**Israel Fights the Remaining Canaanites**

A study of our nation’s presidents over the last several decades reveals how our leaders have been elected due to their perceived qualities to deal with the challenges of a particular time in history. After the laissez-faire policies of Harding and Coolidge, the country was seeking a president who would use the power of government to help the common man. After the harsh years of the Great Depression, it is not surprising that FDR won an unprecedented 4 elections. Following WW2, Dwight Eisenhower was seen as a natural to take office since he had successfully led the military during the war. As the country entered the 1960’s, a youthful John Kennedy seemed best equipped to deal with the inequality that needed to be addressed. Lyndon Johnson continued Kennedy’s policies but his handling of the war in Vietnam led to Nixon’s victories in 1968 and 1972 after which Jimmy Carter was seen as a moral leader after the corruption of Nixon. Rampant inflation and the Iranian hostage crisis resulted in Ronald Reagan and George Bush presidencies for 12 years. A recession in 1991 brought us Bill Clinton for 8 years then George Bush for 8 years following the scandal plagued Clinton. With another economic downturn rivaling the Depression, history was repeated as the country lost confidence in the Republicans and turned to Barak Obama. Donald Trump was seen as a populist leader in contrast to the elitist Democrats in 2016 but lost in 2020 amid the Covid crisis. This week we begin our study of the Book of Judges. As we discussed last week, unlike Joshua following Moses, there was no succession plan in place to appoint a leader after Joshua. This book covers the events following the death of Joshua and record the actions of 12 judges over a period estimated to be 300-350 years (see 1st Kings 6:1 and Acts 13:20). God sent these judges in response to the needs of Israel at the time He sent them. As we will see in the coming weeks, some of the judges were righteous and some were quite flawed and after Deborah, there seemed to be a gradual decline in the quality of the judges in keeping with the gradual decline in the peoples’ adherence to God’s laws.

At the beginning of chapter 1, the Israelites inquired of God which tribe would be sent to fight the Canaanites. This was after the death of Joshua when the tribes had identified the borders of their land but the occupants had not been driven out. The tribe of Judah was selected by God and they enlisted the aid of Simeon which was natural since that tribe was located within the borders of Judah. The 2 tribes were initially successful, defeating forces at Bezek, Jerusalem, Hebron and Debir then additional cities in the desert and hill country but were unable to dislodge people from the plains who had chariots.

The rest of the chapter describes the mixed success of the tribes of Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulon, Asher, Naphtali and Dan. A common theme was they were unable to completely drive out the Canaanites from the land, choosing to co-exist with them rather than redoubling their efforts. Ironically, the Israelites often forced them into slavery, enjoying the benefit of free labor but subjecting themselves to the influence of idol worship. It seems that the lure of profits obscured God’s command to drive the Canaanites out of the land. David Guzik noted that it was God’s intent to drive out the Canaanites gradually over time which would have require hard work from the Israelites. They seemed to have the attitude that if they could not acquire the land easily, they did not want it at all.

The lack of a national leader as Moses and Joshua were probably contributed mightily to the failures of the various tribes. After the death of Joshua and his contemporaries, a new generation arose which knew neither God nor what He had done for Israel (see 2:10 and 17:6). Not having a central leader also resulted in individual tribes fending for themselves rather than joining together (see Ecc. 4:12).

We can learn important lessons about the character of God in the book of Judges. As we will see in next several chapters, when the people repented and asked Him to rescue them, He always responded. He heard their pleas and sent them a leader. Adam Clarke wrote: *“There is, however, one light in which the whole book may be viewed, which renders it invaluable; it is a most remarkable history of the longsuffering of God towards the Israelites, in which we find the most signal instances of his justice and mercy alternately displayed; the people sinned, and were punished; they repented, and found mercy. Something of this kind we meet with in every page. And these things are written for our warning. None should presume, for God is JUST; none need despair, for God is MERCIFUL.”*

Finally, I wonder if, like the Israelites, we are experiencing a gradual decline in the quality of our leaders (one of whom was expelled from Congress last week) in keeping with the decline in our worship of God.