

HEARTS  
OF IRON  
FEET OF  
CLAY

PRACTICAL *and* CONTEMPORARY  
LESSONS *from the* BOOK OF JUDGES

# HEARTS OF IRON FEET OF CLAY

GARY INRIG



Discovery House Publishers

*Books, music, and videos that feed the soul with the Word of God*

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## PREFACE

Today the words “mad cow disease” plant fear deep in the heart of the cattle industry. An outbreak of the disease can decimate herds very quickly, and, therefore, when the disease hits one ranching area, authorities immediately clamp on a strict quarantine to isolate and control the problem. One rancher was particularly determined to save his animals. He carefully sprayed every building on his farm, every room of his house, and every vehicle on his property. He then moved all his animals into a carefully scrubbed and disinfected building, padlocked the door, and restricted all contact with the outside world. No visitors were allowed on his property, and he went so far as to pick up his newspaper at the ranch gate with sterile gloves and then to bake it in the oven to kill any bacteria. Despite his almost fanatical precautions, within three weeks some of his cows became ill, and the entire herd had to be liquidated. As one health official noted, “The virus is transmitted through the air, and you can’t quarantine the wind.”

When I originally wrote this book more than twenty-five years ago, the winds of the “me generation” were blowing a strong and deadly virus through the culture. The cultural revolution that had taken root in the 1960s was beginning to reach full flower, as seen in the abandonment of traditional values and moral standards in almost every sector. “Doing your own thing” became the slogan that guided choices and behaviors, closely aligned with “I gotta be me!” and “I owe it to myself.” The virus of relativism was blowing in the wind, along with a virulent secularism determined to propel any remnants of biblical Christianity out of the public square. It was a period of time marvelously captured in a biblical statement that serves as a descriptive slogan for a period in Israel’s history known as the times of the judges: “Everyone did what was right in his (or her) own eyes.”

Even at my most pessimistic moments back then, I would not have imagined that things could or would unravel as quickly or as

drastically as they have. We have experienced a cultural “perfect storm,” due to the convergence of forces such as moral relativism, aggressive pluralism, determined secularism, “do it yourself” spirituality, and libertarian individualism, aided by the technological realities of the information age.

The implications for followers of Jesus Christ are obvious. We cannot hermetically seal ourselves from the spirit of the age so that we live in splendid isolation from it. In fact, we must not. First, our sovereign Lord calls us to live in the world for His glory, and monasticism and isolationism are not biblical options. Our mandate from the risen Christ prohibits retreat. Besides, the attempt is futile. There is no place to hide. Virtually every segment of modern culture has become a carrier of values alien to those of the kingdom of Christ. We confront the open expression of these anti-Christian values in academia, the media or the entertainment industry; commonly in the operations of our daily life that bring us into constant contact with lifestyles we are expected not merely to tolerate or accept, but to celebrate; and less directly in spheres of commerce and technology. Sadly, the spirit of the age often takes its most deadly form when it is absorbed into the professing Christian community. Much more than I want to admit, many Christians live, act, and choose as if God’s Word had never been written.

How do we live in a society without fixed standards, a society daily becoming more secular and pagan? God’s call is clear: “Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life” (Philippians 2:15–16 NASB). These are important verses. They remind us that we are not simply to survive the moral confusion and spiritual anarchy that surround us, somehow staying unpolluted by the world. We are also to shine, reflecting the glory of the Lord Jesus to a world that desperately needs to see Him. In other words, we are not just to be good in the midst of evil. We are not even just to be good for something, serving others. We are to be agents of our King, pressing His kingdom and its values into our culture and forming communities that are outposts of his kingdom, demonstrating to the world another, and a better, way to live life.

But still the question remains: When everyone around us is doing right in his or her own eyes, how do Christ-followers keep on track, doing what is right in their Lord's eyes? Thirty years ago, I found some solid answers coming from a very surprising place, a book that usually lies neglected on the pages of the Old Testament, Judges. The Israelites living at that time were confronted with a moral and spiritual anarchy not unlike our own modern situation. I discovered then that God had something very practical and contemporary to say to me in the book of Judges. As I shared my discovery with others, they, too, were deeply impressed with how powerfully it speaks to the world in which you and I live and encouraged me to write this book.

Few periods of history are so much like our own as the time of the Judges—at one moment scaling the peaks of glory and at the next plunging headlong into the swamp of sin. In its pages are some of the most exciting events in biblical history, and on their heels march some of the saddest accounts of sinful failure and disobedience. But through it all, there is found the hand of God working in, through, and despite His people.

The book of Judges is filled with people very much like us—people with God-given potential for greatness and unending capacity for catastrophe. When they dared to trust God and depend upon Him, they became people with hearts of iron, who made positive, godly impacts on their times. But when even the greatest heroes depended upon the flesh, they were revealed as people with feet of clay, who not only experienced personal failure but who also caused spiritual catastrophe. As we study their lives and discover the great principles God reveals about the way He works in—and often despite—His people, we can learn what it is to live powerful, productive lives in the midst of a society that is increasingly hostile to loyal followers of the One who alone is Lord.

When I first wrote this book, I was fully engaged in ministry with and to a special family of Christ-followers in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, known as Bethany Chapel. We spent seventeen very special years together, and we as a family remain profoundly grateful for that stage of our lives. For the past thirteen years, I have been privileged to serve as senior pastor of Trinity Church in Redlands,

California. This community of believers continues to be a source of great encouragement and enjoyment, and I have loved the privilege of being part of a body that longs to glorify God by being a church for the people of our time.

My greatest privilege is to have had Elizabeth as my partner in life and ministry. She continues to be an inexpressible blessing. When I first wrote the preface to this book, I expressed my deep love to her and my children, Janice, Stephen, and Heather, for their patience, support, and love. They have each married and made us the grateful and proud grandparents of Morgan, Micah, Evan, Elizabeth, and Conner. Grandparenting, we have discovered, is one of the few things in life that exceeds its publicity! Thank you, Lord.

## The Consequences of Compromise

At precisely 7:58 AM local time on December 26, 2004, a huge earthquake rumbled on the ocean floor just off the coast of Indonesia. That earthquake, the second strongest ever recorded, set in motion forces that produced a tsunami, a massive set of waves that caused unprecedented devastation throughout the Indian Ocean region. The precise death toll will never be known, but within moments more than three hundred thousand lives were lost in an area stretching from Indonesia to Thailand, Sri Lanka, South India, and even Africa. Millions more were displaced by the massive destruction. The Indian Ocean tsunami now ranks as the deadliest disaster in modern history.

Several years ago, after several of us on a ministry team assisted missionaries in Thailand, we vacationed for a few days on Phuket Island in southern Thailand. We walked on its beaches, swam in its waters, and made a day-trip to nearby Phi Phi Island to snorkel. It was a delightful place of refreshment and relaxation. Suddenly, those very delightful, pleasurable places of our memories were on our television screens, but now the pictures were of danger and death, with people fleeing for their lives and buildings collapsing under the pressure of giant waves. A vacation paradise had been turned into a graveyard, and the unprotected buildings on Phi Phi Island had been swept into the sea.

There are times that forces arise that have almost insurmountable power. We live in a time when massive forces are pounding our culture, forces that seem almost irresistible. Any observant person recognizes that we are in the midst of immense moral and spiritual changes. Biblical morality is ridiculed or dismissed as irrelevant by the cultural elite, while in this day of political correctness, evangelical

Christians at times seem to be the only acceptable target for attack or ridicule. To change the metaphor, ours has rightly been described as a cut-flower civilization. While signs of life remain, we have cut ourselves off from our biblical roots, and the petals will inevitably droop and fall. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are a society without standards. The youthful rock star that told an interviewer, "I believe absolutely nothing," is, unfortunately, speaking for many members of his generation.

Back in the 1970s, the "tsunami" that was expected to pound our culture was secular humanism, a naturalistic worldview that sought to eliminate any consideration of the supernatural from modern life. This has been a movement of profound influence, and there can be no doubt that the removal of spiritual and religious beliefs from the public sphere has been one of the most powerful shaping trends in modern society. But things didn't quite turn out the way the pundits predicted. As Peter Berger, one of the premier sociologists of our time whose own writings powerfully supported the secularization hypothesis, was driven to observe, "The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever . . . It is conservative or orthodox or traditionalist movements that are on the rise everywhere . . . Counter-secularization is at least as important a phenomenon in the contemporary world as secularization."<sup>1</sup>

What did happen was that in recent years our culture witnessed a huge interest in spirituality and new patterns of religiosity. This does not represent a turning to biblical Christianity. The new spirituality is inevitably allied with other current fashions, such as pluralism, relativism, syncretism, and consumerism. *Pluralism* calls us to respect and accept all religious claims as equally valid. The most that can be said of Christianity is that it stands alongside other options and alternatives. In fact, the claim that Jesus, as God the Son, is the only way of salvation is viewed as bigoted and hateful. *Relativism* denies the validity of all absolute moral, spiritual, or philosophical truth claims and celebrates the beauty of diversity and the validity of virtually all "lifestyle choices." *Syncretism*, an attempt to unify different forms of belief and practice, is exemplified in the fascinat-

ing observation of a young actress describing herself as “a nice, Jewish, Southern Baptist, Buddhist girl. I literally feel like I’m at a buffet!” she declares.<sup>2</sup> *Consumerism* defines the individual as the center of the universe, with a commitment that lasts only as long as “my needs are being met.” These various forces combine to produce a cultural tsunami that moves with enormous power, carrying away old moral and spiritual landmarks.

God calls His people to live “in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation” (Philippians 2:15). The cultural pressures we face are real, but they are hardly unprecedented. There is a great danger that we will feel sorry for ourselves because we have been called to live in times when it is increasingly difficult to be an authentic Christ-follower. But we dishonor God’s faithful people through the centuries if we exaggerate our difficulties, and we dishonor our God if we doubt His sufficiency. There is much to learn by looking back, especially at those times and places God has recorded for us in His Word. Some of those lessons bring great encouragement, while others serve as loud warnings against following dangerous patterns. Some of the most relevant parallels to our modern situation can be found in a too-often neglected Old Testament book, the book of Judges. It describes a time of moral, spiritual, and ethical anarchy, a society without standards. In fact, the statement that captures the spirit of that long-ago time exactly describes the world in which we live: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25, author’s translation).

Judges is a book that speaks to our time because it presents us with living examples of people in the distant past who were called to serve God in the midst of many of the same challenges we face today. Sadly, only a few of them provide us with positive examples. But there is a great deal to be learned not only from them but also from those who capitulated to the pressures and spirit of their age. Judges vividly demonstrates to us the consequences of spiritual compromise and disobedience to God that occur when the world succeeds in squeezing believers into its mold. No other part of Scripture so emphatically declares that spiritual disaster occurs when a group of people draws back from a wholehearted commitment to the Lord Jesus.

Ours is a dangerous and exciting time in which to serve Jesus Christ. The challenges and opportunities He gives to His people in the emerging years of the twenty-first century are unique and exhilarating. But these are also dangerous times. Satan is on the march, and the power of the cultural forces is mighty. Tragically, if opinion polls are to be believed, many who call themselves followers of Christ have become virtually indistinguishable from their non-Christian counterparts, both in their values and their behaviors. Unless we grab hold of the great principles of spiritual living learned both positively and negatively in the book of Judges, we may find ourselves to be spiritual dropouts, mere spectators at the climax of the invisible war between God and Satan or, even worse, spiritual casualties.

Over the years, I have seen people of great promise who have begun well but finished badly. Such an outcome is virtually never the product of a single moment or the result of a single failure. Rather, the final failure only serves to reveal a pattern of creeping compromise and increasing capitulation to unbiblical values and actions. In the same way, the book of Judges exposes both the course and consequences of compromise as well as the danger of partial obedience in a time of spiritual anarchy. It is the fundamental principle that the Holy Spirit communicates about spiritual survival in a society without standards. Partial defense is no defense at all. As D. L. Moody once said, "The place for the ship is in the sea, but God help the ship if the sea gets into it!" When God's people begin to take on the water of the world, they go down fast, and in the opening verses of this great book, we see that process vividly portrayed.

The theme of Judges is the assimilation of God's people, Israel, to the pagan cultures that surrounded them. Because these pagan people are broadly referred to as the Canaanites, we can speak of the "Canaanization" of Israel, which eventually results in the Israelites' loss of all of their distinctiveness as God's nation, making them virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding peoples. You may be surprised to discover that the book of Judges covers about one-quarter of the historical period described in the Old Testament. About 300 to 350 years pass between Judges 1 and Judges 21, yet it remains one of the most neglected books in the Bible. Except for the stories of Gideon and Samson, most Christians know very little

about the book, and even those stories are known only in the most superficial way. But to neglect it is to rob ourselves of significant truths the Holy Spirit wants to teach us.

The outline of Judges is a very simple one, as the book falls naturally into three sections, all developing the theme of the assimilation of God's people to the surrounding nations:

PREVIEW: THE PATTERN OF ISRAEL'S ASSIMILATION 1:1–3:6

DECLINE: ISRAEL'S DOWNWARD SPIRAL AND GOD'S RESPONSE 3:7–16:31

EPILOGUE: THE DEPTHS OF ISRAEL'S CANAANIZATION 17:1–21:25

We are not told who wrote this book. Jewish tradition suggests that it was Samuel, and that may be so, but his authorship cannot be proven. Internal evidence suggests that at least some parts of the book were composed in the period of the early monarchy, although the careful literary construction suggests that it took its final form at a later period. However, our understanding of the message of the book is not dependent on certainty about either its date of writing or its authorship, and so we may safely set such questions aside.

### AFTER THE DEATH OF JOSHUA: THE HIGH-WATER MARK (1:1, 2)

*After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the LORD, "Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?" The LORD answered, "Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands."*

Before we launch into our study, it will be helpful to survey where these opening chapters will take us. The preview or prologue (1:1–3:6), like the epilogue (17:1–21:21), has two parts. The first section covers chapters 1:1–2:5 and surveys Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan in the years after the death of Joshua from Israel's point of view. The concern is with history, geography, and the military. The second section (2:6–3:5) traverses the same time period. However, this time the writer speaks as a prophet, giving God's perspective,

and it is theological and spiritual in its perspective. The first section describes Israel's military response to God's command to conquer the land; the second, her spiritual response to God's call to covenant faithfulness.

The opening words of Judges may at first glance seem to be only a helpful historical notation. Sadly, as we shall see, they represent the spiritual high-water mark of the entire book. The first phrase, "after the death of Joshua," not only gives us the historical setting and indicates that this is a time of major transition for the nation; it also marks the beginning of a drastic decline in the spiritual well-being of the nation. This decline was totally unnecessary, since Israel's well-being was not dependent on the greatness of its leaders but on the goodness of her God. Although the books of Joshua and Judges stand side by side on the pages of Scripture, they are poles apart in what they record of Israel's obedience to God. The book of Joshua is the record of the exploits of the Israelites as they trusted their Lord and obeyed God. God brought His people into Canaan and gave them victory after victory over their foes. Joshua is a book of conquest, but Judges is a long, sad story of defeat. Joshua is a book of faith; Judges of unbelief and disobedience. Joshua depicts a people united in following God's man; Judges tells the story of a people increasingly divided, sliding into anarchy as every person "did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25, own translation). In Joshua, God's Word is central and people submit to His authority, while in Judges, Scripture is neglected and rejected.

Two verses clearly indicate the vast difference between the time of Joshua and the period of the judges. As Joshua was about to die, he issued one last, stirring challenge to his nation: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." The people's response was instantaneous: With one voice the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!" (Joshua 24:15, 16). But early in the period of the judges, we have this verdict pronounced on the people: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and the Asherahs" (Judges 3:7). So in a few short years, Joshua's "we will not forget the LORD" has become Judges' "the people forgot the LORD." Why did that

happen? How did a people who knew continuous victory by faith sink to be a nation experiencing constant failure due to compromise? And how can we guard against the same thing in our lives? After all, we can identify with the hymn writer who probed his heart and declared, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.” The purpose of asking these questions is to help us begin to answer them, both for the ancient Israelites and for ourselves.

The death of Joshua marked a national crisis. The great leader had gone, and God had not raised up another leader to take his place. But the people, no doubt reflecting the godly influence of Joshua’s life, responded with faith and trust. They gathered together as a united people to seek God’s direction and to carry out His mission. First, they accepted the Lord’s authority. They didn’t just set out to do what seemed best; they sought His direction, probably by inquiring of the Lord through the high priest’s use of the Urim and Thummim.<sup>3</sup> Second, they accepted His mission for them. God had called them to “go up and fight against the Canaanites.” The mission to take the land and exterminate the Canaanites came from the Lord Himself (cf. Exodus 23:31–33; Deuteronomy 7:1–5), and Israel was to be the instrument of His holy justice. Third, they waited for the Lord’s orders. He was the Commander-in-Chief who alone could determine who would lead them into battle.

The Lord’s choice of the tribe of Judah to take the lead is consistent with His plan to choose a king from Judah, a preview of the great day when His Messiah would be born as a descendant of David. But what should be noted here is the Lord’s promise of victory: “I have given the land into their hands.” This is the way it should be for God’s people, but, sadly, as we shall see, we will never reach such heights again in this book.

### **FIRST STEPS ON A SLIPPERY SLOPE: ISRAEL’S PARTIAL OBEDIENCE (1:3-36)**

These verses certainly don’t make very interesting reading, at least at first glance. This passage seems to be a long list of obscure names that catalog ancient battles in distant places, matters that can have no possible relevance to our lives thirty centuries later. A closer look

suggests, however, a pattern that is all too familiar, and one against which we must carefully guard ourselves. In fact, Judges 1 probes us in places we might prefer the Holy Spirit leave alone.

The description of Israel's conquest begins in the southern region of the country and traces the course of Judah's campaign in verses 3 to 19. As we shall discover, Judah is much more successful than the other tribes, and we follow its conquests, sometimes in alliance with the much smaller tribe of Simeon, in the upland campaign around Jerusalem (vv. 4–8); the capture of the Hebron region (vv. 9–15); the southern campaign (16, 17); and the coastal plain (v. 18). It is an impressive record of conquest against all kinds of Canaanite strongholds.

But the writer is not entirely happy. There are two disturbing notes that deserve more careful attention since they begin a pattern that will grow increasingly prominent. The first is found in verse 6. Judah conquered a town called Bezek, capturing the “king” and then cutting off his thumbs and his big toes. That was obviously both a very effective and brutal way of ending his military career; he could handle neither bow nor sword again. But mutilation was a pagan practice, not a biblical one, and the men of Judah were under command to put him to death. They were drawing their standards from people around them, adopting Canaanite practices. Judah's obedience was only partial.

The second disturbing note is found in verse 19. Judah, we are told, could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had iron chariots. On the one hand, that seems perfectly logical—the Canaanites had superior military technology that gave them a huge advantage on the plains. However, that explanation has one major flaw. Yahweh had promised that He would drive out the enemy. In fact, when the people of Manasseh had earlier complained to Joshua that they could not defeat their enemies because “all the Canaanites who live in the plain have iron chariots,” Joshua had declared, “though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out” (Joshua 17:16–18). In Judges 4, Deborah leads Israel into victory against a Canaanite army that possessed nine hundred iron chariots. Furthermore, the greatest victories Israel would have would come under David, and he never

used iron chariots. The real reason Judah did not have victory was that they did not fully trust their God. Diminished power is always the result of diminished faith.

The author has told us that God's people "were unable to drive the people from the plains" (v. 19). That phrase now rings like a chime through the rest of the chapter, occurring seven more times in all (vv. 21, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33). Benjamin failed to drive out the Jebusites (v. 21), while Manasseh did not drive out the pagan inhabitants of its area. Even when the men of Manasseh did possess power to drive out the Canaanites, they preferred to use them as forced labor, a cheap source of energy (vv. 27–28). Their problem was not a lack of power but a lack of obedience. The same record is given of Ephraim (v. 29), Zebulun (v. 30), and Asher (vv. 31–32). With monotonous regularity the clause recurs, "They did not drive out the inhabitants."

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Diminished power  
is always the result  
of diminished faith.

Gradually the diminished success of the tribes becomes more evident. In verses 10 to 30, the Canaanites live among the Israelite tribes, who are the dominant population in their region. But then, in verses 31 to 33, we learn that the two tribes of Asher and Naphtali live among the Canaanites, who form the base population of the region. With the tribe of Dan, we reach the lowest point (vv. 34–36). They were pressed into the hill country because the Amorites wouldn't allow them to come down to the plain. The pagans dominate the area, and God's people are reduced to forced labor, virtual prisoners in a land God had promised to those who would trust and obey Him.

The lesson of Judges 1 is very clear. The people of Israel chose deliberately to obey God only partly. Rather than following the Lord wholeheartedly, they compromised. In a few short verses we have moved from conquest to compromised coexistence to capitulation. It was a pattern that would yield very bitter fruits.

**CONFRONTED BY THE LIVING GOD:  
PARTIAL OBEDIENCE IS DISOBEDIENCE (2:1-5)**

*The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said,  
"I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I*

*swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."*

*When the angel of the LORD had spoken these things to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud, and they called that place Bokim. There they offered sacrifices to the LORD.*

The message of Judges is not difficult to discern as three great themes recur: the faithfulness of the covenant-keeping God; the unfaithfulness of His covenant-breaking people; and the consequences of compromise as the Israelites disobey and assimilate. These themes become evident as the narrative of Israel's partial conquest is suddenly interrupted by a figure that will reappear several times in Judges, "the angel of the LORD." The term *angel* could simply be translated *messenger* and refer to a human being. But what follows, both in this passage and elsewhere in Judges, makes it clear that this is indeed a supernatural being with remarkable powers. Even more to the point, when this messenger speaks, he speaks as God Himself. He does not say, "God brought you up from Egypt," but uses the first person: "I brought you up . . . I swore . . . I said . . . I will never break My covenant." Later, when Samson's father, Manoah, encounters the angel of the Lord, he recoils in fear: "We are doomed to die! We have seen God" (Judges 13:22). In other words, we are to understand the angel of the Lord was God Himself appearing in human form to His people. From a New Testament perspective, we are right to see in Him a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. This was not His first such appearance in biblical history (see, for example, Genesis 18), nor would it be the last.

Any event in which the Lord Jesus temporarily takes human form to appear to His people must be very important, and that is certainly true in Judges 2. We are not told what form the appearance took, but we are told that he "went up from Gilgal" (v. 1). At the beginning of this period of salvation history, the Lord of grace Himself came to warn His people of the cost of covenant unfaithfulness.

Gilgal was not a major population center, but it was a place of great spiritual and symbolic significance. When Joshua led the people in a miraculous way across the Jordan River, Gilgal was the place of their first encampment (Joshua 4, 5). There the Lord commanded them to correct their failure to keep the terms of His covenant with Abraham by renewing the practice of circumcision and by keeping the Passover. And they did so. It was also there, on the eve of Israel's first military campaign in the land, that the Lord Himself appeared to Joshua; gave him the assurance that God, not Joshua, was the commander-in-chief of the Lord's army; and promised that He would lead Israel into victory. Gilgal was the place of victory and blessing, of covenant renewal.

What Israel was never to forget was that God had committed Himself unconditionally to them as His special people. There was no reason for them to doubt His promise or to fear that He would prove unfaithful. Therefore, defeat was always completely unnecessary: "I will never break My covenant with you." That pledge, grounded in God's unconditional covenant with Abraham, was Israel's basis of existence. The Lord had promised Abraham three things: that he would have descendants (a seed); that his descendants would possess a land Yahweh would provide; and that from Abraham blessings would flow to the entire world, for "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"(Genesis 12:3). This great Abrahamic covenant became the foundation of God's dealings in history with Israel, through Israel, and, supremely, in Jesus. God is a promise-keeping God, and His people can rest in the certainty that "no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

So now the angel of the Lord reminded His people that He had been completely faithful to His covenant promises. He had reached into Egypt and delivered His people from slavery. Through Joshua, He had led them into the land that He swore to their fathers. God is a covenant-keeping God. He had kept the patriarchs in the land, preserved Israel for four hundred years in Egypt, guided and supplied a rebellious people for forty years in the wilderness, and had given them victory in the Promised Land over their enemies. "I will never break my covenant." He had not, and

He would not. In fact, He could not. He is a faithful God who cannot deny Himself.

The Abrahamic covenant is extremely important. First, it is the key to God's program in history. God must keep His promise to Abraham. He is not done with the people of Israel. There is coming a time when Christ, the seed of Abraham, will come back to earth and set up His kingdom to fulfill that ancient promise. Second, it gives Christ-followers great assurance. God always keeps His promises. He doesn't reveal hidden conditions or add later requirements. There are no "ifs" and "maybes." He does exactly what He says He will do. "I will never break My covenant, My promise." How do we know our sins are forgiven? He said so. How do we know we have eternal life? He said so. How do we know we are part of His family? He said so, and He never goes back on His word. That is a foundation block for life. We can trust the Word of God because the God of the Word stands behind it.

But the purpose of the angel of the Lord is not to remind Israel of God's covenant faithfulness but to confront them with their covenant unfaithfulness. "You shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me; why have you done this" (2:2)? Covenant grace also involved reciprocal obligations. At Mount Sinai the people had committed themselves to following the sovereign God. To worship Him as their God meant first of all that they were to make no covenant or treaty alliance with the people of Canaan. The only covenant permitted to them was their covenant with God. The enemy was the enemy, and there could be no relationship with the enemy. "You shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land." The second demand flowed from the first. The requirement that they were to make no treaties did not mean that they could live in a state of strained coexistence. "You shall break down their altars." The sin of the Canaanites was a deadly cancer, and the Lord called upon His people to remove it surgically from the land, before it infected them. They were to destroy the idols and altars of the Canaanites and drive them from the land.

The Lord was echoing the command He had given at Mount Sinai: "Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do

not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you”(Exodus 23:32–33). Covenant faithfulness and covenant exclusivity were non-negotiables, and this concept is the key to all that will transpire in the period of the judges and reinforces those three great themes that wind their way through the book: God’s faithfulness; the people’s faithlessness; and the consequences of compromise.

We should not misinterpret God’s requirement. He didn’t issue a challenge and leave Israel to do the best they could. That is never His method. When He gives a responsibility, He provides the resources to carry it out. He had committed Himself to giving His people victory. Their job was to trust and obey Him:

*All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God. . . The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you” (Deuteronomy 28:2, 7–8).*

So with the responsibility of unwavering obedience to the Lord came a resource of unlimited power from Him.

But what happened? The angel of the Lord put it very simply: “Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you” (Judges 2:2–3). Despite their sin and unbelief, God did not turn His back on His people. The angel did not appear to announce that, in frustration, God was terminating His covenant. The purpose of His coming was an act of grace, designed to bring the nation to radical repentance.

One of the most powerful ideas that has ever entered my mind is that the Lord will not allow His people to sin successfully. He loves us too much to allow us to indulge in compromise and sin without consequences. His love at times may be tough love, but it is love. So here the angel of the Lord spelled out the consequences they would encounter: “All right. You would not obey and drive out

the Canaanites. That was your decision, and you will have to live with it. I am not going to drive them out. I am going to leave them, and you are going to experience the natural consequences of compromise. Those people are going to drag you down, and they are going to be a constant nuisance and snare to you.”

When the people realized what God was saying, they began to weep in grief, shame, and repentance. As a result, the place receives a new name, “Bokim,” or “Weeping.” One of the most certain facts of spiritual experience is that the path of partial obedience leads to Bokim. There is no joy in halfhearted spiritual experience. A young man came to see me, and, after a short time, he began to spit out his bitterness and anger. Above all, he was angry with God because his profession of faith had brought him no joy or peace or satisfaction. Other people talked about the joy of the Lord, but his life had turned to ashes in his mouth. But as we talked, he also began to describe his involvement in sin and how he failed to spend time in God’s Word and in fellowship with the Lord and with other Christians. He was living at Bokim, the place of weeping.

The most miserable people in the world are professing believers who will not commit themselves to the Lord. Rather than experiencing the best of both worlds, they have the worst. That was true in the time of Judges, and it is true today. If as Christians we try to walk the tightrope of compromise and partial obedience, we will not know spiritual victory and God’s blessing. We will know the bitterness of defeat and frustration in our Christian lives.

But even there the grace of God is not finished. He does not just leave His people to suffer the consequences of sin. In His grace, He calls them back to wholehearted obedience and commitment to Him. The book of Judges is not simply a record of human sin and God’s judgment; it is a record of God’s love, which seeks people even in their sin.

Do you know spiritual victory in your life? Do you know God’s blessing in your life? If you don’t, perhaps you need to examine the pattern of obedience in your life. Remember: halfhearted obedience is the path of misery.