Who will be the first to go up and fight for us?

Judges 1:1-36

Key Verse: 1:1

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 Book of Judges is placed between the book of Joshua and Ruth. This book tells Israel's history from the death of Joshua to shortly before Israel's first king, Saul. Scholars think that the author of this book may be Samuel. The key verse of this book is 21:25. In those days, Israel had no king; Everyone did as he saw fit.

This book illustrates the bottomless deterioration of Israel and the background from which Israel's monarchy had to begin. It highlights the need for a shepherd king who rules the people with the Word of God and saves them from their sins and oppressors. It points to King David, a shadow, later leads us to the shepherd King and Saviour Christ Jesus

Under Joshua’s spiritual leadership, the Israelites conquered many invincible Canaan cities. Joshua allotted the lands to each tribe according to their lots. Before his death, Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges, and officials of Israel. He renewed the covenant for the Israelites before God.

After Joshua's death, however, Israel fails to complete God's command. They do not drive out completely the wicked Canaanites from the land. It results in a centuries-long cycle where Israel falls into sin and is oppressed by local enemies.

Under oppressions, they cry out for God’s deliverance. God sends them judges. These judges would free Israel from enemies’ oppression and bring them peace for their lifetime. But after each judge's death, the cycle of sin and oppression repeats. But these cycles get worse and worse.

The book of Judges spans over 325 years, recording six consecutive cycles of oppression and deliverance and the lives of twelve men judges and one woman judge.

Chapter 1 describes Israel's success or failure. The tribe of Judah experiences much success, but every other tribe fails to remove or do not drive out the Canaanites. From lesson one, we may learn about our spiritual identity as good soldiers of Christ, the importance of our obedience to God's command and driving out all the idolatry completely.

1. Judah goes first (1-20)

Look at verse 1. 1 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?" Under the leadership of General Joshua, they crossed the Jordan River by faith. They had conquered many enemies and overcome many difficulties. But they still need to fight their remaining enemies to possess the Promised Land.

They had no strong spiritual leaders like Moses and Joshua, but the Israelites came to God and asked, who should attack the Canaanites first. It sounds like they are willing to complete the conquest. On the other hand, in their questions, there is also hesitation that they do not want to fight first. Look at verse 2. 2 The LORD answered, "Judah is to go; I have given the land into their hands." The Lord tells Judah to fight and promises the land has been given into their hands.

What was the answer of the men of Judah? Look at verse 3. 3 Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We, in turn, will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them. The men of Judah invited the tribe of Simeon to fight with them, promising to assist Simeon in capturing their territory when the time comes. According to the second census in the book of Numbers, Judah became the most prominent and influential tribe, with 76,500 fighting men, while Simeon was the weakest tribe, with only 22,200 men. Also, Simeonites’ inheritance was within the land of Judah. So Judah decided to help Simeon. The men of Simeon agreed. Judah set an excellent example of faith and brotherhood. God blessed Judah. Look at verse 4. 4 When Judah attacked, the LORD gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands, and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek. They defeated 10,000 men of Canaanites and Perzeits at Bezek. God blessed Judah's faith and devotion, and Simeon's co-work.

We have two kinds of spiritual fights. One is the fight to drive out the lust, greed, and idols within us; the other is the fight outside us. It is defending and expanding God's community, including our family. Our fight is not physical but spiritual. The object of our battle is not people but evil spirits and sins. Therefore, God's Word and prayer are our essential weapons.

No one like fighting. But what if we do not fight the spiritual battle? We will surely lose our strength and come under the oppression of Satan. We should not lose our identity as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Apostle Paul told his spiritual son Timothy to join with me in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus in 2 Ti 2:3-4.

Jesus also told his disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

Each of us also fights a daily spiritual battle in our place. It is not easy at all. But we pray that we may overcome the spiritual warfare by helping and encouraging each other. We may not lose our spiritual fighting spirit. The Book of Judges gives us this lesson.

Recently Eunice and Jonathan have started learning Taekwondo. I saw clearly training can changes their attitudes in a good way. The training will make them strong physically and mentally. What I want to say is that not only parents but our children must also learn why we must do the spiritual fight and how. Our children may learn to love and obey the words of God above all else. They may learn to depend on God in prayers. The generations of Israel who were born in the wilderness experienced God. They crossed the Jordan River, conquered Jericho and Ai, and defeated the Canaanites kings. Their generation served God in their lifetime. However, the generation born in the Promised Land did not know God. This means they didn't experience the living God and so ended up serving Canaan's idols.

Missionaries Joshua, Sarah and Hannah go to the campus every week to preach the gospel to young students despite their physical weaknesses. They are great examples. Shep. Ian and Jemmie wholeheartedly serve Bible students through the Word and prayers. Shep. Daniel serves house church wholeheartedly with his son John. Although we are small, we do not settle or be complacent but fight the spiritual battle by working together in faith and praying that we may claim an inheritance by going up to unexplored lands.

Look at verses 5-7. 5 It was there that they found AdoniBezek and fought against him, putting to rout the Canaanites and Perizzites. 6 Adoni-Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes. 7 Then Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have picked up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there. The author explicitly mentions King Adoni-Bezek. He seems to have been a very notorious king in Canaan. Adoni-Bezek's confession tells us that this battle signifies God's punishment against the evil deeds of the Canaanites, and Israel was the executer of God’s judgment. God judged him according to his wickedness.

Look at verses 8-9. Next, Judah captured and wiped out Jerusalem and set it on fire. Then they fought in the hill country, the wilderness of the Negev, and the lowland. Here we see the lion-like Judah. Judah proceeds to occupy the land with power. Jacob's blessing on Judah is being fulfilled. And this foretells that the kings will come from Judah.

Look at verses 10-11. 10 They advanced against the Canaanites living in Hebron (formerly called Kiriath Arba) and defeated Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai. 11 From there they advanced against the people living in Debir (formerly called Kiriath Sepher). The men of Judah defeated the sons of Anak and took Hebron. Hebron is a historical place where Abraham was buried there with Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah. Later Hebron became the capital city of Judah, and from there, King David would reign for seven-and-a-half years before Jerusalem.

Look at verses 12-15. The author repeats this report from the book of Joshua(Joshua 15:15–19). The report explains how Caleb defeated the Anakites and gave his daughter in marriage to Othniel, the first judge of Israel, who defeated the nearby city of Debir.

Look at verse 16. The author also tells how the descendants of Moses' father-in-law moved into the region of the Negev, in southern Judah, and lived among the people.

Look at verses 17-20. 17 Then the men of Judah went with the Simeonites their brothers and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath, and they totally destroyed the city. Therefore it was called Hormah. 18 The men of Judah also took Gaza, Ashkelon and Ekron-each city with its territory. 19 The LORD was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots. 20 As Moses had promised, Hebron was given to Caleb, who drove from it the three sons of Anak. The men of Judah destroyed the city of Zephath with Simeon, as they promised. Judah captured Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron. Because the Lord was with Judah, the tribe took full possession of the hill country. But they could not drive out the occupants of the western plain because of their iron chariots.

2. They did not drive out the Canaanites(21-36)

From verse 21, Israel’s failures are recorded. Look at verse 21. The Benjamites, however, failed to dislodge the Jebusites. According to verses 8-9, Judah had already attacked and burned Jerusalem, but did not occupy Jerusalem because Jerusalem was not assigned to Judah. The tribe of Benjamin had the best chance, but they did not drive out the Jebusites residing in Jerusalem. Therefore Jebusites lived with them until King David captured Jerusalem.

Look at verses 22-26. 22 Now the house of Joseph attacked Bethel, and the LORD was with them. 23 When they sent men to spy out Bethel (formerly called Luz), 24 the spies saw a man coming out of the city and they said to him, "Show us how to get into the city and we will see that you are treated well." 25 So he showed them, and they put the city to the sword but spared the man and his whole family. 26 He then went to the land of the Hittites, where he built a city and called it Luz, which is its name to this day. The tribe of Ephraim, "the house of Joseph" (Genesis 48:3–6) destroyed and took possession of Bethel. Bethel, like Hebron, is a landmark city to the Israelites. Jacob called this place Bethel, the house of God, and prayed for a vow after he saw in his dream a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. When Ephraim attacked Bethel, spies were sent, and with the help of a Canaanite man, Bethel could be captured. This event reminds us of Rahab, a prostitute who saved the spies in Jericho, but he and his family were not converted; he built another Canaanite city and named it Luz to replace it.

From verse 27, the other tribes did not drive out the Canaanites in the north. The stories in Judges chapter 1 is all bad. None of the other tribes completely drove out the inhabitants from the land or destroyed them. Some grew strong enough to drive out them, but they spared them and took advantage of them as their forced laborers.

God's command was to drive them out entirely. It means to keep the Israelites from their evil practices and idolatry. The next chapter of Judges shows how Israel's disobedience leads to immediate consequences(Judges 2:1–5). Much of the rest of the book of Judges details the consequences of Israel's disobedience and complacency.

In conquering the land of Canaan, this seems to be ignorably small, but it turns out a big mistake: they failed to obey God's clear instructions about dealing with their enemies. God had told them not to compromise with the enemies. Exodus 23:31-33 reads: “I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. 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.” Deuteronomy 7:2-5 says: “…and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.” Also Deuteronomy 20:16-18 says: “However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them-- the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites-- as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.” It is clear to see why God commanded his people to drive the Canaanites completely out of their lives. God wanted his people to root out all their enemies for their benefit. God was deeply concerned that the Israelites might be influenced by their idol-worshiping culture. They disobeyed God by making treaties with the Canaanites (2:1-3) and violated the covenant God made with their forefathers (2:20-21).

Some tribes might have thought they could control because they forced the Canaanites into forced labor. They thought there would be a lot of benefits to use the Canaanites as a free workforce rather than destroying them. But They were not in control. Instead, their enemy was controlling them. Soon they would intermarry with the idol-worshiping people and worship their idols. This is the reason why God had told them to root out the enemies completely. Likewise if we let sins be unrepentant in our lives, then they will be snares to make us end up in idolatry, just like the nation of Israel.

The enemies we must drive out from our lives are deep rooted sin and sinful desires, including lust, greed, ambition, anger, jealousy, fear, addiction, etc. When we fail to drive out sin from our lives, the result is a gradual deterioration of our relationship with God. We have Christ Jesus our Saviour and King and good shepherd. May Jesus teach us your truthful way and help us to live as a spiritual fighter. You may give us your power and Holy spirit.

In conclusion, we live in an ungodly world in which a spiritual battle is going on. We may not lose our identity as your good soldiers of Christ. We may obey God’s Word and fight spiritual battles. May God help us to fight a good spiritual fight to the end!