



UNIT 4



THE WEAKNESS OF THE OLD COVENANT

If you open up the book of Judges hoping for good news about God's chosen people, you'll be disappointed. Judges is one of the lowest points for the Jews in all of Scripture. It actually starts out great. The Israelites continue to conquer their land even after the death of Joshua. But the Israel-

ites start having trouble expelling the Canaanites from the Promised Land. And it wasn't always because they couldn't. They made poor choices and failed to do what God commanded. But keep reading because God has a purpose for recording these stories in the book of Judges.

GOD'S BIG PICTURE



God brought His people into the land He had promised their forefathers.



The judges were themselves a judgment on Israel.

4.1 MOSES: THE NECESSITY OF A NEW HEART

Read See Exercise 4.1.
Memorize Deuteronomy 30:6

A Corrupt Heart

In medical science the heart is a hollow, muscular organ that circulates blood. But in reality, we use the word *heart* to mean much more than the physical organ.

We use the word *heart* to represent a range of emotions and actions. We convey feelings with the word when we say things like, "He doesn't have the heart to do it," or, "Take heart." We sorrow for people with a "heavy heart." We use the heart to represent our wills or our minds: "I had a change of heart," or, "I knew the test by heart." We use it to talk about attitude: "Her effort was half-hearted."

Some people are mean and have a "hard heart." Others are too sympathetic and have a "bleeding heart." And we all know that "home is where the heart is," but Grandma's is where we get to eat our favorite food "to our heart's content."

You get the idea. You probably can think of a lot of different ways we use the word *heart*. The Israelites were a lot like us. They too used the word *heart* in a lot of different ways. The box on the next page tells you about the various ways they used *heart*.

In the Old Testament, the heart represents our physical beating heart, our attitudes, our feelings, our desires, our will, and even our minds. It seems that the heart represents everything about an individual.

This is why God desires for His people to have a special kind of heart that would cause them to fear Him and keep all His commandments (Deut. 5:29). He even commands them to love Him with all their hearts and to keep His commandments on their hearts (6:5–6). But God knows that their hearts could be deceived (11:16), that their hearts could be hardened (15:7), and that their hearts could be greedy (15:9–10). He knows too that their hearts could be weak (20:3) and scared (20:8).

And it is their hearts that fail them. Because of their hearts, the Israelites can't keep their covenant responsibilities. So if they are to keep those covenant responsibilities, God—and not them, for they cannot do it—will have to change their hearts. In fact, He will have to give them new hearts. In other words, something internal will have to happen—they will have to be regenerated

(made alive again). They will have to be saved. And only God can do that.

A Good Story

There are very few stories out there in which the hero dies. People don't tend to like stories where the hero fails. It just doesn't feel right. The main character is supposed to win. The guy gets the girl. The underdog team wins the championship. It makes people unsettled and even angry if that doesn't happen.

At this point in our survey of the Old Testament, the main (human) character of the Bible's story is actually a whole nation: the seed of Abraham. And it hasn't exactly been winning. The generation of former slaves died off in the wilderness. But maybe now Israel will win! Maybe they'll make it into the land, wipe out their enemies, and bless the whole world by crushing the serpent!

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is basically one long sermon that Moses gives to the second generation of Isra-

elites as they all stand at the border of the Promised Land. Moses is reminding them of everything that happened to their parents—the Exodus, the law, the reason the previous generation died.

Even if you read the sermon carefully, though, you may not be sure whether to feel hopeful or afraid for Israel. Toward the beginning of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people of their past failures. And he warns them not to think they're getting the land because they deserve it:

The Lord thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiffnecked [stubborn] people. Remember, and forget not, how thou provokedst the Lord thy God to wrath in the wilderness: from the day that thou didst depart out of the land of Egypt . . . ye have been rebellious against the Lord. (Deut. 9:6–7)

Ouch. And toward the end of Deuteronomy, it gets worse. Moses basically predicts that the Israelites will ruin their beautiful land by worshipping other gods (Deut. 29:22–28).

The Human Heart

The Old Testament uses the word *heart* in numerous ways. It can mean the physical organ (Exod. 28:29). Sometimes it is the word used to mean the *midst* of something—such as the sea (Jon. 2:3). Sometimes, it means to be kind or friendly. For example, Ruth tells Boaz that he has spoken “friendly” to her (Ruth 2:13). The word *friendly* in this passage is the same Hebrew word for *heart*. It can mean courage. Amos says the *courageous* (those who have heart) will flee in the day of the Lord (Amos 2:16). It can also mean desire. Nehemiah uses *heart* to show that the people had a *desire* to work (Neh. 4:6). Several times it refers to a person's will—to the choice to do something. For example, Joash decided to repair (i.e., “with heart he repaired”) the temple (2 Chron. 24:4).

The Hebrews saw people as rational beings. For them, the heart was central to feelings, to

desires, to thinking, to reasoning, and to choosing to do something. You could say that the Hebrews saw the heart as representing the most important part of a person. In fact, it represented the person.

God says that their hearts are in need of circumcision, which means that each person's whole being is in need of repair, because sin has tainted every aspect of their lives. Early in Deuteronomy, God tells the people, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (6:5). Humanly speaking, this is impossible to do twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. God promises that in the New Covenant He will give them new hearts. And when He gives them new hearts (30:6), loving Him will be the result.

And if that weren't enough, God says it very directly Himself. God tells Moses that after his death

this people will rise up, and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land . . . , and will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them. Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them. (Deut. 31:16–17)

“Israel is constitutionally incapable of choosing the way of life.”

—J. G. McConville

How would you feel if you were an Israelite and God said these things about you? Even as a reader, it's unsettling to see the people you were rooting for fail—and fail so miserably.

The Lord—Gracious and Compassionate

But we should never have expected that the hero of the Bible—the serpent crusher who is to restore the world to the way it ought to be—would be another fallen human like Adam. Apparently, putting together a whole nation of fallen humans (like Israel) only makes the problem of sin worse, not better.

If the Bible is the story of what God is doing to redeem His fallen creation, then the true hero of the Bible has to be God Himself. Even the most blessed people in the world are still stuck in their sins. Even getting their own land and special laws straight from the finger of God isn't enough to save them. They still need more saving than they received in the Exodus because they're still slaves—slaves to sin.



As the messages in the book of Deuteronomy are presented, Israel is standing at the border of the Promised Land, ready to enter and conquer.

So our merciful God gives them a special promise. They will fail, yes, and God will push them out of their land and scatter them around the world for breaking His covenant with them. But God won't leave them on their own outside the land. In His love and faithfulness, He will eventually bring them back and fix the broken thing that is causing all their problems—their own sinful hearts. Near the end of Deuteronomy God reveals just a glimpse of the work that Jesus will do in the New Covenant:

And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. (Deut. 30:6)

“Deuteronomy recognizes the need for God to act within the heart if Israel is to achieve faithful obedience to God’s covenant.”

—Paul Barker

The real, fundamental problem of all people is that they do not love the Lord with all their hearts. They love themselves. They love sin. Their hearts are twisted in the wrong direction. But God can untwist them. God will change their hearts. That’s what Israel really needs, and someday God will do it.

Your Heart

That’s what you need too, of course—if you haven’t already experienced it. That’s why some readers have to drag their eyes across these pages like pulling a wheelbarrow up a mountain. In their deepest heart, they just don’t care about all this stuff, because they don’t love the God who is the main character of the Bible.

You can’t just make yourself love something you don’t already love. Wanna try it? Okay, on the count of three, love spinach. Okay, now stop. On the count of three, love God. Okay, now stop. It doesn’t work. Love can’t be turned on and off because it comes from your inmost nature. And just as God would have to change your tongue to like a food you hate, God has to change you deep inside if you’re going to love Him.

Thinking It Through 4.1

1. In the Old Testament, what does the term *heart* represent?
2. In Moses’ final sermon to the second generation as they are about to enter the Promised Land, why does he insist that they will fail to keep God’s covenant law?
3. What is God’s solution to the problem of Israel’s failure?
4. How will God accomplish this solution to the problem?
5. Why does God give Israel the land?

4.2 JOSHUA: PROMISES FULFILLED

Read Joshua 6:1–8:29
Memorize Joshua 21:43–45

Joshua's Job

In the book of Joshua, we see God's people finally entering their land and managing to conquer it by God's power. They're subduing the earth and having dominion over it in a very real and obvious way—just like God told humanity to do in the beginning. And Joshua tells how they start filling the land God promised them—just like God told Adam to fill the earth. These are real signs of hope.

The book of Joshua is, of course, named after the leader who takes Moses' spot when that great leader dies. And as Joshua (one of the two faithful spies from Numbers) leads the people into the land, hope grows even higher.

When the book opens, we see God's charge to Joshua. God gives Joshua some amazing promises. Perhaps the most important promise was that God would be with him in the same way He was with Moses (Josh. 1:5; cf. Deut. 34:10–12). God also gives Joshua some specific instructions. He was to be strong and courageous because he would lead the people to take possession of the land that God had promised to them (Josh. 1:6).

More importantly, Joshua was to obey. He was to do all that Moses had commanded Israel to do. He should not turn from the law in any way (1:7). Only by doing exactly what it says would he have success. He was to meditate on it day and night so that he would know it so well that he would obey "all that is written therein" (1:8). Through obedience, the nation would be carrying out the Creation Mandate in the way that God intended.

The rest of the world was not exercising good and wise dominion over the earth in a way that honored God. But if the nation of Israel lived in the Promised Land according to the law God had given Moses, then all the nations would be able to see what good and wise dominion under God looked like.

The book of Joshua shows us how these commands were carried out. It shows how the people sometimes failed to carry them out, and how they succeeded in carrying them out.

It also shows us how God is fulfilling the covenant promises that He made to Abraham.

When God first speaks to Joshua, He focuses on the land that He is giving to the sons of Israel (1:2–4). God describes to Joshua the borders of the land and the security that they will find there. As you read the first chapter of Joshua, observe how many references are made to the land and other landmarks such as rivers and the sea.

The following lesson is an example of what happens to Israel when they fail to carry out God's commands. Simply put, they don't have success. In fact, they are soundly defeated. But this lesson also shows what happens when they carry out the commands. They have success. And it's not just any type of success; it is great success that points directly to God's mighty works on their behalf to fulfill His promises to Israel's forefathers.

Group Punishment

Nobody likes group punishment. Nobody likes it when one kid gets in trouble, and the whole class is punished. But we have no problem with group punishment in sports. One player commits a penalty, and the whole team has to move the football back fifteen yards. What's the difference? Why do we accept it in one situation and not the other?

Well, in sports we understand (or at least we should) that we win as a team and we lose as a team. No team is an individual, and no individual is a team. We never say, "Player number seven for the Lions lost today, but the rest of the Lions won."

Being part of a group usually comes with responsibility. If you're part of a sports team, you know that there are rules. If you have bad grades, you might have to sit out until you bring them up. If you get in trouble—that is, big trouble—you might not get to be on the team.

The same is true on a national level. If the leaders of your country act foolishly in provoking a war, it is not only the leaders who suffer a counterattack, but the nation. If your nation's leaders are foolish and seek to build illegal weapons, it may not be just the leaders who come under sanctions, but the nation.



Walking around a city for seven days is not usually the best means of conquering a walled and heavily armed stronghold—unless the Lord of Hosts is on your side and tells you to do it.

Being part of Israel came with responsibility—the responsibility to keep Israel's part of the covenant with God. When God gave Moses His law, He told the children of Israel that they had to do what was written in the law. You obey—blessings. You disobey—curses.

Part of obeying was to follow what God's leaders said to do. The consequences for disobeying them were the same as the consequences for disobeying God.

There is at least one account in the book of Joshua where the nation of Israel experiences group punishment. But no one could say that it wasn't fair. Joshua had given them explicit instructions, but one man disobeyed. And it cost the lives of thirty-six men.

Victory at Jericho

God's plan to use Pharaoh to show His power worked very well. Even forty years after the Exodus, a prostitute in Jericho remembers those amazing displays of God's power. She and all Jericho are afraid of this strangely blessed nation

(Josh. 2:8–14). (And Rahab's fear of the Lord wins her a place in the line of future Israelite kings!)

When the people are faithful to the Lord, miracles happen. Jericho's walls come tumbling down without Israel shooting a single arrow. When the omnipotent God, who created the universe, is on your side, walls don't present much of a barrier.

In fact, it was a rather easy victory. The Israelites had easily defeated what many thought to be an impenetrable and undefeatable city.

Joshua's fame was heard throughout the land.

One Soldier, One Sin, One Defeated Army

The Israelites were feeling good about their victory. They felt so good that they decided they didn't need to send many men to attack Ai. About three thousand would do. There would be no reason to worry the rest of the fighting men or make the people travel up to Ai and camp out. They could all stay home.



The first casualty probably came as quite a shock to the Israelites.

The three thousand (or so) men marched out to Ai and the rout was on. One after the other began to fall, and they were in full retreat. But the retreating men were the Israelites—not the men of Ai.

About thirty-six men from Israel were killed. The rest of the fighting men returned home and the “hearts of the people melted, and became as water” (Josh. 7:5). In other words, the Israelites were terrified—they were scared to death.

Joshua was perplexed. Why did this happen? He fell before the Lord and asked Him, “Why did the Israelites turn their backs? Why did this happen, Lord, and what are you going to do about it?”

The Lord told Joshua to get up. Israel had sinned, and Joshua must deal with it immediately. And until it was taken care of, the Israelites would continue to turn their backs and run.

Joshua called for all the people to prepare themselves. The next day, they would figure out who had sinned. And that person would pay the price—he would burn with fire.

The next morning, one by one, each of the tribes came near, and the tribe of Judah was chosen. Then the family of the Zerahites was chosen, and then the family of Zabdi, and then Carmi, and finally, Achan was chosen.

Joshua asked him what he had done.

Achan said that he had seen some beautiful things and some valuable silver and gold. But he lingered too long. He coveted them and took them. He was supposed to destroy them or give them to God so that he wouldn’t covet them. But he didn’t destroy them, nor did he give them to God. Instead, he had hidden them in a covered hole that was in his tent.

Achan’s words were true. The stolen goods were exactly where he said they were.

So, he came clean. He’s in the clear. Right? Not exactly.

Remember, thirty-six people died, the fighting men were humiliated, and the entire nation was terrified. But there was something worse—he had sinned against God.

Although he admitted to stealing and even admitted to sinning against God, he would still have to face the consequences for his actions. And the consequences were severe—both for him and his family—death by stoning followed by burning with fire. The punishment was necessary because Israel's covenant with God had been violated. Justice must be served. Through the punishment God could renew His blessing on the nation according to His own faithfulness to the covenant.

When even one Israelite was unfaithful to the covenant, there were terrible consequences. Although Achan was only one man, his sin was against God. And because he was part of the covenant group of Israel, his sin made not only himself accursed, it also made the camp of Israel accursed (Josh. 6:18). When God isn't on your side, one soldier can beat your whole army.

In their experiences at Jericho and Ai, God was teaching Israel two lessons: (1) *I'm the one who wins your battles, so stay faithful to My covenant.* (2) *If you are unfaithful, you won't get to stay in your land.*

Staying Faithful

Israel had to learn the hard way that God meant what He had said. Disobey and there will be consequences. But Israel also learned from the experience at Ai that God is faithful and would give them the victory if they would be faithful to His covenant.

The rest of the book of Joshua is about the successes and failures of the children of Israel and their leader. (Yes, even Joshua makes mistakes. He makes a covenant with the Gibeonites without consulting the Lord. He was to defeat them, not make peace with them.) As you read through the book, you see victory after victory over king after king and over territory after territory. God is fulfilling His promises.

When you come to the end of the book, you see just how much God fulfilled. Joshua reminds the people,

Ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof. (Josh. 23:14)

"Not one thing hath failed." In other words, not one promise is unfulfilled. God has been faithful, and they know it in their hearts and in their souls.

Conclusion

The first generation of newly freed Israelites had seen God perform amazing miracles: ten plagues, the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea, the provision of manna. And yet they complained, they had no faith, and they left their bones in the wilderness.

The second generation of Israelites watched God knock down the walls of Jericho and hand them a beautiful land on the Mediterranean Sea, the very land He had promised to Abraham. And yet their faithfulness to the covenant lasted only as long as the lives of their godly leaders.

If people who watched God act with their own eyes won't (and, as Joshua says, *can't*) remain faithful to Him, how deep is the problem of mankind? How deep does sin go in your own heart?

Would you have been more faithful than Israel under the same circumstances? Don't answer that question by thinking about your personal history; answer it based on what the Bible tells you is true. From what you know about the sinfulness of mankind, what would you have done?

Thinking It Through 4.2

1. The focus of the book of Joshua is God's fulfillment of which Abrahamic promise?
2. What would determine whether the people were successful or not?
3. What two lessons did God teach the Israelites in their experiences at Jericho and Ai?
4. By the end of the book of Joshua, how many of God's promises had He failed to fulfill?
5. Give one illustration of how personal sin brings consequences on others.