

Judges 1 - 2:5

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[0 : 0 0] Why have you done this? Why have you acted in such a way? What possessed you to do what you've done?

Why? Just explain to me why. Have you ever been posed that question or have you posed that question to others? Has there been good reason for the question to be directed to you? Indeed, I wonder how many of us have posed the question to ourselves, why did I do that?

It is a question that God posed to the Israelites following their military campaign that has as its purpose to take full possession of the promised land. We've read there in Judges chapter 2, the end of the verse, verse 2, why have you done this? Why have you done this?

It's a question that God continues to pose to His people, to the church, and to each of us as believers prone to mess up and to fall short. Why have you done this? In order to appreciate the original significance of the question, why it was asked at all, and to better understand how it is a question that God continues to pose to His people today, we need to understand what's happening at the beginning of the beginning of the book of Judges, the passage that we read just a little while ago.

Chapter 1 describes the efforts of the Israelites of Israel and its constituent tribes to take possession of the promised land, to conquer Canaan and to drive out the Canaanites as God had instructed them to do.

[2 : 0 3] What we have here is an account, a story of conquest, of a somewhat botched up conquest, it has to be said, but of conquest nonetheless. And it is a story, it is an account that will provide clues that help to explain the trials and tribulations of God's people throughout the period of the Judges and indeed beyond. If we understand what went wrong here at the very beginning of the book, we will better understand why those things that transpire in the rest of the book do indeed turn out in the manner that they did.

Now the manner in which I want us to consider this story or account of conquest is by examining the conquest from four distinct but complementary angles. I'll just lay out what these four angles from which we are going to be considering the conquest are. First of all, the reason for the conquest, and for that we'll need to take a step back and draw to bear material that we don't find in the passage that we've read, or not entirely in the passage that we've read. The reason for the conquest, but then just very briefly, the description of the conquest, which effectively is what we have in chapter 1, or certainly a description of one part of the conquest, a description of the conquest, but then very significantly, perhaps most significantly, we have the analysis of the conquest. That's given by God through the angel of the Lord in the verses that begin chapter 2, and where we have this very probing question that we've been highlighting. So the conquest analyzed by God himself and conclusions that are come to. And then finally, as time allows, to just very briefly consider the challenge of the conquest. In the light of all that we discover concerning this conquest, what is the challenge that remains and that is directed to us today? First of all then, the reason for the conquest. Now here we're taking a step back in order to see the bigger picture, at least to try and see the bigger picture. Why were the Israelites conquering Canaan at all? Now the simple answer, and yet the very fundamental answer, is that God had so determined. This was God's purpose, that his people would take possession of this land that he had promised them. In the words of God that are recorded in this very recorded in this very book, at the very beginning of chapter 1, in verse 2, the Lord answered, Judas, to go, I have given the land into their hands. God is very clear, that is why you are to take the land, because I have determined that this is to be your land. I have given the land into your hands. And we know, of course, that this goes right back to the words of God, and the promise of God directed to Abraham that we have recorded in Genesis in chapter 12, leave your country, leave your people, and go to the land I will show you. So the very

Genesis of God dealing with a people, of calling a people to himself, and entering into covenant with Abraham and those who would be his descendants, there is at the very heart of this, this promise of a land that would be given to them, that God would show them. And then as we continue through Genesis, we find Abraham within the promised land. He's left Ur of the Chaldees. He's now located, situated in the promised land, the land that was shown to him by God. And once again, he hears the voice of God. We have this recorded for us in chapter 15 of Genesis. In verse 7, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land, this land where you are now, to take possession of it. Now that was a promise given by God some 500 years at least before the events described at the beginning of the book of Judges. It's difficult to have a very precise chronology because there's certain debate as to just when all of these things happen. But we're talking hundreds of years before the promise is given and it is only now in the events related here at the beginning of Judges that the promise is brought to reality or to fruition as God's covenant people take possession of the promised land. So the ultimate reason for the conquest is simply this. It served to bring to fruition, to reality, that which God had promised when He first entered into covenant with Abraham and his descendants. But while keeping clearly in view this overarching reason that this was God's determined purpose, we can also delve a little deeper into the reasons for the conquest. We might call them the reasons for the promise. I think we can say that in the conquest, three things are happening. Three things are happening in parallel. First of all, we can say this, that God is demonstrating His love towards His people. He's demonstrating His love towards those He has called to Himself and He does so by providing for them and He does so by protecting them. He's providing for them a place they can call home. We all need a place we can call home and God here is showing the love that He bears towards His people by providing them, providing them a place they can call home. After generations as slaves in Egypt, after 40 years wandering in the desert, they will finally have a place of their own. So He shows His love by providing for them, but He also shows His love by protecting them from those who would harm and, if it were possible, destroy them. Of course, this explains the need and the very difficult for us to understand reality, but the need for the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites.

On this, God was very clear they had to drive out the Canaanites from the land. And as they say, that's difficult for us to reconcile with our 21st century sensibilities. But to live amongst or alongside the Canaanites would necessarily result in grave danger to both the Israelites' physical and spiritual well-being. And so God's concern is to protect them. He shows His love by providing for them, but also by seeking to ensure their protection. So that's one thing that God is doing, one thing that is going on in the conquest. But there's a second thing we can say, and that is that God is acting in judgment against the Canaanites. And this relates to the command just mentioned, the difficult command that the Canaanites had to be driven out of the land. Now, the conquest of Canaan, it's curious how it has become a very popular account for those who would criticize the Christian message and question the Bible. And of course, it's popular for such because here they can cast great accusations against those who hold to the Bible and say, look at this barbarity. Look at what your God sanctions and demands. This ethnic cleansing as modern terminology is imported into the pages of Scripture.

And the conquest is variously described. There are those who would perhaps more gently describe it as ethically complicated, and others who would use much more strong language, indefensibly barbaric, and many other positions in between. How could God order what some have described as the ethnic cleansing of a whole people innocently minding their own business in the land of their fathers, the original inhabitants, if you wish to call them, of a Canaan? The reality, in the light of these questions that are posed, the reality is that the conquest served as an act of judgment by God against the Canaanites. Now, that would be no more palatable, I'm sure, to many. But nonetheless, that is what the Bible clearly presents us. There are many references to this, but perhaps the most significant biblical reference to this is to be found way back at the very inauguration of God's covenant with

[10:59] Abraham recorded for us in Genesis chapter 15. Let's just quickly turn to that passage. This is hundreds of years before, but very significantly, let's listen to what God says to Abraham concerning the when of the taking possession of the land. In Genesis chapter 15, the chapter is entitled God's covenant with Abraham, and indeed, that is what it relates to us. We're going to go straight to near the end of the chapter, and listen to what God says to Abraham as it's recorded for us from verse 13.

Then the Lord said to him, Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own. This is the promised land. You're standing on it now, but your descendants won't live here, not for many generations. They will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated for 400 years, relating, of course, to the time in Egypt. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. And then notice what God says in verse 16. In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. Very especially that last phrase, the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. What does that mean? What is it that God is saying to Abraham? Why is it that Abraham and his people couldn't simply settle in the promised land there? Why do they have to go to Egypt and suffer there for generations and all of that?

And God gives the reason. He says, It would not be just for me to drive out the Amorites now because their sin has not reached full measure. But when it reaches full measure, then not only will I provide you with the land I have promised you, but in so doing I will execute judgment on the inhabitants upon whom that judgment will be a just judgment because then and only then their sin will have reached full measure.

And so we have behind the scenes, as it were, this reality of God's judgment being executed upon the Canaanites. Difficult as it is for us to process all the violence as it is described for us.

It's interesting that even the victims, as they're described for us in Judges chapter 1, acknowledge the justice of what is happening. We have this little cameo presented for us of this character Adonai Besec there from verse 4. Again, the language is barbaric, or at least that's the language that many would use to describe it. This man whose thumbs and big toes were cut off, people say, oh, isn't that horrific that God would sanction such behavior? But listen to what Adonai Besec thinks about what's happened to him. In verse 7, in the second half, or in the whole of verse 7, then Adonai Besec said, 70 kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off of pick-up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them. Just in one little snapshot, you have this reality of God's judgment being executed rightly and justly upon this individual who recognizes it to be just. And of course, that is true of the whole campaign and the whole conquest, the whole taking possession of the land. So God is demonstrating his love towards his people. He's acting in judgment toward the Canaanites. But God is also ensuring that his ultimate saving purpose for all nations is safeguarded. When God established his covenant with Abraham, he promised that all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. God's purpose was to bless the world through his people.

[14 : 56] And in the Old Testament, that was the nation of Israel. And for Israel to serve as God's channel for blessing, it needed to be established as a nation secure in and by the possession of a territory of the promised land, a territory where in God's time would be born the promised Messiah through whom the nations of the world would be blessed. That then a little bit of background to the reason for the conquest. But then more briefly, just let's think about the description of the conquest as we have it in chapter 1. This chapter of Judges provides a descriptive account of the conquest or perhaps more accurately the final campaign of the conquest. In the book of Joshua, we're given a much more extensive account of the conquest. But it's also clear that under Joshua's leadership, the job was far from complete. Indeed, in Joshua itself, in chapter 13 and verse 1, where we're told of Joshua about to die, it's interesting to note what is said, what the Lord himself recognizes. In Joshua 13 verse 1, when Joshua was old and well advanced in years, the Lord said to him, you are very old and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over. So much still to be done. The conquest was at this point still a partial conquest. Still much to be done. And chapter 1 of Judges gives us this final campaign described, the final push to secure the land following Joshua's death. And in synthesis, the chapter describes three related realities in describing this final stage of the conquest. First of all, that it was a partial conquest. But then it also describes the reasons why it was a partial conquest and also identifies the consequences of it being a partial conquest. No moral judgment is made at this point in the chapter, simply a description of these three intertwined realities. First of all, very clearly, even this final push resulted in a partial conquest. The chapter gives us a lot of detail and many battles or advances are described. Some battles are conclusive. Others only result in partial victories. There are victory gains that then seemingly are subsequently lost or the gains aren't permanently secured. We read of Jerusalem being attacked and then we read of the people not being able to dislodge the Jebusites who were in Jerusalem. So it's very much a mixed picture as to the success or otherwise of the campaign. Some tribes do very well. Really in the first half of the chapter, the picture is a much more rosy one of success of Judah and Simeon securing the land that they had been allotted. But then other tribes have mixed success. At the risk of oversimplifying, we could say that the tribes allocated the southern part of the promised land do pretty well, while those allocated the northern part, the picture for them is a lot bleaker. In summary, what is described is a partial conquest, not as had been intended by God, a partial conquest.

But then the chapter also gives us some reasons why the conquest was partial. We can quickly identify a few. We're told that it was partly due to the military might of the Canaanites. Then in verse 19, we're told that the men of Judah were unable to drive the people from the plains because they had iron chariots. It's a very matter of fact reason why they didn't secure all the land allotted to them.

We're told of the stubborn resistance of the Canaanites. Not surprisingly, really, we're told of how they were determined to remain in the land. Then in verse 27, at the end, for the Canaanites were determined to live in the land. So though the Israelites made great efforts to dislodge them, it sometimes proved unsuccessful because of this determination on the part of the Canaanites. We're told also of pragmatic compromises were adopted.