

Homiletics Analysis: Judges 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Judges 1 opens the book with a transition report: Israel's military campaigns to possess the land following Joshua's death. The chapter begins with a promising inquiry of the LORD and an early success — Judah leads, defeats Adoni-bezek, and takes Jerusalem, Hebron, and portions of the Negev and Shephelah. Caleb's offer of his daughter Achsah to whoever takes Debir results in Othniel's victory and Achsah's bold request for springs of water, a small vignette of covenant faith and inheritance pursued. But the chapter turns. Tribe after tribe — Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, Dan — fails to drive out the Canaanites. The recurring formula shifts from "Judah took" to "they did not drive out," "they did not drive out," "they did not drive out." The Canaanites remain, are subjected to forced labor rather than expelled, and by the chapter's end Israel is living among the very peoples God commanded them to displace. The chapter ends not with victory but with Israel pressed back into the hill country, unable even to occupy the valleys because the Canaanites have iron chariots.

This Text — Intent

God is establishing, from the first chapter of the book, the pattern that will govern the entire Judges narrative: partial obedience is covenantal failure. Israel does not apostatize dramatically in Judges 1 — they simply do not finish. They fight, they win some battles, they impose tribute on the Canaanites, they settle for less than God commanded. The intent of this opening chapter is to press the reader toward a diagnostic question: *Why does God's people keep falling short of God's promise?* The answer is not military or logistical — it is spiritual. Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites is not incapacity but compromise, and God is calling the reader to see that the same instinct for managed coexistence with what God has forbidden operates in every generation of His people, including this one.

Subject Sentence: Israel enters the land but fails to finish — partial obedience produces inherited compromise.

Primary Claim: God opens the Judges narrative by exposing the pattern of partial obedience that will undo His people across generations — not dramatic apostasy but the slow settlement for less than God commanded — calling every reader to see this instinct in themselves and return to the totality of covenantal trust and obedience.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of Israel's Failure

The central interpretive question is whether Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites is primarily military (they could not) or covenantal-moral (they would not). The text itself answers this question by the end of the chapter: the note about iron chariots in verse 19 might seem to suggest military limitation, but the phrase "the LORD was with Judah" immediately precedes it, and the broader canonical context — including the explicit statement in Judges 2:1-3 where the angel of the LORD directly charges Israel with disobedience — makes clear that the failure is volitional, not circumstantial. A militaristic reading that treats Israel as victims of superior technology imports a modern category of technological determinism into an ancient covenantal narrative. The text never presents iron chariots as a valid excuse; indeed, the conquest under Joshua involved enemies with every military advantage, and the LORD overcame them.

Some interpreters, particularly those with a focus on historical-critical reconstruction of the text, read Judges 1 as evidence that the conquest was never as complete as Joshua presents — using it to argue for a gradual settlement model rather than a military conquest. This reading misunderstands the literary-theological relationship between Joshua and Judges. Joshua does not claim that every pocket of resistance was eliminated; it claims that the land was given and the major campaigns won. Judges 1 describes the subsequent generation's failure to consolidate and complete what God had given. The two books are not in tension — they describe sequential phases, and Judges 1 explicitly stands as an indictment, not a correction of Joshua's historical record.

A Wesleyan reading may emphasize Israel's failure as evidence of their need for entire sanctification — the Canaanites representing internal sinful tendencies that must be fully expelled. This reading is homiletically fruitful but must not be allowed to allegorize away the historical-covenantal specificity of the text. The Reformed reading holds together the historical particularity (this is Israel, this is the land, this is a real covenant) with the typological force (the pattern of partial obedience is universal and instructive for every covenant people). The Wesleyan instinct to press toward completeness is worth retaining, but the grounds for that completeness must be covenant obligation and gospel grace, not an anthropology of moral perfectibility.

The Dispossession Command and Modern Sensibilities

Some expositors soften or skip the conquest command entirely, finding the dispossession of the Canaanites morally troubling. This is a pastoral reality in contemporary preaching that must be acknowledged but not accommodated at the level of the text's claim. The Reformed reading holds that God's command to drive out the Canaanites is an act of holy judgment against nations whose iniquity had reached full measure (Genesis 15:16), not ethnic cleansing for Israel's benefit. The failure to execute that judgment is not more

merciful than God — it is, as Judges will demonstrate, catastrophically less merciful to Israel and to all subsequent generations. The text does not call us to be comfortable with holy war; it calls us to trust that God's judgments are right and that partial compliance with God's commands, motivated by our own comfort or pragmatism, is always destructive.

Reformed Verdict

Judges 1 is a covenantal audit of a generation that began well and settled short. The Reformed reading holds that Israel's failure is not military, not structural, not evidence of a flawed conquest tradition — it is the first installment of a book-length demonstration that covenant unfaithfulness begins not with dramatic apostasy but with managed compromise. The text is not primarily about the Canaanites. It is about Israel's relationship to the Word and command of God, and by extension, about every people of God who find it easier to coexist with what God has forbidden than to trust Him fully.

Key Canonical Support

- **Joshua 1:1-9** — The LORD's charge to Joshua grounds the entire land-possession mandate in covenantal obedience: "Be strong and courageous... do not turn from it to the right or to the left." Judges 1 shows the next generation failing precisely this charge.
 - **Judges 2:1-5** — The angel of the LORD delivers God's direct verdict on Judges 1's events: "You have not obeyed my voice." This passage is the divine commentary on the chapter, establishing that the failure is explicitly covenantal disobedience, not military limitation.
 - **Genesis 15:13-16** — God tells Abram the Amorites' iniquity is "not yet complete." The conquest of Canaan is not arbitrary — it is the execution of delayed judgment. Israel's failure to carry it out fully represents a refusal to be the instrument of God's righteous purposes.
 - **Numbers 33:50-56** — God warned explicitly: if Israel does not drive out the Canaanites, those who remain will become "barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides." Judges 1's pattern of non-dispossession is the opening installment of this curse's fulfillment.
 - **Hebrews 3:7-4:11** — The New Testament's treatment of Israel's failure in the wilderness (cognate to Judges' failure in the land) as a warning against "an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" — hardened by sin's deceitfulness. The category of "entering rest" through full trust and obedience carries the typological weight of what Judges 1 fails to achieve.
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Aim: To expose the anatomy of partial obedience — its appearance of adequacy, its logic of compromise, and its long-term covenantal cost — so that the reader recognizes the same pattern in their own life and returns to whole-hearted trust in God’s commands.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1-2	After Joshua’s death, Israel inquires of the LORD who shall go up first against the Canaanites. The LORD designates Judah.	The inquiry is proper and promising — the book opens with covenantal protocol observed.
3	Judah invites Simeon to fight alongside them, promising reciprocation.	A tribal alliance within the covenant structure; not sinful but noteworthy as human negotiation alongside divine commission.
4-7	Judah defeats the Canaanites and Perizzites at Bezek (10,000 killed). Adoni-bezek is captured; his thumbs and big toes are cut off. He acknowledges this as just retribution for what he did to 70 kings. He dies in Jerusalem.	Adoni-bezek’s confession is remarkable — even the enemy recognizes the justice of the LORD’s judgment. The retributive principle is clear.
8	Judah fights against Jerusalem and takes it, putting it to the sword and setting it on fire.	Note: Jerusalem will appear again as still contested (v. 21); this may reflect destruction of the lower city while the Jebusite stronghold remained.
9-10	Judah goes down to fight Canaanites in the hill country, Negev, and lowland; defeats Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai in Hebron.	Continuation of Judah’s early success.
11-15	Caleb offers Achsah to whoever takes Debir.	The Othniel/Achsah vignette is a bright moment: faith,

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	Othniel (his nephew) takes it and receives Achsah. She asks her father for springs of water in addition to the Negev land; he gives her upper and lower springs.	initiative, and bold requesting of inheritance. Othniel will become the first judge (3:7-11). A small model of covenantal faith within the larger narrative of failure.
16	The descendants of Hobab the Kenite (Moses' father-in-law) go with Judah into the Negev.	Covenant loyalty among non-Israelites; a quiet grace note.
17	Judah and Simeon defeat Zephath/Hormah ("devoted to destruction").	The name "Hormah" carries the weight of the devoted-to-destruction principle — this is how the conquest was meant to go.
18	Judah takes Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron with their territories.	Significant coastal acquisitions. (Note: some textual traditions read this negatively — "did not take" — but the MT reads positively.)
19	The LORD is with Judah; they take the hill country. But they cannot drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they have iron chariots.	First note of limitation. "The LORD was with Judah" — yet they could not drive out. The tension is not resolved here but points toward covenantal, not military, explanation.
20	Hebron is given to Caleb as Moses commanded; he drives out the three sons of Anak.	Caleb is the counterexample: wholehearted obedience (Numbers 14:24) produces full inheritance.
21	Benjamin does not drive out the Jebusites in Jerusalem; Jebusites live with Benjamin to this day.	First explicit "did not drive out" for a tribe. The pattern begins.
22-26	The house of Joseph goes up against Bethel; the LORD is with them. A spy negotiates	A partial echo of the Rahab narrative — sparing an informant — but the result is

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	with a man from Bethel for the city's layout in exchange for his family's safety. The city is taken; the man and his family are spared and go to Hittite territory and found a city called Luz.	different: the man goes and builds another Luz elsewhere. Compromised thoroughness.
27-28	Manasseh does not drive out Beth-shean, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, Megiddo, or their towns. The Canaanites persist. When Israel grows strong, they put Canaanites to forced labor but do not drive them out.	"Forced labor" instead of dispossession: pragmatic exploitation replaces covenantal obedience. This is the dominant pattern of the second half of the chapter.
29	Ephraim does not drive out Canaanites in Gezer; they dwell among them.	Brief, stark, no qualification.
30	Zebulun does not drive out Kitron or Nahalol; Canaanites dwell among them but become forced laborers.	Same forced-labor compromise.
31-32	Asher does not drive out Acco, Sidon, Ahlab, Achzib, Helbah, Aphik, or Rehob — seven cities. Asher lives among the Canaanites.	The language shifts: it is no longer the Canaanites dwelling among Israel but Israel dwelling among the Canaanites. The cultural direction of the compromise is visible.
33	Naphtali does not drive out Beth-shemesh or Beth-anath; dwells among Canaanites; inhabitants become forced laborers.	
34-36	The Amorites press Dan back into the hill country, not allowing them into the plain. When the house of Joseph grows strong, the Amorites are put to forced	Dan is not merely failing to dispossess — they are being pushed back. The trajectory from Judah's success to Dan's regression is the chapter's narrative arc.

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	labor but are not driven out. The Amorite border runs from Scorpion Pass upward.	Failure compounds.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-2	Commission: Israel Inquires and God Designates Judah
2	3-20	Judah's Campaign: Early Faithfulness and Its Limits
3	21	Benjamin's Failure: The Pattern Begins
4	22-26	Joseph's Campaign: Partial Success, Compromised Thoroughness
5	27-36	The Northern Tribes: Systematic Failure and Reversal

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel enters the land but fails to finish — partial obedience produces inherited compromise.

Primary Claim: God opens the Judges narrative by exposing the pattern of partial obedience that will undo His people across generations — not dramatic apostasy but the slow settlement for less than God commanded — calling every reader to see this instinct in themselves and return to the totality of covenantal trust and obedience.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that partial obedience is a form of disobedience, not a lesser category of faithfulness. (*Mind/Belief*) Israel fought. Israel won battles. Israel moved into the land. By any visible measure, the generation of Judges 1 was doing something — more than doing nothing. But the text renders a verdict of failure, not partial credit. The modern reader who has begun a discipline of obedience, or who is observing some commands and quietly ignoring others, must confront the same verdict. God does not grade on a completion curve. The question is not whether you are further along than you used to be — the

question is whether you are finishing what God has commanded. Partial obedience that has stopped at the comfortable point is, in the logic of this chapter, covenantal failure.

2. Examine where you have replaced God's command with pragmatic substitutes that feel nearly equivalent. (*Mind/Belief*) Israel did not refuse to engage the Canaanites — they found a use for them. Forced labor instead of dispossession. A managed arrangement instead of full obedience. The substitute looked reasonable: the Canaanites are still under Israel's authority, something was accomplished, the military risk of further fighting is avoided. But “forced labor” was not what God commanded — it was Israel's more comfortable alternative. The reader must ask: where have I replaced what God actually commanded with something that serves my purposes and looks like obedience from a distance? Where am I subjecting something to “tribute” that God has called me to put out of my life entirely?

3. Let the Caleb and Othniel vignettes create a genuine hunger for whole-hearted obedience. (*Affections/Worship*) Caleb is the chapter's bright counter-example: the man who followed the LORD fully (Numbers 14:24) receives full inheritance. Othniel pursues Debir and receives both the city and Achsah; Achsah boldly asks for more — springs, not just Negev land — and receives it. The contrast with the tribes that “did not drive out” is not subtle. These are people who actually want what God promised, who will pursue it at cost, who are not satisfied with a managed lesser outcome. The application is a call to affection, not just to action: do you actually *want* what God has promised? Are you pursuing His purposes with the kind of desire that Achsah showed — asking for upper springs and lower springs both — or have you settled into a flat relationship with God that no longer asks, pursues, or expects?

4. Take seriously the warning that spiritual compromise is directional and compounds over time. (*Affections/Worship*) The chapter moves from Judah's early success to Dan being pressed *back* into the hill country. The direction of drift is not neutral — it is always toward greater accommodation and diminished territory. The Canaanites who began as neighbors to be tolerated become neighbors to be accommodated; the language shifts from Israel dwelling in the land to Israel dwelling *among the Canaanites*. Those who live with what God commanded them to remove do not gradually recover their footing — the pressure of the compromise increases. The reader who has a tolerance arrangement with a known area of sin must feel the weight of this trajectory: the Canaanites do not stay manageable. Let that reality produce godly grief and genuine urgency.

5. Identify the specific “Canaanites” in your own life that you have subjected to tribute rather than dealt with decisively, and bring them before God with a concrete plan of action. (*Will/Behavior*) The application of Judges 1 is not general. The tribes named specific cities and territories they had failed to take. The reader should be equally specific. This is not “I need to deal with sin in general” — it is “I know the name and address of the thing God has commanded me to remove, and I have been managing it instead.” What is the Gezer in your life that you have never actually addressed? What is the Acco or the Sidon — the failure of obedience you have rationalized into a permanent feature of the

landscape? Bring it to God specifically, confess the compromise specifically, and ask for the grace to finish what He has commanded, trusting that His commands are not burdens but the path to full inheritance.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Judges 1 establishes a foundational theological principle that governs the entire Old Testament narrative of covenant faithfulness: God's commands are not suggestions to be approximately honored but specific directives whose partial fulfillment constitutes disobedience. The chapter reveals that God's purposes in the land were not merely territorial but typological and spiritual — the Canaanites represented not just military opponents but the presence of covenant-corrupting influence within God's holy people. The vignette of Adoni-bezek acknowledging God's just retribution, combined with the note that "the LORD was with Judah," establishes that God's presence and blessing are real and available — the failure is never on God's side but always on the side of a people who stop short of full trust. Most profoundly, the chapter demonstrates that the human instinct to find a workable compromise — to subjugate rather than to expel, to manage rather than to obey — is a spiritual condition, not merely a strategic preference.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Judges 1 is a covenant-document about the nature of obedience and the anatomy of spiritual decline — and it belongs at the heart of Reformed theological anthropology. The Reformed tradition insists that total depravity does not mean every person is as sinful as they could possibly be, but that sin affects every dimension of the human person, including the will's capacity to fully obey God. Judges 1 illustrates precisely this: a people who are capable of some obedience, who begin with genuine piety (inquiring of the LORD), who achieve real victories — and yet whose will stops short of the totality God requires. The Caleb counterexample is not incidental — it points to the necessity of wholehearted obedience enabled by grace (Numbers 14:24: "a different spirit"), not generated by superior human resolve. The chapter also sets up the entire Judges cycle as a demonstration that God's covenant people cannot sustain faithfulness from their own resources across generations — which is the very condition that the New Covenant addresses in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, where God promises to write His law on hearts of flesh and put His Spirit within His people. Judges 1's failure is answered not by better strategy but by the gospel.

Main Takeaway

You are probably not in danger of wholesale apostasy. The danger is that you have already stopped short — that there are named territories in your life where God has commanded complete obedience and you have negotiated a tribute arrangement instead. Israel did not abandon the LORD in Judges 1; they simply did not finish. And the book that follows shows exactly where that leads. The time to complete the unfinished obedience is now, before the Canaanites press you back into the hill country.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Allegorizing the conquest in a way that loses its historical and covenantal specificity.** It is appropriate and necessary to draw applicational parallels between Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites and the believer's failure to deal decisively with sin. But this must not become a purely spiritualized reading that treats the conquest command as merely a metaphor. God gave Israel a real land, real enemies, and a real command. The gravity of Israel's failure is proportionate to the specificity of the command. If the preacher allegorizes too quickly, the passage loses its edge — it becomes a generic call to “deal with sin” rather than a devastating audit of a people who knew exactly what God commanded and chose not to complete it.
- **Treating the iron chariots as an exoneration of Israel's failure.** Verse 19 creates a temptation to excuse Israel's limitation in the plains as understandable military constraint. This reading must be resisted. The canonical context (Judges 2:1-5, the whole of Joshua, the LORD's repeated assurances that no military force could withstand His people when they trusted Him) makes clear that iron chariots were not an insurmountable obstacle — Israel's unbelief was. The preacher who uses the iron chariots as an excuse for Israel has done exactly what Israel did: found a pragmatic rationale for stopping short of obedience.
- **Preaching the chapter as primarily about the spiritual danger of external influences, without pressing to the internal diagnosis.** The easy application of Judges 1 is “be careful what you allow into your life; bad influences corrupt you.” This is not wrong, but it is not the chapter's primary claim. The chapter's claim is not about what the Canaanites did to Israel but about what Israel chose — the decision to stop, to settle, to manage. The preacher must press through the external influence (Canaanites remain) to the internal disposition (Israel would not drive them out). This is where the idol-diagnostic work must happen: why does Israel not finish? What are they trusting instead of God's promise and command?
- **Making Caleb and Othniel the sermon's heroes in a way that produces moralism.** The Othniel/Achsah vignette is genuinely encouraging and should be preached warmly. But it cannot be preached as “be like Othniel and Caleb” without

immediately grounding the application in what made Caleb different: “a different spirit” — a grace-enabled wholehearted trust, not a superior personal virtue. If the preacher holds up Caleb as the model without grounding it in the grace of God that produced his character, the sermon produces hero-worship or self-improvement motivation, not the covenantal faith the text commends.

- **Skipping or softening the severity of the conquest command on pastoral grounds.** Contemporary congregations are often troubled by the command to drive out and destroy the Canaanites, and the preacher may be tempted to rush past this to the more comfortable applicational sections. This is a missed opportunity and a failure of theological nerve. The command to dispossess was an act of holy judgment — God’s judgment on Canaanite iniquity deferred since Genesis 15 — and Israel’s failure to execute it was not more compassionate than God but less faithful to God. The preacher who is willing to work through this will find that it actually strengthens rather than undermines the passage’s application: if God’s judgments are just and His commands are right, then Israel’s compromise is not defensible, and neither is ours.
- **Treating Judges 1 as merely introductory material — a preamble to the “real” Judges content — rather than as a complete theological claim in its own right.** Because Judges 1 functions as the book’s opening framework, it is tempting to treat it as setup rather than substance. But the chapter makes its own complete claim about partial obedience and its consequences, and that claim is fully preachable. The preacher should resist the urge to turn the sermon on Judges 1 into an introduction to the Judges cycle rather than an exposition of this chapter’s own diagnostic and calling.