

THE STORY OF SUCCESSFUL FAILURES (Judges 1:1-2:5)

Rico Tice is a pastor in England. He tells about a time that he was at a funeral when an elderly lady came up to him and asked, “Rico, do you know what failure is?”

He replied, “No – tell me.”

“Failure,” she answered, “is being successful at the things that don’t matter.”

After telling that story, Rico added, “Success is hearing, ‘Well done’ from the only lips that matter. Failure is being successful at the things that don’t truly matter at all.”

Based on that definition, are you a success or a failure? Are you succeeding in the things that truly matter, or are you spending your time pursuing those things that are inconsequential and unimportant when viewed in the light of eternity?

This morning we are beginning a new journey. We are going to examine a book I have never before studied. I looked in my sermon file and discovered that in almost 40 years of preaching, I have only preached from this book twice, and the last time was almost 17 years ago. The book to which I refer is the seventh book of the OT, the Book of Judges. We are going to travel through Judges at a far different pace than we did in Philipians or the Gospel of Matthew. In those books, we looked at just a few verses each week. We are going to put on our hiking boots, pick up the pace, and stride through Judges a chapter or two at a time.

Judges is quite different from Joshua, the book that precedes it. Joshua is a book mostly of victory as the people began to take possession of the land God has promised them. Joshua is named after Moses’ successor. God had chosen Joshua to step into the role Moses had occupied for 40 years. Can you imagine trying to fill Moses’ sandals? That would be a daunting task. That is why God repeatedly commanded Joshua in Joshua 1 to be strong and courageous.

Joshua was both of those, and the people followed him just as they had followed Moses. He led the people into the Promised Land, and by God’s direction, they forcibly took control of the cities and towns of the land God was giving them. The Book of Joshua chronicles the great success the people experienced.

The Book of Judges is much different. Joshua dies, and there is no successor. Instead of following a man, they are meant to follow God, but they don’t. They become satisfied with the limited success they have achieved. Instead of finishing the job they had begun, they become complacent and down-right disobedient. They don’t do what God directed them to do.

There is always a high price to pay when we disobey God because God doesn’t look the other direction when we willfully choose to rebel against Him.

Throughout Judges we see this continually repeated cycle of disobedience, judgment, repentance, restoration.

We begin our study by looking at Judges 1:1-2:5. We won’t look at every verse or even read every verse in our text this morning, but I encourage you to do so at home. Our goal is to get the flow and draw God’s message to us from it.

The chapter starts out on an encouraging note but quickly goes downhill from there.

Look at the first two verses. The story starts out well. Even though Joshua isn't there to tell them what to do, the people know the task to take the land has not yet been completed, and they go to God for their next assignment. Each tribe has been allotted a portion of land, and it is their job to take control of the land that was apportioned to them.

The people ask a simple question, and God gives them a straight-forward answer, "Judah, you are the lead-off batter. You are up first."

Look at v. 3. The tribe of Judah says to the tribe of Simeon, "Why don't your fighting men go with us, and we will help you when it is your turn?" Some people object to this decision, but it doesn't seem to have bothered God.

Look at v. 4. Dale Davis points out, "Each time Israel acted in some sort of tribal unity Yahweh granted victory." He pointed out, ". . . the unity of Israel seems to be one of the author's primary concerns . . . throughout the book he depicts Israel's unity as progressively deteriorating—and with it, Israel's fortunes."

It is a good thing when God's people help one another. There needs to be more of that in the Church today. Other churches are not our competition; they are our brothers and sisters. We are to assist one another in fulfilling the commission that is ours.

After a string of victories, things took a turn for the worse. Look at v. 28. This verse is a damning indictment against God's people. God never told His people to subjugate the Canaanites. He told them to annihilate them, to destroy them completely.

Some people have a real problem with that. They ask, "How could a God of love command His people to kill men, women, and children?" They can't believe God would give such an order. The Bible, however, is clear as to what the Israelites are to do, and while no apologies are made, a rationale is given. Look at Deuteronomy 7:1-5.

Commenting on v. 28, Davis wrote that the people of Israel were a pragmatic success, but they were spiritual failures. That is where I get the title for today's message: "The Story of Successful Failures."

I am convinced that there are many Christians today who are successful according to the world's standard of success, but they have failed miserably in living a God-approved life. Many believe that success means being dominate in the field they have chosen. In God's eyes, success means being obedient in every part of life—in your home life, your work life, your church life, your thought life, your community life. He has a will for you in how you use your time, how you use your money, how you use your abilities. Dominance is not an acceptable substitute for obedience.

From our text, let me make four observations concerning the story of successful failures.

Successful Failures Rely on Their Plans Rather Than God's Promises

God said, "Destroy them," but, He assured His people that He would be with them, and He would give them the victory. Somewhere along the way, the people thought, "God wants us to be in control. Wouldn't it be better if we let them live and make them our slaves? That way, we don't have to do all the work ourselves. Besides, it's a real hassle to try to root them all out. More than that, we are pretty good at fighting up

here in the mountains, but they've got the advantage on the plains. Let's just stay up here in the hills where we can exert our control."

Notice v. 19. The problem was not that the Canaanites were better equipped than the Israelites. They were better equipped, but that wasn't the real problem. The real problem is that the Israelites did not trust the promise they were given. Look back at Joshua 17:16-18. Superior technology is no match for God's superior power.

It occurs to me that we, the people of God, are in a battle. We are in a battle for the soul of our nation. We keenly feel that we are outgunned, that the enemy is better equipped. That may very well be true. We, however, have something the enemy does not have. It would be more correct to say that we have Someone. We have the Spirit of God who lives in us and who goes before us.

Let me take you back to 1975. That year two Christian men had a meeting. Their names were Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade and Loren Cunningham, the founder of YWAM (Youth with a Mission). God had placed something on the heart of both men. Together, they formulated a God-given, world-changing strategy. They were convinced that it was the job of the Church to bring about a godly change to this nation and every nation by reaching the seven spheres, or mountains, of societal influence. In order to truly transform a nation with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there are seven mountains within a culture that must be reached for Christ. They are:

- Religion
- Family
- Education
- Government
- Media
- Arts/ Entertainment
- Business

As the Church, we cannot confine ourselves to the spheres of religion and family alone and expect to change the world. We must infiltrate, participate, and bring our influence to bear upon all the other parts of culture.

We need Christians working in education, from writing textbooks to overseeing schools either as principals or school board members.

We need Christian politicians and government officials letting their Christian convictions guide them in their work.

We need Christians actively at work in all the various forms of media. We need believers at the helm of TV news programs, publishing newspapers, writing stories that actually report the news rather than pushing an agenda.

We need Christians involved in Arts and Entertainment. We need Christian writers, actors, directors in the various forms of the performing arts. I have heard the question asked, "Why should the devil have all the best music." The truth is that he doesn't. Christians need to write and perform the best music, produce the best movies, put on the best plays, and air the best television shows.

We need Christian business men and women for whom the almighty dollar is **not** the bottom line. They care about their employees, and the consumer, and the environment. They act with honesty and integrity, and they do what they can to give back to the community.

We can't stay in the Church building and win the world for Christ. We must get out and get involved.

One of the characters that reappears in Judges 1 is Caleb. Caleb had long been faithful. If you go all the way to when Moses sent twelve men to spy out the Promised Land and bring back a report, only Caleb and Joshua said, "We can do it. The LORD will give us the victory." The other ten spread fear and said, "There are giants in the land. We look like grasshoppers compared to them. There is no way we can hope to take the land from them."

The people believed the ten rather than the two. As a result, God made to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until that entire generation died out. Joshua and Caleb, however, were the only adults who were allowed to enter the land. Caleb was promised a certain hill country. When it was time, Caleb went to Joshua. Caleb was now 85 years-old, but he claimed he was as strong now as he was way back then. In Joshua 14:12 we read Caleb's request of Joshua: "Now, therefore, give me this mountain." Caleb wanted permission to go up and take the land he had been promised. "Give me this mountain."

God has a mountain for you to take in concert with other believers. It might be government or business or media. It will be one of the seven mountains of cultural influence. Ask God to show you your mountain. With God's help, go take it for Him.

We routinely ask kids, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" That is a terrible question. It implies that it is up to them to make that choice. Instead, we should ask, "What do you think the Lord wants you to be when you grow up?"

Choose His promise rather than your plans.

Successful Failures Refuse to Follow the Good Models God Gives Them

Before things fall apart in Judges 1, there are some good things that happen. Judah captures the city of Bezek. Then, they go to Jerusalem and capture it. That victory, however, was short-lived because we read in v. 21 that the Jebusites had retaken the city, and they would keep it for a few hundred years until David captured it and made it his capital.

Look at what happens in vv. 11-13. You might say that Achsah was the ancient version of a trophy wife. You might be offended by the way Caleb used his daughter as an incentive. The truth of the matter is that by doing what he did, Caleb ensured that his wife would have a noble husband, and she would be proud to be married to a war hero. She could have done much worse.

The point of the story is that Caleb was sold out to the work God had given His people.

We find another inspiring tidbit in our passage. Look at v. 16. Who were the Kenites? We can answer that first by saying who they weren't. They weren't Jews. They were the

descendants of Moses' father-in-law. That means they were his wife's people. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro was said to be a priest in Midian. That means his wife and her people would have been Midianites or possibly, Edomites. Regardless, they chose to stay and go with the people of Judah.

I am reminded of Ruth. Although Ruth became the great-grandmother of David, she was not a Jew either. She was from Moab. Early on in the book that bears her name, Ruth tells her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, "Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

Caleb and the Kenites were strong examples of faithfulness and obedience. Interestingly, even Caleb wasn't Jewish by birth. He, too, was a Kenite.

The writers of Scripture often shamed the Jews by holding up non-Jewish people as examples of those who did the right thing. Jesus did that in the parables He taught. In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes a hated Samaritan the hero of the story while the Jewish priest and the Jewish Levite are the uncaring clods who don't want to get involved.

Jesus praises the Syrophenician woman and a Roman soldier as being people of great faith. It was the tax collector not the Pharisee who left the temple justified, right with God.

What model has God given you? Are you following that model? Did you have a godly mother, a godly father? Sometimes, God gives us a model in our own children or grandchildren. They model for us simple faith and trust.

In Matthew 18 the disciples asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" In the very next verse we read, "And calling to Him a child, He put him in the midst of them" (v.2). He goes on to tell them, "Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3).

According to Jesus, to go to heaven, children don't have to become like adults. No, adults have to become like children. They are our model for absolute trust.

If you tell a child something, even if it is outlandish, he believes you. Adults, on the other hand, are sophisticated, worldly wise. We have learned to doubt what we hear until we have good evidence that what we have heard is so.

We need to take God at His word as a child would. If God says, "I will protect you," we should believe Him. If God says, "I will provide for you," we should trust Him.

When we don't learn from the models God gives us, we become successful failures.

Successful Failures Rebel from Doing the Task God Has Assigned Them

The real turning point in this chapter starts in v. 21. We are told what the tribe of Benjamin did not do. We are told beginning in v. 22 that while the house of Joseph experienced some success, we get a sense of uneasiness. The author tells a story that is reminiscent of the fall of Jericho. In that story, Rahab, a resident of Jericho befriends Jewish men who have come to spy out the city. They repay her by promising to rescue her, and to protect both her and her family when Jericho falls. When that happens, Rahab joins the Jewish people and lives with them as one of them. She even becomes a direct

ancestor of Jesus.

In this story, however, while there is a man who provides crucial information that leads to the overthrow of his city, and while he is spared, he doesn't throw in his lot with the Jewish people. Instead, he goes off and starts another city, giving it the same name, and it is peopled by those who are enemies of God's people (v. 26).

Daniel Block wrote: "In v. 21 the tone changes, becoming increasingly pessimistic as the narrator observes what was to be a triumphant campaign of conquest turns into an expedition of compromise." Don't let your life be an expedition of compromise.

The speed of this compromise hastens beginning in v. 27 and running through the end of the chapter as we are told what each tribe did not do. Instead of driving out the inhabitants, they made an uneasy peace with them. We will see later how that ungodly compromise becomes worse and worse until the Israelites live and act just like the wicked people who lived among them.

The NT warns us, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals'" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Who has the attention of your eyes? Who has the attention of your ears? Who has the attention of your heart?

You can become a successful failure in a heartbeat by surrounding yourself with the wrong influence.

Successful Failures React Incorrectly to God's Announced Judgment

Look with me at the first five verses of Judges 2. There is debate as to exactly who this messenger is in this chapter. Some believe that it is the Son of God who comes with this divine message. What is most important is not the identity of the messenger but the content of the message.

Basically, God is saying, "You have disobeyed me again and again. Now, you are going to reap the consequences of your disobedience." God's judgment most often comes in allowing us to reap the consequences of our actions. If you continue to smoke, you might get cancer. Don't blame God. If you live an immoral lifestyle, you may get an STD. Don't blame God. If you don't give up your alcohol or drug addiction, your life may crumble around you. Don't blame God.

God is saying, "You want to make the Canaanites your slaves? Don't blame me when they become your masters."

How did the people respond? According to v. 4, they cried. Their tears, however, appear to have been crocodile tears because they didn't change their behavior. They didn't repent.

We read in 2 Corinthians 7:10, "For godly grief produces a repentance to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."

Successful failures don't repent. They just feel bad about the situation.

You and I would not need to think hard or look long to be able to list the internal problems our country faces—the fracturing of families, the rise of crime, racial tension, and on and on we could go.

President Franklin Roosevelt once said, “I doubt if there is a problem—political or economic—that will not melt before the fire of a spiritual awakening.”

Awakening in the culture will not come until revival in the church happens. Revival in the church starts with me, and it starts with you. I challenge you to pray this prayer: “Lord, do whatever you must do to me so that you can do whatever you want to do in me and through me.”

If you will be faithful in praying that prayer, God will make you into the success He wants you to be because you will succeed in the things that matter.