gospel to others. I had also become a preacher. I had a lot to learn, of course, but I began preaching right away, and the Plymouth Brethren among whom I had been raised gave me ample scope to express my new passion. Every Sunday night, with a few companions, I began to preach in the open air, in the streets around our church. Soon opportunities opened up for me to preach indoors as well at the weekly “gospel meetings” in the church building. My preaching ministry developed from there and has continued to this day.

My philosophy of preaching was shaped to a large extent by the way I began. Preaching should be passionate and engaging. In the open air, if you're not arresting no one will stop and listen, and even inside a captive audience will only *appear* to be listening. Their minds will quickly drift elsewhere. This is particularly so today, when audio and visual communication has become so varied and stimulating, and people's attention spans are shrinking. The preacher should not try to compete with this directly, of course. He will simply not be able to do so and will be boring by default. Instead he should offer his hearers something they *can't* get elsewhere. But the bottom line is that he must be engaging. Monotonous, dispassionate, lecture-style preaching is simply a waste of time.

Second, the preacher must have confidence in the Word of God. It is God's Word, not our rhetoric, that is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12), and it is by “the living and abiding word of God,” not our oratory, that people are born again (1 Peter 1:23). We may sway people by our rhetoric if we are gifted enough, but if that is all we do, others who are more gifted will sway them more. And if we have not built strong Biblical foundations into people's lives by the faithful preaching of God's Word, they will eventually go wherever the most charismatic speakers take them. There are two main implications of this. The preacher who has confidence in the Word of God

will not shrink from preaching the whole of Scripture, not just the bits he feels most comfortable with or that he feels will be most acceptable to his audience. He will believe that “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). He will be committed to preaching all of it because he knows his people need all of it. He will also not try to jolly it up with jokes or so overload it with illustrations that people are diverted from it instead of taken deeply into it. This is not to say that there is no place in preaching for a judicious use of humor or apt illustrations, especially if they are drawn from the preacher’s own experience of the things he is talking about. Readers will find plenty of examples in what follows. But these must never give the impression that the preacher thinks the Bible is boring and needs to be made interesting by copious embellishment. The preacher who has confidence in the Word of God will not be driven by a need to *make* the Bible interesting, but by a conviction that it *is* interesting, and that the best way to convince people of this is to open its riches to them and let the text itself do the work.

Finally, the Christian preacher will be convinced of the unity of Scripture and that its central theme is God’s great work of salvation that reaches its fulfillment in Christ. I have always believed this, but my understanding of it was deepened enormously by the fine theological education I received at Moore College, Sydney. This consolidated my understanding of what Christian preaching should be and has guided my practice ever since. In particular it taught me how to preach the gospel from every part of Scripture, including the Old Testament with all its breadth and depth and variety, without artificially forcing it to say things it doesn’t. Not every Old Testament passage speaks directly of Christ, and it is bad exegesis to try to make it do so. However, every passage is part of a story that leads to him, and along the way each has much to teach us about the character and ways of the God we have come to know in Christ as our heavenly Father. Each also has much to teach us about ourselves and about the struggle to live a life of faithful obedience to God in a world that daily tests our resolve to do so. So the Bible has many secondary themes as well as its primary one. It has an inexhaustible richness that will never disappoint the patient reader and preacher. But I am persuaded that however many other things we may speak about along the way, our preaching should always be taking people on a journey that leads to Christ, just as the whole Bible leads to him. In other words, the Bible as a whole is the gospel writ large, and therefore all Christian preaching can and should be evangelistic. Which brings me back, really, to my conversion as



a youngster under the preaching of Billy Graham. That is what ignited my passion for preaching and made me want, whatever else I became, to be an evangelist. And I believe that is what I have always been at heart and still am today. What my theological education and experience has shown me is that there is absolutely no conflict between that and being an evangelical scholar and expository preacher.

I am most grateful for the opportunity that Kent Hughes gave me to write this volume. *Judges and Ruth* are both books for our times, an age of individualism when every man or woman does what is right in his or her own eyes, when love has been divorced from commitment, and when people need more than ever to discover, or rediscover, the redeeming love of God in Christ. May this book help inspire the kind of preaching that will lead them to him.

*Barry G. Webb  
Moore College  
Sydney, Australia  
September 3, 2014*

# JUDGES



# 1

## After Joshua: The Legacy of a Great Leader

JUDGES 1:1–21



THERE ARE MOMENTS in the lives of people and nations that change everything. The birth of a first child is like that—his or her parents’ lives are changed forever. So is the death of one’s last surviving parent, the passing of a generation. We call such things boundary events because they are moments of irreversible transition. In the life of a nation it may be the passing of a great leader or the achievement of independence. Sometimes transitions to a new situation are traumatic and fill us with foreboding. The dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the year I was born, was an event like this. No longer could nations look to merely conventional weapons to protect them. A change had taken place that was irreversible, and those who understood this and had the means to do so began to arm themselves with new weapons. We had entered the nuclear age. The Second World War was ending, but another had already begun, and there was no going back. Those born after August 6, 1945, were born into a world that was radically changed from the one their parents had known.

The book of Judges opens with a boundary event of this kind. Joshua has died. An era of progress and confidence has ended, and the future is uncertain. Joshua was not just anyone. He had been a man of tremendous importance for Israel. By his personal example of courage, faith in God, and military leadership, he had brought Israel into its promised inheritance in Canaan. He was not perfect, but he was unquestionably great—the greatest man of his generation—and Israel would feel the loss of him keenly. As its name suggests, the book of Joshua is dominated by Joshua from beginning

to end. It begins with the death of Moses, Joshua's mentor, an even more towering figure than Joshua himself. That, too, was a mammoth boundary event. But by the time Moses died Joshua was already in place to take Israel forward. Moses had personally commissioned him. Deuteronomy 34:9 tells us that "Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him." So after Moses there was Joshua. But after Joshua there was no one in particular. There was a leadership vacuum, and Israel was in crisis.

### Joshua's Influence

The crisis was mitigated to some extent by Joshua's legacy—the imprint he left on Israel. Great people exert a powerful influence on others, an influence that often outlives them. But even great people have flaws, and their legacy can sometimes be more harmful than good. That was the case with Solomon, for example, whose failures in the latter part of this reign left Israel compromised and divided (1 Kings 11, 12). Joshua's legacy, on the other hand, was positive: "the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua" (2:7). Joshua had been the greatest man of his generation, and those who knew him aspired to be like him. Even after his death they followed his example of godly living. Several things in 1:1–21 show the impact his life had made.

### *Unity (v. 1)*

We have all witnessed the sad spectacle of divided families. Thoughtless words have been said or selfish actions taken. People have been hurt and found it hard to forgive. Strong people have gotten their way at the expense of weaker ones. Quarrels over money, especially disputed wills, have split families into warring factions that have led to stalemate rather than settlement. Bitterness has set in, and blighted relationships, and the damage done to the family can last for generations. The same thing sometimes happens in nations. Leaders maintain their hold on power by playing factions against one another, resulting in an appearance of unity without any real concord. When they finally die or fall from power, open warfare ensues as competing factions struggle for supremacy in the vacuum left behind. For all they may have achieved militarily, economically, and so on, their legacy is disaster—a nation divided against itself. Not so with Joshua. After his death what we find is not this or that faction vying for supremacy, but the Israelites acting as one: "*the people of Israel* inquired of the LORD" (v. 1). Joshua was the

kind of leader who drew people together rather than setting them against one another, and that is a mark of true greatness.<sup>1</sup>

*People Who Seek God (v. 1)*

A leader has to lead, and to do that he must stand out in some way from others. He must exercise authority and have that authority respected. But Joshua had never claimed to have absolute power or focused attention on himself as though he was Israel's supreme leader or as if they would be lost without him. He had always directed his followers to the Lord as the one to whom all alike were accountable, including himself. This was something that had been impressed on him by his predecessor Moses (Deuteronomy 31:1–8, 23) and powerfully reinforced by his own encounter with God, the true “commander of the army of the LORD,” in Joshua 5:13–15. So although Joshua left a huge gap when he died, the Israelites knew they were not leaderless. They “inquired of the LORD,” seeking direction from him as their supreme commander. They knew they were *his* people, *his* army. Joshua had never eclipsed God in their vision, and it is a central part of his legacy that they continued to look to God as their leader after Joshua himself was no longer with them.

It's not clear how the inquiry was made. Perhaps it was through a priest, using oracular stones (the Urim and Thummim) as in 20:27, 28.<sup>2</sup> According to Numbers 27:18–21 this is how Joshua had been given instructions about Israel's movements in the wilderness. But the nature of the response here (a whole complex sentence rather than a simple yes or no) suggests that in this case something more was involved than the use of the Urim and Thummim—most likely the delivery of a spoken oracle by the priest himself or (as elsewhere in Judges) a prophet or the mysterious “messenger of the LORD.”<sup>3</sup> We're simply not told. What is significant is not how the inquiry was made, but the attitude it reveals. The Israelites inquired of the Lord because they recognized him as their supreme leader, as Joshua had done, and believed he had not abandoned them now that Joshua was gone. This, too, shows the powerful impact Joshua had made on their lives. We will return later to the significant response to Israel's inquiry in verse 2.

*People Who Know They Need One Another and Work Together (vv. 3–21)*

This is another aspect of the national unity that was part of Joshua's legacy. Joshua had never been an autocrat. He believed in teamwork. He was a man who knew how to delegate responsibility and work cooperatively with

others and had modeled this in his leadership. Again and again in the book of Joshua we see him exercising leadership along with Eleazar the priest, the elders, and heads of families and tribes.<sup>4</sup> The phrase “he and the elders of Israel” is particularly revealing about the way Joshua had shared his leadership with these key men. He had mourned with them when Israel suffered a heavy defeat at Ai (Joshua 7:6) and literally walked with them “before the people” as they went up to Ai a second time (Joshua 8:10). It was a great and courageous example of team leadership that put humility, trust, and cooperation before self-seeking, personal status, and competitiveness. These were the men who would eventually have to shoulder the responsibility of leading in their own right, and the book of Judges indicates just how profoundly their understanding of what that entailed was shaped by Joshua’s example: “And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of *the elders who outlived Joshua*” (2:7). Furthermore, as we are about to see, Joshua’s example of noncompetitive, cooperative leadership impacted not only the elders of Israel but the whole nation.

In the time of the judges the major people groups that made up Israel were the twelve tribes, named after their ancestors, the twelve sons of Jacob. This gave the people of each tribe an identity more specific than simply “Israelites.” This was a good thing in itself, because people need to feel they belong to something smaller and more strongly kinship-based than a nation. In the modern world this is expressed (among other ways) in the need many feel to do genealogical research and produce a family tree that shows their connectedness to others sharing the same forebears. But there are dangers when the desire for a distinct identity goes too far. Kinship connectedness can descend into a kind of tribalism that threatens the unity of the larger community to which the tribes belong. It can set tribe against tribe in a way that leads to rivalry and the kind of fierce competitiveness that destabilizes nations and can ultimately destroy them. This very nearly happened in the period of the judges, as the closing chapters of the book show. In the period immediately following Joshua’s death, however, and no doubt due to his influence, relationships between the tribes were marked by cooperation rather than rivalry.

Joshua had led Israel in a series of military campaigns that broke the back of Canaanite resistance and then divided up the land by lot, giving each tribe a specific part of Canaan as its inheritance in the land the Lord had given them (Joshua 1:10—12:24; 13:1–51). But in his farewell speech he had made it clear that much remained to be done. Canaanites still lived in the allocated territories, and each tribe faced the challenge of taking possession of

what had been assigned to it and establishing its presence there. This would not be easy, and some territories would be harder to occupy than others, especially those with large Canaanite populations and fortified cities. Nor were all the tribes equally capable of such an undertaking. Some were larger than others, with more manpower and resources. If Israel as a whole was to accomplish the task Joshua had left them, they would have to work together, which is exactly what we see them doing in the first half of Judges 1.

In response to Israel's inquiry in verse 1, Judah is named as the tribe that should go first (v. 2). But the men of Judah do not launch out on their own. On the contrary, the very first thing they do is to ask the men of Simeon, their "brother" Israelites, to go with them and help them fight the Canaanites in their territory, and they offer to help the Simeonites do the same in theirs, an offer the Simeonites readily agree to (v. 3). This is referred to again in verse 17, and these two verses frame everything in between. In other words, the cooperation between these two tribes was basic to the whole series of campaigns fought by Judah and its fellow Israelites in the southern part of Canaan (vv. 9–17). The smaller tribes and clans, such as the Kenites and Benjaminites (vv. 16, 21), had the most to gain from this kind of partnership, but so did Judah, and ultimately all Israel, because it set a pattern that made the nation stronger whenever and wherever it was repeated. The way ahead was going to be difficult and would put the unity of Israel under severe strain. But the fact that they started this way was a good sign and another indication of the powerful influence that Joshua had had on the nation.

### The Blessing of God

Joshua's legacy was good, but it was not the fundamental cause of the success enjoyed by the men of Judah and those associated with them. That lay in God, not in them, just as Joshua's own achievements were not in the end attributable to Joshua himself but to the God he served. That was certainly how Joshua had seen things at the end of his long life: "And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed" (Joshua 23:14). God had been faithful; he had made promises to his people and had kept them. The same is true for the good things that happen after Joshua's death here in Judges 1. God promised victory to Judah (v. 2), and he was true to his word: he "gave" the Canaanites into the hand of Judah and Simeon (v. 4), and the Lord was "with Judah" (v. 19). God doesn't send people into battle without being with them. He blesses those he



sends with his presence and help.<sup>5</sup> The real reason the men of Judah were successful was not their good strategy or military might, or even their unity and cooperative leadership, but the evident blessing of God upon them in fulfillment of his promise.

Two mini-narratives embedded in the passage show us this blessing of God at closer range. Like a good camera man, the author doesn't just sweep across the scene of Judah's battles to show the general direction and shape of things. He also zooms in at a couple of points to give us a closer look at two representative examples of what was happening. The first scene we are shown at close range is military (vv. 4–7); the second is domestic (vv. 11–15).

*Victory (vv. 4–7)*

The first joint operation of the men of Judah and the men of Simeon was at Bezek, near Jerusalem. It was an ambitious campaign that penetrated enemy territory in the high country at the center of Canaan and resulted in a massive victory (v. 4). But the battle itself is reported in only one verse and is clearly not what the writer most wants us to dwell on. His main interest lies elsewhere. He quickly narrows the focus to one man, Adoni-bezek (the “lord” or “ruler” of Bezek), and shows us the kind of man he was and the fate he suffered (vv. 5–7). It is a gruesome passage, but what it's about is not revenge. Israel had not suffered at the hands of this man. Others had, though, and now God brings terrible, just retribution on him for what he has done (v. 7). Among other things, this mini-narrative shows us that much more is going on than God's giving the land to Israel. He is also judging the Canaanites, especially their rulers, for their evil lifestyle. The men of Judah and Simeon are his agents in this case, but it is fundamentally God's doing. It is God who gives this tyrant into their hands, and what they do to him is God's judgment on him (v. 4). This is the negative, flip side of God's blessing on his people; they share in his judging of the world. It is a high honor that all his people are destined one day to share (1 Corinthians 6:2).

But as Christians who now stand on the other side of the cross, what are we to make of the *form* that God's justice took in this particular case (v. 6), especially in view of Jesus' command to love our enemies and do them good, not harm (Luke 6:27)? We have already noted that it is not revenge. But what more can be said? Positively, it is a case of the principle of justice enshrined in the Law of Moses: “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).

The responsibility to dispense justice of this kind lay with duly appointed judges (Exodus 21:22), not private individuals, and limited punishment to what was fair: the offender got no more and no less than he deserved. Given the extreme brevity of the account, it's not clear whether or not there was any judicial process involved in Adoni-bezek's case; probably not. That is the nature of warfare; it delivers summary justice in situations where the normal processes of justice have broken down. But that does not make the punishment meted out to Adoni-bezek unjust. In view of the sheer volume of suffering he had inflicted (by his own admission he had mutilated seventy) he was actually treated rather leniently!

Finally, we should note that though Jesus forbade personal revenge, he upheld the principle of just retribution and the right and responsibility of judges to administer it (Matthew 7:2; 5:25, 26). We may be glad that in the gospel age in which we live the administration of justice is the role of the state rather than of the church (Romans 13:1–4) and that, on the whole, wrongdoers are dealt with less severely than Adoni-bezek was. But this passage stands as a reminder that cruel tyrants are not all-powerful. Unless they repent, God will call them to account, and his people will share in his victory over them.

### *Marriage (vv. 11–15)*

The blessing of God is more immediately apparent in this second scene. It features not a cruel tyrant who gets his just deserts but a young man who is richly rewarded for his bravery. Othniel distinguishes himself in battle at Kiriath-sepher and wins the hand of Achsah, Caleb's daughter, as his wife. And what a prize she is! Caleb had been a close associate of Joshua. They were among the twelve men chosen to spy out Canaan in preparation for the conquest, and the only two of their generation who were promised that they would enter it because of the faith they had shown in God's promises (Numbers 13:6; 14:6, 30). Caleb in particular had been commended by God as one who had "a different spirit" and fully followed the Lord (Numbers 14:24). So Achsah had a rich heritage, which she brought with her when she became Othniel's bride.

But she also brought herself, and her sterling qualities show through in verses 14, 15. She urges her new husband to ask her father for a field as her dowry, and when the field turns out to be in the Negeb, the dry area in the south of Canaan, she herself presses him to also give her springs to irrigate it. Achsah is no shrinking violet. She's hardheaded and practical. She knows what is needed and is not backward about making a reasonable request. And

her father, far from being affronted by her boldness as a lesser man might be, gives her what she has asked for and more: “And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs” (v. 15). So we end with a picture of the desert blooming. Not just victory in battle, but marriage, land, and fertility—the rich blessing of God. Othniel is truly a blessed man. And to cap it all, Caleb himself, who has blessed Othniel and Achsah with their inheritance, at last, in his extreme old age, receives Hebron as his own promised inheritance, a fitting reward for a lifetime of wholehearted service to God (v. 20).<sup>6</sup>

Not everything is perfect, of course. There are some disquieting indications in verses 19b, 21 that some things did not go according to plan, and we will have more to say about this in due course. Darker days will come. But the overwhelming impression of verses 1–21 is of God’s faithfulness to his promise: “And the LORD was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country” (v. 19a; cf. v. 2). Israel’s experience in the period immediately following Joshua’s death was one of manifest, abundant blessing.

### The Shape of Things to Come

But before we move on, let us reflect again on the question that was asked back in verse 1 and the answer it received: Who will lead us? Judah. This is one of those very pregnant verses of Scripture. It’s heavy with significance, and a great deal is going to emerge from it. Of course, the announcement that Judah should take the lead shouldn’t have surprised anyone. Way back in the time of the patriarchs Jacob had said this about his fourth son:

Judah, your brothers shall praise you;  
 your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;  
 your father’s sons shall bow down before you.  
 Judah is a lion’s cub;  
 from the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
 He stooped down; he crouched as a lion  
 and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?  
 The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
 nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,  
 until tribute comes to him;  
 and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. (Genesis 49:8–10)

Judah had always been destined for leadership, but until this time none of that nation’s leaders had been Judahites. Moses was not from the tribe of Judah, nor was Joshua. But in the longer term the leadership Israel would need to bring it into the full enjoyment of its inheritance would come from Judah—not just from the tribe of that name, but from one who would arise

from it, and the statement made at the beginning of Judges is in effect an announcement that the time has come for this to begin to happen. Not only did the tribe of Judah lead the other tribes after Joshua's death, but Othniel, the first judge, was from Judah (3:7–11).<sup>7</sup> And scarcely are the Judahites named as leaders in chapter 1 than they advance against Jerusalem and subdue it (1:7, 8), the city that was later to become the city of David (2 Samuel 5:6–10). So something begins here in Judges that has its outworking in David, and eventually in Jesus, the great Son of David, Israel's Messiah, and the One hailed in the book of Revelation as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5).

### Time to Reflect

This passage has been about the legacy of a great man. Joshua made a great impact on his generation and left behind him people who worked together, called on God, moved at his command, and experienced his blessing. They coped well with the transition to life without Joshua, in part at least because he had prepared them well for the challenges they would face. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to have godly parents and grandparents have had a similarly great preparation for life. I am reminded of Paul's memorable words to his young protégé, Timothy: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 Timothy 1:5). To be on the receiving end of such a legacy is a great privilege, and it is an equally great privilege to be able to give it to our children and grandchildren. But whether or not we have been blessed in this way, as Christians we all share in a far greater legacy. For the whole church of which we are a part is the legacy of Jesus Christ. It is the fruit of his work and still impacts the world in which we live in incalculable ways. At its worst the church is a scandal, but at its best it bears the imprint of Christ's own character and brings delight to his heart (Ephesians 5:22–32; Revelation 19:6–8; cf. Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 32:41; Zephaniah 3:17). And where it honors him as its Lord and is obedient to him, his abundant blessing is evident and brings glory to God.<sup>8</sup>

More importantly, the passage has been about God's providing leadership for his people. It is always a shock when someone who has made a massive impact on the church and on us personally is taken from us. Many of my generation were powerfully impacted by the evangelistic vision and preaching of Billy Graham, now over ninety years of age. We wish our children could have experienced what we did in the 1950s and 1960s when his ministry was at its height and thousands of people came to Christ at his

meetings. For us, his death will mean the end of an era in which we saw God move in amazing ways and saw victories that we had scarcely thought possible. On a smaller scale similar loss is felt with the death or departure of a pastor whose faithful ministry has impacted whole families and helped raise up another generation of committed gospel-minded young men and women. All of us know people whose influence on us has been so profound that we feel they are simply irreplaceable. But the reality is that *no human being* is indispensable. Time moves on, and God remains faithful to his people, and in every generation he raises up godly leaders to care for them. But none of them is perfect, and idolizing them can be a snare. It can lead us into a kind of hero-worship that makes it hard for us to see beyond the leaders God gives us to God himself. The fact is that if all those we admire and feel dependent on were taken from us tomorrow we would not be bereft and leaderless.

After Joshua had died God provided the tribe of Judah to lead his people, confirming that Judah was destined to play a central role in God's future purposes for his people. The kind of leadership they would need in the years ahead to enter into all that God had promised them would come from the tribe of Judah. And that larger purpose of God has now been realized in Jesus. He is our supreme leader. He is the perfecter of our faith. He has promised never to leave or forsake us. It is to him we must look, and in his name we must go forward to possess all that God has for us. If we do that, we will not only be greatly blessed ourselves but, like Joshua, will leave a rich legacy to those who come after us.



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