



THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Catalog No. 735

Judges

First Message

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January 12, 1992

As we begin a study of the book of Judges from the Old Testament, I want to say at the outset that even though Judges is an Old Testament book, the truths we will discover here are very much New Testament truths. The Old Testament brings these before us in a way that fills out the principles we encounter in the New Testament. In particular, Judges highlights like no other book the truth of Romans chapters 6–8.

I want to begin by talking about an important concept, and that is the concept of place. “Place” brings to mind home, security, rest and identity. We all have places that are important to us. Sometimes that place is physical; it is tied to our roots, our home. A few weeks ago, Gary Vandret talked about a sentimental trip he took with his brothers to New York City. There he and his brothers visited the home where they grew up. They walked the streets where they played as children, etc. Our children’s pastor, Jane Alexander, is from the South, and she always looks forward to times with family and friends when she visits there. I’m from Nebraska, and so the heartland of our nation has a fond place in my heart. In *Gone With The Wind*, Scarlett O’Hara, as you recall, was devoted to her land, Tara. I asked my youngest daughter where her place was, and she said that now her favorite place is her beanbag chair that she got for Christmas.

Sometimes our place can be mental, a place we travel to in our minds. When I remember a familiar scene in Nebraska, I can travel back in my mind to my home. We can be transported by poetry. Consider these lines from William Butler Yeats: “I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree.” A song does the same thing for us. “There’s a place for us, somewhere a place for us,” goes the lyric from the musical *West Side Story*. There are places we go to for rest. I recall coming home from college as a young man. As soon as I entered my home I would enter into rest. No matter what was bothering me I could find comfort and rest at home, and I would sleep undisturbed. When we despair or face confusion, there are places where we go to walk, to meditate, to be quiet. When I was younger, my “place” was always the basketball court. If I could just go out and shoot hoops for an hour, I could think through all my problems and make the decisions I needed to make. Physical roots, home, land, these are all important concepts to us.

Place was very important to the nation of Israel as well. There is a great deal of material in the Old Testament about a certain place, and that place was the land that Israel entered into to possess. Much of this narrative describes how Israel was to possess and live in this land. So if we’re going to understand the Old Testament, and in particular the books of Joshua and Judges, we need to understand the idea of land as a theme that runs through the

scriptures. This will provide a wonderful visual aid to truth that the Bible has to offer.

As we open the book of Judges we see that the nation of Israel had been on a long spiritual journey. God had called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and brought him to the land of Canaan. He told him, “This will be the land that you will inherit, all you and your seed.” “I will make you a great nation,” he told Abraham. The age of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, followed. Then, one of Jacob’s sons, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt, and there the people of Israel were born. They were held in slavery for 400 years, and then God sent them a deliverer, Moses, to lead them out of Egypt. They crossed through the Red Sea, but they failed to go into the land and they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Finally, Joshua and a new generation crossed over the Jordan River and entered into the land. In the book of Judges, each tribe is dismissed to inherit their own territory, to possess the land that God had given to them. God said, “I will send hornets ahead of you that they may drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you. I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate, and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land” (Ex. 23:28-30).

Just like Israel, Christians too embark on a spiritual journey. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: “Now these things happened to them [Israel] as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Every believer in Jesus Christ embarks on a similar journey. God delivers us from Egypt, from the world system, from its way of thinking and acting. God leads us through the Red Sea and across the Jordan River. Both of these crossings picture baptism. The crossing of the Red Sea illustrates our being baptized into the death of Christ, being cut off from the world with all its attitudes and opinions. We pass from one life into another. Crossing the Jordan River also pictures baptism—being baptized into the life of Christ. It is a picture of the end of our life in Adam and the beginning of our life in Christ; the end of our reliance on ourselves and our own programs. And then, like Israel entering into the land of Canaan, we enter into the land. This pictures our entering into the life of Christ, the Spirit-filled life, life as God designed it to be, life as it can be.

A few years ago, I read the C. S. Lewis favorite, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, to my children. When we encountered that marvelous character, a lion named Aslan, I asked my children, “Whom does Aslan remind you of?” “Jesus,” they chimed. In the same way, the concept of the land in the OT reminds us of Jesus.

What I want to do this morning is highlight several comparisons between the land and Jesus. Hopefully, this will deepen our understanding of our life in Christ. The first thing I would like to say is that the land is a gift to God's people. Thirty times in Deuteronomy, God says, in effect, "I will give you this land as a free gift." Listen to this statement: "But as for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I give them to possess" (Deut. 5:31). The land emphasizes the free act of grace on Yahweh's part. Israel brought nothing to this promise. Actually the opposite was true. God told them, "Know therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people" (Deut. 9:6). The initiative was with God, and it arose out of his love for his people.

There is another idea associated with this truth about the land being a free gift: Israel could not take it or grasp it. The land was beyond her power to acquire; it could only be hers as a gift. If it was not a gift, then it would not be hers at all. A couple of incidents bear this out. In Kadesh Barnea, Israel was rebuked for her faithlessness, but she proceeded willfully, apart from Moses and apart from the Ark of the Covenant. She entered into battle and was roundly defeated. The same thing happened at Ai, when the people acted on their own initiative, in their own strength, disregarding the fact that the land was a gift, and again they were defeated. The land is a gift.

When we come to the New Testament, we find the same thing to be true about our life in Christ: Christ is a gift, and the life that he gives is a gift. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," says Romans 6:23. We read in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." Life in Christ is a gift. We don't deserve it; we don't earn it. It can't be grasped; it can't be contained; we can't put it in a bottle; it can't be had by our own strength or power. Just like the land, if we do not receive it as a gift, then we fail to experience it.

We've just celebrated Christmas, that most wonderful of holidays. All of you probably took part in that familiar scene of opening presents on Christmas morning. Usually we have one of two responses when we open up a gift. If it's something that we demanded or manipulated for, we're disappointed. We say, "That's great. I got what I wanted." But there's no joy associated with receiving the gift. But then we open a gift that's far beyond what we expected. We were given it because somebody loved us. When that happens, our heart is filled with joy and we receive it as a gift. The land tells us that we need to receive Christ in that way. We can't define it or demand it; it's a gift that we must experience and enter into.

The second thing we see about the land is that it is a blessing. God says, "So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8). There are two blessings that are associated with the land—abundance and rest. Deuteronomy talks about the abundance that we find in the land: "For the LORD your God is bringing you into a

good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you shall eat food without scarcity, in which you shall not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper" (Deut. 8:7-9). The land is described as being superior to the land of Egypt. The eyes of the Lord are on the it, and it appears to Israel as a kind of paradise. The land also represents rest, not primarily peace of mind, but physical rest, freedom from the harassment of enemies. God said, "you have not as yet come to the resting place and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you. When you cross the Jordan and live in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies around you, so that you live in security" (Deut. 12:9-10). This kind of rest is not possible in the wilderness. There the nation wandered; they were confused and attacked. But when they came into the land, they were to find rest.

We find the same truth in the New Testament concerning our life in Christ. This life is described as a blessing; more specifically, it's described as a blessing of abundance and of rest. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Paul wrote, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). Our life in Christ can be compared to a land overflowing with milk and honey, overflowing with God's goodness, mercy, love and grace. It's a land that is designed to be fruitful—overflowing with the fruits of the Spirit. And not only do we have abundance, we have rest. Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and My load is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). On a similar note, the writer of Hebrews says, "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (Heb. 4:9-10).

Consider for a moment a few of the people who encountered Jesus and the transformation they underwent as a result. The woman at the well lived a life that was anything but abundant; her life was dried up and barren. But Jesus said to her, "If you ask of me, I would have given you living water." She believed, and her life became full. There was abundance and rest where before there was need and turmoil. "Do you want to be well?" asked Jesus of the paralytic man. "Yes," the man replied, "I'd like to be well." Jesus said to him, "Then take up your pallet and walk." Someone who had no value, who was dead, suddenly came alive and his life was filled with abundance and rest. Even Nicodemus knew that he lacked something. Externally, it looked like he had everything, but he knew in his heart that something was missing. He came to Jesus by night and Jesus said to him, "You can be born again." Life in Christ is designed to be an abundant life!

The next thing we see about the land is that it must be entered by faith. This was a hard lesson for the nation of Israel to learn. The first time they came to the land they sent in spies to reconnoiter, but all of them, except for Joshua and Caleb, came back and said, "No way! The giants

are too big and too numerous; they have too many weapons. There's no way that we can enter into that land." So Israel at that point did not enter the land; they were consigned to meaningless wandering in the wilderness. The same is true when we come to the New Testament: We enter into the life of Christ by faith and faith alone.

Everywhere in scripture we are reminded that we can never accomplish the work of Christ. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12). "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). When we enter into this life in Christ, we can't reduce it to a formula. We can't put it on a pert chart, consolidate it on an efficiency model, type it into our computers, or put it on our voice mail. The life of Christ is designed not to be safe or to be lived safely. We have to enter by faith, and often when the circumstances dictate that we will be roundly defeated. If we don't, if we disbelieve, then life becomes meaningless and we wander like Israel in the wilderness. I'm reminded of the story of the airliner that was taxiing onto the runway and the pilot's voice came over the speaker: "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Welcome to Flight 222, non-stop from New York to London's Heathrow Airport. Today we will be flying at 35,000 feet, at approximately 500 miles per hour. Our flight course will take us over Canada, Greenland and Ireland. We shall be in the air about eleven hours. We are almost ready for take off—just as soon as I get up my nerve!" We wouldn't be too excited about the pilot's faith, would we? But all too often this is how we enter into our life in Christ. All too often we're just trying to get up the nerve because we want it "hard-wired," we want to find the resources within ourselves. But God says we are to enter by faith and faith alone. "The righteous man shall live by faith," says Paul.

I study with a group of men on Monday nights, and last week I got to share my life with the group, so I brought all my pictures, etc. (They were excited to see what I looked like growing up in the hippy generation.) I told them that I had come to Christ in college and that my life had been transformed in my twenties. I shared some stories about what God began to do in my life, how I was stepping out in faith, etc. Later that evening I felt rebuked. I thought to myself, "I was excited about sharing those stories, but what's happening now? The game's not over. It may be the second half, but it's not over." We must enter into the life of faith day in and day out!

The next thing we see about the land is that it is holy land: the land was where Israel met God, where they walked with God and enjoyed his company. God said, "And you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the LORD am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel" (Num. 35:34). Israel took the ark of the covenant into battle with them as a symbol that God was with them. When the temple was built, the cloud descended upon the temple and filled the house of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord lived in that house. When we come to the New Testament, however, we discover something very different: God is no longer to be found in a building; he is no longer to be found in a particular place. Now, God is in Christ, and by grace we have access to God

through Jesus. Jesus said, "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth ...that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me" (John 17:19, 21).

Years ago, when my wife was first considering becoming a Christian, she got all prepared one day to go up to the Stanford University Chapel, a place she had been many times as a child. Before she could get there she was sitting quietly, thinking and praying. Suddenly, she had a distinct feeling that God was coming to her in a very real way. Further, she felt that somebody was with him. God said to her, "This is my Son. I want you to get to know him." This was how she came to Christ. She came to the Father through the Son. She didn't find God in the Stanford Chapel; she found him in the Son.

The land is holy land. Christ is our holy land, and that is where we meet God.

And the land demands a specific lifestyle. God said, "These are the statutes and ordinances which you shall be careful to do in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess" (Deut.12:1). He told them, "You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes" (Lev. 18:3). Israel was not at liberty to set its own behavioral guidelines. Residence in the land meant paying attention to what was fitting activity in the land. Again, in the New Testament, the same principle holds true about our life in Christ. Our relationship with him demands a lifestyle of obedience. We must learn to live not as the world lives, to not walk as the Gentiles walk. We're in the world but we're not of the world. We're to put off the old man and put on the new man. There's a way of living that comes with this life in Christ. Jesus put it this way, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

Finally, there's one other parallel that I would like to make that's particularly appropriate when we encounter the book of Judges: the land needs to be possessed. Yes, the land is a gift, but when Israel enters it, there are enemies living there. The nation learns that the land must be possessed. God said, "And I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand and you will drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not live in your land, lest they make you sin against Me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you" (Exodus 23:31-33). This is the problem that arises when we come to the book of Judges. The book of Joshua is a book of victory, a book of conquest, but in Judges we discover a generation that does not know the Lord and they fail to drive out the inhabitants of the land. The key to the whole book is chapter 21, verse 25: "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*" They did what was right in their own eyes, not what was wrong in their own eyes; what was right in their eyes, but wrong in God's eyes. They had to learn the principle that even though the land was a gift, it had to be possessed.

Again, the same thing holds true of our life in Christ. This life is a gift, but it must be possessed. When we enter into this life we enter into the kingdom of God, but we still have an enemy to contend with: it is the flesh. We learn from the New Testament that the flesh sets its desire against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh so that we may not do the things that we please. Thus we learn in the book of Judges that victory in the Christian life is not automatic. Even though no enemy can stand up to the power of Christ, we still must enter into the battle. Although the inheritance is deeded to us, it must be conquered in battle. Our enemies just don't get up and walk away; they have to be defeated. Even though we might know great truths about God, and great truths about deliverance, it doesn't mean that we will automatically get to enjoy them. The land needs to be possessed.

We could talk all morning about the land and how it pictures for us our life in Christ. As W. D. Davies wrote, "The land has been Christofied." Even though the land was very real and very much physical for Israel, I hope that it allows you to see the richness and depth of our spiritual life in Christ. This is why the book of Judges is so relevant and so practical to our us.

As we bring this study to a close, I want you to consider something: Where is your land? Where is your place? On what is your blessing and your security founded? What do you look to for abundance? What are you trying to establish? Where are you building? If you're like me, all too often your focus is lacking. Like Israel, we're content to wander in the wilderness because we're fearful of entering into the land. We have decided to remain on the other side of the Jordan and settle for second best because that place looks good enough for us. How many of you, like I do, think on occasion, "If I could just get out of the Silicon Valley rat race, sell my house and get five acres someplace, then my life would be good. I could find abundance, rest and security"? But that kind of thinking blurs our focus and we fail to enter into the life of Christ.

The scripture tells us that Christ is our land, our place. One day this life of Christ will lead us into a new heaven and a new earth and we'll have new bodies. We'll be just like Christ. And the scripture says that we can enter into that life now! When we think about it, we make choices in different areas every day of our lives to enter into life. Every day we decide consciously or subconsciously whether we're going to enter into life. Take our jobs, for instance. We can hang our heads, complain, and be unenthusiastic about our work, or we can work well and enter into the community of people we work with.

We have the same opportunity in our schools. We can decide to just drop our kids off at school in the mornings and pick them up in the afternoon, or we can decide to enter into the community of the school—go to the activities, meet the teachers, be involved with the parents of our children's friends, etc. We can leave our children off for sports activities or we can meet the coach, talk to parents on the sidelines, and enter into the community that surrounds these particular events. We make this choice in our neighborhoods. Do we have a barrier in front of our homes that says, "Do not enter," or do people feel free to stop by and say hello? Do we look the other way when somebody walks by on our street or do we try to enter a conversation and find out who they are? Do we sit in the back yard or do we at times sit in the front yard so that we can meet people? What do we do with friends? Do we decide to attach ourselves to people and find out about them, what's in their hearts, what they're going through, or do we play it safe, stay home and watch videos? What about church? Do we zip out of here on Sunday mornings and go home to watch the ball games, or do we make a choice to really enter into the community of faith that God has surrounded us with? Are we involved with people? Are we a part of people's lives? These are the kinds of decisions we have to face in our life in Christ. Do we really enter into this life, or do we just stand at the boundary?

Do you want a land? Do you want a place? If you do, you will find that his name is Jesus. He is a land flowing with milk and honey. His life is a gift, and it is filled with abundance and rest. The book of Judges will challenge us to enter into the land, to enter into his life, to be filled with the Spirit by faith.

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