

Going Half-Way

Our Upside-Down World Series, April 10 & 11, 2021 | Judges 1:1-4
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WHAT DOES AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD LOOK LIKE?

Steve Sasson turned the world upside-down in 1975.

Sasson was an engineer for Kodak working on a revolutionary idea: the digital camera.

Sasson cobbled together a camera lens, a portable digital-cassette recorder, an analog-to-digital converter, and several dozen circuits.

Together they were able to capture an image in a fraction of a second and transfer the data to a tape. That tape could be read by a computer that displayed the image on a screen.

Digital cameras people would want to use were still years away. However, the digital revolution in photography was under way.

Still, Sasson's invention eventually turned Kodak's world upside down.¹

In the Old Testament book of Judges, the world frequently turned upside down.

In the Old Testament, the Judges come *after* God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, after Moses led the people through the wilderness, and after Joshua led them to conquer the Promised Land. They also come *before* the kings like Saul, David, and Solomon.

If we place the beginning of the reign of King Saul in roughly 1050 BC, then the period of the Judges extends for 300-400 years prior to that.

The mindset of the people during this period is best summarized by the statement in Judges 21:25 that,

... Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

If you put that in terms we might recognize today, it would basically say, "Everyone followed their hearts." Chaos resulted.

The people of God got caught in a cycle. They would turn away from God and worship idols. Then they would suffer consequences. Eventually they would cry out to God for help and God would send them a deliverer (a Judge). The deliverer would rescue them, they would be faithful for a period of time, then they would turn away from God again.

Each time this cycle repeated itself, it would be worse than the last.

By the end of the book of Judges, rampant and dramatic evil inside of Israel ended in a civil war that nearly wrecked the nation. It's the picture of an upside-down world.

What does an upside-down world look like?

¹ <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/12/kodaks-first-digital-moment/#> Page

First, when the world turns upside-down, it tends to do so **violently**. For the Israelites, this took the form of invaders. Whenever the world turns upside down, big problems disrupt life.

Second, when the world turns upside-down, it does so **philosophically**. Our solutions simply don't work.

Third, when the world turns upside-down, it does so **emotionally**. Hope fades eventually; sometimes we give in to despair.

In this series we're going to examine the upside-down world.

We're going to ask what it's like to live in an upside-down world.

We're going to examine how we get there and how we can get ourselves righted.

In this sermon, we're going to start by looking at the map.

We're looking at a map of Israel during this period of time. As we examine a map of the period, we find that before the world turns upside-down, the conditions have to be right.

We're also going to think about a map of our lives. We're going to ask what our map says about the condition of our lives, where that map is heading, and how we make the map right.

JOSHUA FINISHED THE JOB HALF-WAY.

Judges 1:1 reminds us that our story really begins with Joshua.

Judges begins:

After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?"

Joshua demonstrated great potential early in the days after God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. He led the Israelite army in multiple successful battles.

When Moses sent spies into the Promised Land to see if it was time to invade, Joshua was one of only two people who said that the people of Canaan were strong, but God was stronger.

After Moses died, Joshua led the people into Canaan and began conquering the land.

Joshua charged the people with finishing the job he had started faithfully.

Before he died, he told the people of Israel to keep fighting to claim their land.

He promised them that the Lord would be with them and fight for them in **Joshua 23:5**,

"The LORD your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you."

He also reminded the people that it was imperative that they continue to follow God and him only. In **Joshua 24:20** he warned,

"If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good."

So much was at stake! Joshua's death reminds me of July 4, 1826.

Thomas Jefferson died around noon on that day.

Then at around 5 pm, John Adams died.

Of course, Jefferson and Adams were two of our founding fathers.

At one time, they were close friends.

However, Adams was a champion of a strong central government, and Jefferson was the champion of a more limited central government.

Their differences spilled over into rivalry and a series of nasty elections.

However, they reconciled somewhat after their respective presidential terms ended.

They wrote to one another and carried on a long discussion about government.

The two men represented some of the deepest thinking about the nature of our democracy.

As John Adams died, he is reported to have said, "Thomas Jefferson survives."

It's not clear how he meant that. Plus, Adams was wrong. Jefferson had died just hours earlier.²

But what Adams' statement means to history is that, as long as one of them was alive, our founding ideals were still alive. When both men were gone, our foundations were gone.

That's the moment Israel faced when Joshua died. The founder, military genius, spiritual leader, and guide was gone. What would come next?

However, the map shows us that Joshua finished the job only half-way before he died.

The picture that you see shows the land of Canaan in beige. That's the land that should have belonged to the Israelites.

The area highlighted in salmon shows you the areas that Joshua had conquered and subdued.

There were still massive areas under the control of the people who lived there before.

That means that the job of conquering Canaan was still only half-way complete.

That doesn't mean Joshua did a bad job. His job was to start the process.

However, it sets us up for what comes next: the people had to carry on their work after Joshua.

And it leads to a problem, because the Israelites didn't finish what Joshua started.

The reality of this map leads to a question about our own lives:

What parts of the job of sanctifying your life is left undone?

Imagine your life like the territory on this map.

Let's say that the territory of your life is the size of the Promised Land.

Let's say that the parts of your life that are under the control of God are shaded salmon.

As we become more and more like Jesus, larger parts of our lives should be shaded salmon and under the control of God. That happens through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and is called "sanctification." God is making us holy.

How much of your life is shaded salmon and under the sanctifying power of God? And how much of your life is still shaded beige and under your control?

For all of us, there is still work to do.

² <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/04/us/john-adams-thomas-jefferson-frenemies-trnd>

JUDAH THOUGHT LIKE GOD'S PEOPLE: HALF-WAY.

Judges 1:2-4 showed that the Israelites started well.

The LORD said, "Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand." And Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites. And I likewise will go with you into the territory allotted to you." So Simeon went with him. Then Judah went up and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek.

After Joshua died, the people went straight to God and asked who should lead the way as they continued the work Joshua had given them.

God responded that Judah (one of the twelve tribes of Israel) should go to battle first.

In the verses that follow what we read today, Judah did go to battle. God was with them, and they immediately met with success against a strong, well-trained enemy.

As they continued to fight, though, the battles became somewhat confused. In the end, they came up against an army they could not dislodge.

Why? Because they had already made big mistakes.

Judah faithlessly turned to the tribe of Simeon.

When the people of Israel asked God who should go to battle first, the Lord responded that Judah should go.

In the very next breath, the tribe of Judah asked the people of Simeon if they would join them in battle. It sounds like a brotherly thing to do.

However, God didn't send the armies of Simeon into battle.

With the help of God, Judah didn't need Simeon.

Judah's step sounded faithful, but it was already off track.

Judah also mistreated Adoni-Bezek.

After they conquered the city of Bezek, they found the city's leader.

He's simply called "Adoni-Bezek" which means "Lord" or "King of Bezek."

When the armies of Judah captured Lord Bezek, they tortured him and humiliated him by cutting off his thumbs and big toes.

Then they took him to Jerusalem before they went to battle against the city; somehow (we are not told how), Lord Bezek died in Jerusalem.

The process shows us that Judah thought like God's people only half-way.

When they tortured Lord Bezek, Lord Bezek thought it was justice. Lord Bezek commented that when he won in battle, he treated the defeated kings the same way he was now being treated. In fact, he had defeated 70 kings himself. Each one of them lost their thumbs and big toes.

But that wasn't how God's people were supposed to act.

God's instructions demanded that the people of Judah eliminate all Canaanites from the land.

Mercy might possibly lead them to spare Lord Bezek.

Instead, they acted just like the people God sent them to destroy.

In other words, instead of acting like Israelites, they acted like Canaanites.

They acted like Canaanites because they were starting to think like Canaanites. That's a dangerous trend! And it leads us to ask about our mindset.

What parts of your mindset are affected by the world around you?

As we think about the maps of our lives, some parts of our lives are under God's control, and some parts of our lives are under someone else's control.

The fact that there are at least two kinds of territory in our lives means that there are at least two different ways of thinking in our lives.

Part of our mindset and part of our way of thinking are shaped by God. Other parts of our mindset are shaped by the world around us.

When the world shapes our way of thinking, that has consequences. It comes out in our behavior eventually! If we think like the world, we eventually act like the world.

ISRAEL OBEYED GOD HALF-WAY.

There were some successes for Israel. However, most tribes could not finish the job.

They faced Canaanites with iron chariots living in fortified cities in valleys.

The Israelites, by contrast, lived in the hills and in towns without walls. They didn't have iron chariots of their own.

Instead of going to battle in the power of the Lord, the Israelites decided to wait until their populations grew and they were able to overwhelm the Canaanites in their region.

Once they overwhelmed the Canaanites, they forced them to work as servants.

They **enslaved** the Canaanites eventually. That wasn't God's plan at all.

Other tribes would not finish the job.

They just decided to live next door to the Canaanites.

They did business with them, learned from them, and eventually intermarried with them.

They **intermingled** with the Canaanites.

One tribe even failed completely.

Instead of fighting and pushing the Canaanites back, one tribe let the people in their area push them back up into the hills.

For a long time, they were **dominated by** the Canaanites.

The results show us that Israel obeyed God only half-way.

God told them to push out Canaanites and others out of the Promised Land.

God did it because He promised the land to Israel way back in the days of Abraham.

God also gave that order because He knew that the Israelites could not live holy lives as God's special people if they were constantly surrounded by the temptation of the lifestyle of the people who lived in the Promised Land.

And God gave the order to push out or destroy the people of Canaan because they were evil.

In Deuteronomy 9:5 Moses said: *"Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."*

Rather than doing what God instructed them to do, the people of Israel obeyed God only half-way. They left lots and lots of wicked people in their land.

Now we have our presenting problem: the world is ready to go upside down.

What behaviors do you engage in that disobey God?

On this map, there are lots of little dots. Those dots represent places and people.

In some of those dots, the people of Israel obeyed God. In other dots, they disobeyed him.

Think of the decisions you make on a regular basis that way. Some of the dots you put on the map of your life represent ways and times that you obey God. Other dots you put on the map of your life represent ways and times that you disobey God.

What are some of the disobedient dots you put on the map of your life?

FOLLOWING GOD HALF-WAY DOESN'T WORK.

The fact that this happened to the generation that followed Joshua reminds us that we need to pay careful attention to Judges chapter one.

Very close to the end of the book called Joshua (the book that immediately precedes Judges), we read that there was a whole generation of people alive when Joshua died. They had seen the miracles of the conquest, and absorbed the wisdom of Joshua, and faithfully followed God. **Joshua 24:31** says:

Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.

Those words were written about the people we have been studying today! These are the good guys, and these are the good old days in the book of Judges!

What we're seeing here is that the greatest generation of the book of Judges was deeply, deeply flawed. We're seeing that they thought like the people of God, but only half-way; they belonged to God, but only half-way; and they did the job God gave them, but only half-way.

This is the generation that sowed the seeds of the world turning upside down.

If all of this is true of that generation, then we need to be very, very careful when we evaluate ourselves. We probably assume that we're doing pretty well, that God has taken most of the territory in our lives, that we think by-and-large the way God wants us to think, and that we are doing pretty much what God wants us to do.

However, what we're seeing here is that we may be carrying around inside of us the seeds of our own world's turning upside-down.

Going half-way with God doesn't work.

Let's map our lives.

In a sense, we've been doing this exercise together today already. However, I am hoping that we can think again about this for just a minute. More importantly, I hope we all continue this exercise on our own later.

It's a mental exercise. If you're good at visualizing, then this is an exercise you can do by simply thinking. If you are more tactile, then you may want to sit with a piece of paper.

We are mapping the territory in our lives the way that cartographers mapped the land of Canaan during the period of the Judges.

However, what we're really mapping—or visualizing—is the territory in our lives that is rightfully claimed by the Kingdom of God versus territory still claimed by the kingdoms of this earth.

First, we want to take stock of the territory that is still in enemy hands. We have to approach that work honestly because we are strongly inclined to hide the truth from ourselves. As we are honest, our honesty should drive us to repentance. We've allowed rebellion in our lives; we've participated in that rebellion, and we have even led that rebellion at times.

Second, we want to invite the Holy Spirit to drive out the ruler of the kingdoms of this earth from every corner of our lives and to place the Lord Jesus in charge of those areas.

Third, we want to turn over the territory still claimed by the kingdoms of this earth to the Lord Jesus, that territory's rightful ruler.

Let's not forget grace.

Throughout the book of Judges, we will see God's unmerited, incredible grace shine through.

Grace led God to choose Israel and send them to the Promised Land.

In grace, God decided to work through Israel even when they didn't follow him fully.

Grace even caused God to deliver them each time they wandered away from him; eventually he delivered them even though they hadn't asked him to!

It is grace that has taken root in our lives if we're followers of Jesus; that's why there is a salmon-colored blotch on the map of our lives to begin with!

And it is grace that dominates our life, not any demands God makes of us.

However, we've seen what can lead to our lives turning upside-down.

Judges is not telling us that every single upside-down moment in life is the result of our willful disobedience against God.

Even so, the parts of our lives that we hold back from God certainly can undermine us in the long-run and lead to painful seasons.

And we've received an important call that will only grow louder and clearer as we study Judges:

We belong to God; there is no reason to hold anything back.

Let's follow God fully, instead of half-way.