

“IF AT FIRST YOU DON’T SUCCEED...”

Judges 20:23-48

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Sometimes our spiritual journeys are best approached like any successful athlete approaches his sport. A good baseball player or golfer knows the importance of mental discipline and focus during a game or a match. The good athlete knows that not every at bat is going to be successful, nor every shot a great one. There are going to be strike outs and there are going to be shots hit out of bounds. Someone once said that golf is ten percent ability and ninety percent mental. You can’t let your last at bat or previous shot, whether good or bad, control what you do next. If you hit a good shot, and you don’t show the same focus on the next shot but instead nonchalantly hit the ball, more than likely it will not be as good as the previous one. Every at bat, every shot, is going to require the ability to refocus and do what is necessary at the moment under different conditions, to perform well. You don’t always approach an at bat or a shot the same way. Different conditions require different approaches.

In a similar way in our spiritual walk with Jesus, we have to be intentional and focused about what we are doing. Take the simple example of going to church. If church has been a part of your life for some time, then you can get in your car, drive to church by rote, walk in, sit down, and sing, but not really be engaged in true worship. You are just stepping up to the plate and not considering what is different in your life or your relationship with Christ this week in comparison to last week. Do you come to intentionally listen for God’s voice to speak to you about what took place last week or what is going to happen in the week ahead? Do you come to intentionally worship and praise God for specific successes and blessings? Or do you just show up?

Another piece of wisdom that applies to our walk with Jesus is knowing that some days you will fail. And when you do, this old adage comes into play: “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again!” In our walk with Jesus, there can be seasons when it seems like we take one step forward and two steps backward, before we start moving more consistently in a forward direction. Sometimes painful failure is allowed by Jesus to become part of our lives, because through it He brings about the transformation of spiritual character

that is necessary for us to be better ambassadors of Christ. In our continuing study of **Judges 20**, we will see how God uses failure to bring us back to Him and how important it is to follow His lead, direction, and correction. We find ourselves in the midst of a major failure in the history of Israel's relationship with God. **Judges 19-21** highlights the fate of one of the tribes of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin.

In **Chapter 19**, we read about the horrific gang rape and murder of an Israelite woman by some perverted men from the tribe of Benjamin. In response to the killing of his wife, her Levite husband followed up that horror by an equally despicable mutilation of her corpse. Enraged by the attack upon his wife, he took her body home, cut it up into twelve pieces, and sent one piece to each tribe in Israel to make a statement about the injustice he had suffered.

In **chapter 20**, where we find ourselves this morning, we see the response of the eleven other tribes of Israel. They, with one mind, wanted revenge and the purging of evil from the tribe of Benjamin. After they were asked to turn over the wicked men to be dealt with, according to God's Law, the Benjamites refused, and decided instead to stand beside the immoral men and defend them. As a result, a war began between the tribe of Benjamin and the other eleven tribes of Israel. In the second half of **Judges 20**, we read of three battles in this war. Last time, we stopped after reading about the first battle. Let's begin our study this morning by rereading the outcome of the first battle and continuing through to the end of the chapter.

Beginning with **verse 17**, we read:

¹⁷Then the men of Israel besides Benjamin were numbered, 400,000 men who draw the sword; all these were men of war. ¹⁸Now the sons of Israel arose, went up to Bethel, and inquired of God and said, "Who shall go up first for us to battle against the sons of Benjamin?" Then the LORD said, Judah shall go up first."

¹⁹So the sons of Israel arose in the morning and camped against

Gibeah. ²⁰The men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel arrayed for battle against them at Gibeah. ²¹Then the sons of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and felled to the ground on that day 22,000 men of Israel. ²²But the people, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and arrayed for battle again in the place where they had arrayed themselves the first day.

What a shock this must have been to the eleven tribes that had numbered 400,000 soldiers, to be so soundly defeated by a hugely outnumbered army of 26,000 soldiers. If you were one of the 400,000 soldiers, you would rightfully be asking the question, “Why did God tell us to send Judah up first, only to allow us to be humiliatingly defeated?” Later, they would learn the lesson why. It had to do with their having already made up their minds as to what they were going to do without ever consulting God or asking Him, “Should we go to war against our brethren? If not, what should we do?”

They would learn what the Israelites would learn again and again at the hands of their enemies for several hundred years to come: When they refused to seek out God’s direction first before acting, God would use their enemies the Canaanites, Midianites, Philistine, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Babylonians to be His ordained instruments of discipline and instruction.

But now they remained understandably confused. There were two group reactions. According to **verse 22**, immediately following their defeat, the first-mentioned group reaction came from those of the “glass half full,” “stay positive no matter what” crowd. They got up, dusted each other off, and said, “Let’s go get ’em! Don’t let the last inning where we committed six errors bother us. As long as we have one more out, we still have a chance.”

But then, beginning with **verse 23**, we heard from another group, the pragmatists. They were the majority. We read, “**The sons of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and inquired of the Lord, saying, ‘Shall we again draw near for battle against the sons of my brother**

Benjamin?””

These Israelites were emotionally demoralized. They wept before the Lord, and, I believe, they half-heartedly asked the Lord if they should attack again. But they were asking the Lord a question that they, themselves, had already answered. According to **verse 22**, their military leaders had already arrayed themselves for battle again. They had already determined to go to war.

Too often we make the same mistake in being half-hearted about our requests, and God knows it. We know the answer we are only going to ascribe to, and as a result, we can't hear God's answer.

I'm reminded of a scenario I have heard too many times, concerning the way some of us go about a major purchase. Take for instance, a home. We've looked for the house, we've placed a bid, we've applied for the loan, we've filled out the paperwork, and then, right before signing our name, we say, "Lord, is this the house You want me to buy? If no, then close the door."

Now, let's be honest. Can we expect the Lord to answer that prayer in that context? Are we, at that moment, really looking for or able to even hear God, if He were to say "No?" Honestly, I don't think so. It has nothing to do with God's not speaking loud enough, because at that point, our hearts are hardened by our own desires, and our ears are deaf to His voice. Typically, at that moment, we want what we want, as long as it falls short of being dishonest. It's been my observation that quite often, God permits us to go forward with our ill-fated desires, and sometimes we learn a painful but powerful lesson along the way. What's the lesson? Start all projects, all purchases, major and minor, by seeking the Lord's direction. He loves to partner with His children for their best interests.

So it was for Israel that day. They didn't inquire about what their strategy should be. God, in turn, answered affirmatively but didn't volunteer any information that had not been seriously sought after.

And the Lord said, "Go up against him." ²⁴Then the sons of Israel came against the sons of Benjamin the second day. ²⁵Benjamin went

out against them from Gibeah the second day and felled to the ground again 18,000 men of the sons of Israel; all these drew the sword.

The results, this time, were not much better than that of the first encounter. The victims numbered 18,000 Israelite warriors. Again, not a word was said about Benjamite casualties.

The eleven tribes now discovered, from this repeated defeat, that the Lord had withdrawn His grace and was disciplining them. Their sin, however, did not consist in the fact that they had begun the war. Their sin was their independent spirit that led them to live as though God need not be involved. May I remind you what both Jesus and the Apostle Paul have to say to us concerning our need to seek after His presence, direction, and power in all things? Jesus said, **“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing,” John 15:5.** The Apostle Paul states of himself and all other Christians, **“Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,” 2 Corinthians 3:5.**

With each successive defeat, the Israelites became more concerned about getting God’s guidance. They had previously just asked Him to bless their plans with success. But with these two defeats, God was showing them that their outnumbering the enemy alone did not guarantee victory. They needed to continually seek after God’s direction, obey His instructions no matter how culturally outside the box they may at first appear, and trust God to accomplish the impossible, as he did for Gideon’s three hundred back in **Judges 7:7.**

The record of the third battle begins with **verse 26.** In these next two verses, we have the spiritual staging that is necessary to live victoriously in life.

Then all the sons of Israel and all the people went up and came to Bethel and wept; thus they remained there before the Lord and

fasted that day until evening. And they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. ²⁷The sons of Israel inquired of the Lord (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, Aaron's son, stood before it to minister in those days), saying, "Shall I yet again go out to battle against the sons of my brother Benjamin or shall I cease?" And the Lord said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand."

Look more closely with me at the writer's detailed remarks in these verses that reflect, for the first time, the eleven tribes' genuine repentance and seeking after God's will and direction.

Different from the two previous attempts of half-heartedly seeking after God, the writer for the first time says, "**All the sons . . . all the people**" came before the Lord, realizing that their covenantal relationship with God was in doubt.

Next, we read that they all "**Wept . . . fasted . . . offered offerings.**" The intensity of the weeping had increased by the numbers. A spontaneous fast due to the grief of the loss of 40,000 warriors and the offerings signal genuine repentance.

There are two types of offerings mentioned here, both of them voluntary, not mandatory. "**Burnt offerings**" signified complete surrender to God based on **Leviticus 1:1-17**. This presupposes their admission to the sin of having not lived as those who should have been surrendering completely to the Lord. "**Peace offerings**" signified a desire to restore communion with the Lord based on **Leviticus 3:1-17**. Together, these two offerings point to a heartfelt desire to genuinely submit to and do whatever the Lord directed.

Different than previously, the writer mentions four times in three verses that they called out to “**the LORD**” using His covenantal, personal, and intimate name “Yahweh,” signifying their recognition that they as a people belonged to no other God. He was their God and they were His people, living in Israel to bring glory to Him, to worship the Giver and not the comfortable lifestyle He had given.

Then there is the mention of Phineas. It’s interesting that Phineas is the only person named in **Judges 19-21**. Why? As I said last week, Phineas was the grandson of Aaron, Moses’ brother. As a young man, wandering in the wilderness, his resolute action saved the nation of a plague, which had been caused by sin. His efforts won him a unique commendation from the Lord in **Numbers 25**. He had taken a prominent role in the campaign against Midian in **Numbers 31**. He took an equally prominent part when the tribes east of Jordan were suspected of disunity and apostasy in the erection of their memorial altar in **Joshua 22**. I suspect that his name is the only name mentioned in these three chapters for two reasons: First, because he was one of the very few people in leadership who was living righteously during this era. He was one of Israel’s truly great and devoted men, who became the Promised Land’s next generation High Priest. Secondly, his name is mentioned to give us a chronological marker. These events took place at the very beginning of the period of the Judges, before the dust had even settled from the conquest of the land.

Apparently the defeats of the previous two battles had the desired effect. The people returned to absolute dependence upon God. In the seemingly disastrous events of those recent battles, we see God working behind the scenes. He had been preparing Benjamin for their downfall while bringing the sons of Israel to the place where he could bless them.

In response to their heartfelt repentance and adoration of the Lord, this time He assured them a victory: “**Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.**”

With the writer’s silence on the reaction of the Benjamites to their first two victories, one may imagine a growing sense of confidence among their ranks, if not a sense of invincibility. But little did they know what lay ahead.

From this point of the story, the chapter divides into two parts, much like the way the opening two chapters of **Genesis** break down. **Genesis 1** contains a general explanation of God's creation of the earth, and **Genesis 2** a more detailed report about the creation of man and the garden. Here, in **verses 29-36a**, there is a general report of the battle; after that is a more specific, detailed narrative. Note that the writer spends more time explaining the events of this battle than he has the previous two put together! In doing so, He emphasizes God's desire to bless and to bring victory to our lives if we will surrender fully to Him and ignore the voices of the world, doing only what He says, no matter how politically incorrect your lifestyle may be.

In reading these two reports, we see that the writer carries us on a wave that climaxes the moment that the Benjamites realize their tribe is just about to be totally wiped off the face of the earth. We read:

²⁹So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah. [Remember, this is the town where the gang rape and murder of the woman took place.] **³⁰The sons of Israel went up against the sons of Benjamin on the third day and arrayed themselves against Gibeah as at other times. ³¹The sons of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city, and they [the sons of Benjamin] began to strike and kill some of the people as at other times, on the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the field, about thirty men of Israel. ³²The sons of Benjamin said, "They are struck down before us, as at the first." But the sons of Israel said, "Let us flee that we may draw them away from the city to the highways."**

Get the picture: Thirty soldiers from the eleven tribes set themselves up in an

open field, baiting the Benjamites to come and get them. When they were spotted by the Benjamites, the thirty soldiers ran, and the Benjamites started chasing them. **“³³Then all the men of Israel arose from their place and arrayed themselves at Baal-tamar; and the men of Israel in ambush broke out of their place, even out of Maareh-geba [the meadow of Gibeah.]”** While chasing after the thirty, the Benjamites didn’t see the 10,000 Israel soldiers coming out of hiding, cutting off the Benjamites from their city. The Hebrew verb **“broke out,”** describing the onrush of the 10,000 Israeli soldiers, is used of water gushing forth like a flash flood.

³⁴When ten thousand choice men from all Israel came against Gibeah, the battle became fierce; but Benjamin did not know that disaster was close to them. ³⁵And the LORD struck Benjamin before Israel, so that the sons of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day, all who drew the sword. ³⁶So the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated.

From this point forward, we have a more detailed report of what we just read.

³⁶When the men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin, because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah, ³⁷the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush also deployed and struck all the city with the edge of the sword. ³⁸Now the appointed sign between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise from the city. ³⁹Then the men of Israel turned in the battle, and

Benjamin began to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel, for they said, “Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle.”

⁴⁰But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, Benjamin looked behind them; and behold, the whole city was going up in smoke to heaven [similar to a burnt offering]. ⁴¹Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were terrified; for they saw that disaster was close to them. ⁴²Therefore, they turned their backs before the men of Israel toward the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them while those who came out of the cities destroyed them in the midst of them. ⁴³They surrounded Benjamin, pursued them without rest and trod them down opposite Gibeah toward the east. ⁴⁴Thus 18,000 men of Benjamin fell; all these were valiant warriors. ⁴⁵The rest turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, but they caught 5,000 of them on the highways and overtook them at Gidom and killed 2,000 of them. ⁴⁶So all of Benjamin who fell that day were 25,000 men who drew the sword; all these were valiant warriors.

⁴⁷But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they remained at the rock of Rimmon four months.

⁴⁸The men of Israel then turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city with cattle and all that they found; they also set on fire all the cities which they found.

A small force of 600 made its way to the rock of Rimmon, which lies three to four miles east of Bethel. It was an almost inaccessible and impregnable natural stronghold. “**Rimmon**” means “pomegranate” because it rose up high out of three ravines that surrounded it and was filled with numerous caves to hide in that were like the pockets in a pomegranate after you pick out the seeds. These sole surviving warriors remained for four months in the natural fortress, afraid to return to their ancestral homes, a pathetic remnant of the proud Benjamite army.

Meanwhile, the Israelite forces turned their attention to the surrounding Benjamite towns, populated at this point by older men, women, and children. These towns, after all, supplied the troops who had since been killed in the fighting. By slaughtering every living thing and subsequently burning the cities, the Israelites did something God never instructed them to do to another Israelite tribe. They treated the entire tribe as though they were Canaanites. This was an excessively severe treatment and was contrary to God’s will (**Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 19:18**).

As you read of this historical event that has 65,000 soldiers and untold numbers of old men, women, and children killed, along with their homes, pets and animals destroyed in three days, does it cause you to ask, “How could this happen?” It does me. God did not desire nor cause the overkill. So then, who is responsible? I believe the prophet Isaiah helps here, when he records these words of Yahweh, “**Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter,**” **Isaiah 5:20**.

When we human beings turn our backs on what God says is right, good, and

moral, and instead turn to the wisdom of the politically correct world in which we live, we become confused, deceived, and self-destructive. God says throughout His Word, “If you want to ignore me, I will let you; but do so at your own risk, knowing that your own foolishness will destroy you.” That’s a Bonner paraphrase of the latter half of **Romans 1**.

The wise man Solomon put it much better. He warned the listener not once, but twice: first, in **Proverbs 14:12**, “**There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.**” And again, in **Proverbs 16:25**, “**There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.**” And then closely related to this is **Proverbs 19:3**, “**The foolishness of man ruins his way, and his heart rages against the LORD.**”

How’s life going for you this morning? I mean really. If you aren’t feeling like you are making it, let me suggest something to you. If at first you don’t succeed, don’t keep trying the same thing over and over to never see any changes. Try something different. If you are thinking, “Yeh, Pastor, I know what you are going to say, ‘Try God!’ Well, I have, and He didn’t work.”

If that is your experience, then may I humbly suggest that you may not have come at this rightly? You see, you don’t “try God.” God is not on trial. You are. But when you fully humble yourself to the point of weeping so you are ready to fully surrender to Him, to do whatever He says, then you will find victory and life. It’s not giving God a test; it’s giving Him your all!

My friend, God will never force His good and perfect will on you. Instead, He invites you with words such as these that come from the lips of our Savior, Jesus Christ, “**I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me,**” **John 14:6**. Again, Jesus says, “**The thief comes only to rob, kill, and destroy; but I come that you might have life and have it more abundantly,**” **John 10:10**. But then, Jesus even goes one step further. He speaks a personal invitation, as a gentleman, to anyone who hears His words, “**Behold, I stand at the door [of your soul] and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.**” In the Middle East, the meaning couldn’t be clearer. To invite someone into your home is a sign of desiring a special close fellowship with that person. It is a sign of warmth, security, and hospitality.

Today, there are many voices calling for your attention. Whose will you respond to? For those of you who call yourselves followers of Christ, have you been living like the foolish eleven tribes of Israel, doing life your own way? How's it working for you? Have you had some major defeats? How many will you go through, when you already know there is a better way, ordained by the one who loves you so much that He died for you?

If you are here this morning, and you have never admitted to yourself, to God or anyone else your stiff-arming tactics toward Him, but you are tired of being alone, you are tired of your shame, and you want to experience a deeper sense of peace, joy, and complete acceptance and approval, then you must know that there is no one who can give you that like Jesus. He loves you, regardless of your past. Won't you accept His invitation to invite Him into your life as your savior and master? Won't you invite Him in to take control and make you into the person you really want to be but just never have been able to pull off? If so, let's pray together to that end. Let me pray with you, right here and now.

