

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

Faithless People And A Faithful God¹

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Judges 2:6 – 3:6

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please keep your Bibles open to Judges chapter 2. Thank you, Derek, for reading our passage for this morning. Over the next few months, we are going to be making our way through the book of Judges – a book that describes some of the darkest episodes in Israel’s history.

This is a gritty, violent book, and it’s tough to stomach at some points. In fact, as Kathleen was preparing the visuals, she found that one church used this image for their series.



We opted to go a different direction, but that’s not the worst illustration. Judges *does* look like a dumpster fire at times!

¹ This title is drawn from a line by Barry Webb in Barry G. Webb et al. eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 265.

But I believe that's one of the primary reasons why God gave us this book. Judges is gross because SIN is gross. It was gross in the Israelites. And – if we're willing to be honest – it is gross in US! Doesn't your life look like a dumpster fire sometimes?

The Israelites called themselves the people of God while they simultaneously slept with temple prostitutes. We read that, and we want to pat ourselves on the back because we would *never* do such a thing. But what would happen if the browsing history from this past week was revealed for all the Christians gathered for worship in the city of Orillia today?

We look more like the book of Judges than we dare to admit. Unless there are some sinless men and women in the room today, we ALL have a little dumpster fire simmering within us.

And that's part of what makes the book of Judges so beautiful! Because – while we read about the most vile and despicable sin – we simultaneously see a God who pursues and restores the most vile and despicable sinners.

God did not send His Son to save the shiny, perfect people – He sent His Son to save sinners.

That brings us to our passage. In the opening verses of our passage this morning we are introduced to the generation that followed Joshua. We meet them in verses 6-10:

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land.⁷ And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel.⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years.⁹ And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash.¹⁰ And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. **And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.** (Judges 2:6-10 ESV)

You've heard me say it before but let me say it again: So much of the Christian life is centered around the practice of REMEMBERING! There is a reason why – after God gave the law to the Israelites – He said:

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you

rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:7-9 ESV)

People FORGET! We LEAK!

Just think for a moment about the power and the mercy that Joshua's generation had witnessed! Most of them would have been children when God led His people out of Egypt. His was the generation that still remembered holding mom and dad's hand while they followed a pillar of fire through the wilderness. They skimmed their fingers through the wall of water as they passed through the parted Sea. They felt the mist on their face as the waves collapsed over Pharaoh's chariots. The exodus wasn't history to them – it was MEMORY.

But when that generation faded, so too did Israel's memory. And the results were catastrophic. We read in verses 11-12:

¹¹ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. ¹² **And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt.** They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. (Judges 2:11-12 ESV)

The people were faithless. They forgot – they abandoned – the God of their fathers. Yet – in spite of all that – God did not give up on His people.

And that brings us to the main emphasis of this passage. I want you to notice is that this text is really *part two* of the introduction to Judges. *Part one* of the introduction began with the death of Joshua:

After the death of Joshua (Judges 1:1a ESV)

But – if you are a careful reader – you might have noticed that in the opening verses of our passage for this morning, Joshua seems to die AGAIN! Look at verse 8:

And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. (Judges 2:8 ESV)

What's up with that? Did Joshua come back from the dead? No! The author is here signalling that he is about to *retell* the events that led up to this terrible season in Israel's history. In the first telling, the focus was primarily on *Israel*.

But in this second telling, if you look closely, you will notice that the main character is not Joshua, or Israel, or the surrounding nations. No, the main character of this passage is GOD!

The first half of the introduction was viewed from the perspective of a faithless people. But this second half is viewed from the perspective of a faithful God.

In this second introduction, we catch a glimpse into how God responds when we return to our sin and jump back into the filth. We see HOW He dealt with Israel in their rebellion and – more importantly – we see WHY He did what He did. This passage is a glimpse into the purposes of God. And, as the Apostle Paul reminds us:

Now these things happened to them as an example, **but they were written down for our instruction**, on whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Corinthians 10:11 ESV)

As we look to this example – this instruction – we learn:

What Faithless People Need To Know About Our Faithful God

Part of the reason why the book of Judges is so unpopular today is because the lessons it teaches us about God are lessons that fly in the face of our false ideas about Him. For example, the first thing we learn about God in this passage is that:

1. His jealousy is fierce

Several times in this story, God is described as *angry*. We see it in verse 12:

And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. **And they provoked the Lord to anger.** (Judges 2:12 ESV)

And in verses 13-14:

They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. ¹⁴ **So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel**, (Judges 2:13-14a ESV)

And again, in verses 19-20:

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. ²⁰ **So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel** (Judges 2:19-20 ESV)

You get the point. God is *angry* at His people. He's angry because He *loves* these people and He has been *faithful* to them. He's angry because they have – in return – been hateful and faithless to Him. Look again at verse 17:

they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. (Judges 2:17b ESV)

This is *evocative* language! When Israel abandoned God, it was as if they had *committed adultery* on God who was their loving husband. One commentator notes:

Yahweh's wrath is the heat of his jealous love by which he refuses to let go of his people; he refuses to allow his people to remain comfortable in sin.²

There is a famous YouTube clip where Oprah Winfrey explains that *this* was the reason why she left traditional Christianity. She could not stomach the idea of a 'jealous God'. Jealousy is seen as an ugly word in this cultural moment and there are many who share Oprah's distaste.

Maybe you're one of them. Maybe you've only ever experienced the ugly, unhealthy forms of jealousy in previous relationships. You don't have a category for any kind of jealousy that is healthy and pure. I'm sorry if that's the case, but I also want to challenge you this morning to allow your thinking to be shaped by God's word. In Exodus 20, God Himself declares:

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, **for I the Lord your God am a jealous God** (Exodus 20:5 ESV)

² Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 49.

Jealousy is the *right response* when love is betrayed.

For example: If a faithful, loving wife spotted her husband kissing the single lady next door, would it be *wrong* for her to feel jealous? If she truly loved her husband, how could she feel anything else?! The FIRE of jealousy is love's right and appropriate response to betrayal.

Therefore, if God loves you, how could He not be jealous when you betray Him?

Would you really prefer that He were indifferent? Do you want Him to roll His eyes and say, 'Whatever. I never cared that much about her anyway...' No, when you go back to that old sin – when you grow bored with God and give your love and affection to the next shiny distraction – when you stuff Him away in the closet and only pull Him out when you need something from Him – you need to know that His JEALOUSY is FIERCE! He loves us enough to FIGHT for us!

And sometimes, the only way that He can fight FOR us is if He fights AGAINST us. That brings us to the next thing that faithless people need to know about our faithful God:

2. His discipline is purposeful

If you look closely at our passage for this morning, you'll notice that one of the major themes is the theme of 'testing'. Look, for example, at verses 20-22 where God says:

“Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, ²¹ I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, ²² **in order to test Israel by them**, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not.” (Judges 2:20b-22 ESV)

The same theme is then picked up and expanded upon in chapter 3. Look again at verses 1-4:

Now these are the nations that the Lord left, **to test Israel by them**, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. ² It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before. ³ These are the nations: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. ⁴ **They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would**

obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. (Judges 3:1-4 ESV)

If you were with us last Sunday, then you might notice that there is an apparent contradiction here. In the opening chapter, we learned that the first generation to come into the promised land failed to drive out the inhabiting nations. You could summarize the first half of the introduction with the phrase: ‘Now these are the nations that the Israelites left...’

But in this passage – as the focus shifts to God’s perspective – we’re told:

Now these are the nations **that the Lord left**, to test Israel by them (Judges 3:1a ESV)

So, who left them? The first generation because of their disobedience? Or the Lord because of His testing? If you’re going to answer that question from the text, then the answer would have to be BOTH! People were sinning. But God was working. This is what God does! One old proverb says: ‘He writes straight lines with crooked sticks.’

Would it have been easier for the Israelites if their fathers had driven out all the nations? Absolutely! However, there are some lessons that you simply can’t learn in peacetime. These Israelites grew up hearing about the Egyptian slavery and the wilderness wanderings, but their faith had never really been put to the test. As we read in verse 10 of chapter 2:

And there arose another generation after them **who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel**. (Judges 2:10b ESV)

They knew *about* the Lord – they heard the stories of how He had worked in the lives of their parents – but *they didn’t know Him for themselves*. And, as one commentator helpfully puts it:

People cannot thrive on the spiritual power of their parents; each generation must personally experience the reality of God.³

³ Herbert Wolf, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Deuteronomy - 1, 2 Samuel)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 3, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 394.

God would use these remaining nations to TEST this new generation and to EXPOSE their hearts. They would come to know oppression – they would come to know war – and in all of that, they would come to know the saving power of God.

Let me get really practical here: Some of you are facing terrible trials in your life right now. It isn't fun. It isn't easy. But – and this is the lesson in our passage – it isn't WASTED. It's hard! It hurts! But God is teaching you something right now that you will never forget. Look again at chapter 3, verse 2:

It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, **to teach war to those who had not known it before.** (Judges 3:2 ESV)

I grew up in a Christian home. I heard stories *about* God. But I didn't come to *know* God until I was punched in the mouth by my own sin. I was oblivious to the fact that there was a spiritual war being waged all around me. I needed a wakeup call. I needed to see my need. I needed to understand His holiness and His mercy. I needed to understand WHY Jesus needed to die on that cross. And I couldn't see HIM rightly until I saw MYSELF rightly.

God knew EXACTLY what I needed, and He positioned me EXACTLY where I needed to be to learn that lesson. Now – to be clear – I put myself in that mess. It was MY sin! But God was working.

Some of you are aching as you watch your adult children wander from the faith. They're making all the sinful decisions that you made – and worse. You wanted to spare them from that heartache – you wanted to raise them up in the promised land where they would never know adversity.

But sometimes God needs to give a person over for a season – sometimes He needs to test them in the fire – before they are ready to walk with Him.

I won't claim to know exactly what God is doing in your life right now, but I can tell you for certain that His discipline is purposeful. Faithless people need to know that about their faithful God. And, finally, we need to know that:

3. His mercy is relentless

We see the first sign of this mercy in verse 16 of chapter 2:

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. (Judges 2:16 ESV)

Whenever His people appeared to be at their end – whenever the consequences of their sin threatened to bury them once and for all – God would raise up a deliverer. This book is the account of the various judges that God sent to see His people through this awful season of their history.

If you have any familiarity with this book, then you have likely heard reference to the ‘cycle of the judges’. Essentially, the book of Judges is a continuous loop: Israel rebels, Israel is punished, Israel cries out, and Israel is delivered. The cycle spirals throughout the book with each passing generation descending further into sin than the generation before it. With each passing story the reader is left wondering, ‘Why would God save a people like this?’

We catch a glimpse of the answer to that question in verse 18:

Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. **For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning** because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. (Judges 2:18 ESV)

One of the things that struck me as I was preparing this week was the fact that repentance is nowhere mentioned in this passage. Did you notice that?

It doesn’t say that ‘the Lord was moved to pity by their *repentance*’.

It doesn’t say, ‘the Lord was moved to pity *because they got their act together*’.

What moved Him? Their *groaning*.

This is a *raw* book of the Bible, so I’m going to risk using a *raw* illustration this morning.

Imagine a loving mom who is trying desperately to help her son who's trapped in addiction. She takes a second job so that she can send her boy to rehab. She writes him every day. Eventually he gets out, and he seems fine, but mom quickly discovers that he's been lying to her face. Money keeps disappearing from the safe. Jewelry keeps disappearing from the dresser. Another stint at rehab leads to the same result.

Finally, heartbroken, she realizes that the only thing she can do is to stop enabling him. She kicks him out of the house and tearfully 'gives him over' to the road that he has chosen. Friends report that they saw him sleeping on a park bench. A neighbour spots him slouched over in an alleyway with a needle in his hand. She wants to run to him – her love for him wasn't wavered for a second – but she knows that she can't.

Then, one morning, she wakes up to find their son barely conscious, lying in a pool of his own vomit in the front yard. He can't apologize. He can't make any promises. All he can do is groan. And – in that moment – *moved to pity by his groaning* – she picks up her son, she washes him off, and then she brings him to rehab to start all over again.

The book of Judges is like that. It's the story of a faithful God fighting relentlessly for His faithless people. They reject His love. They spit in His face. They spurn Him. They betray Him. They return to the same despicable sin. They RUIN their lives. They groan in despair.

But God – full of pity – picks them up and starts again.

And then – after they have recovered – they run right back to their sin! Did you notice that in the last verses of our passage this morning? Look again:

So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁶ And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, **and they served their gods.**
(Judges 3:5-6 ESV)

This book forces us to be honest with ourselves. When we are enslaved to sin, this is who we are. We are so quickly pulled back to the things that we know are wrong. We are the adulterers. We

are the faithless. God created us that we might glorify Him and enjoy Him forever! But we ignore Him and cast Him aside. He gave us a beautiful world, but in our sin we choose to sow chaos and destruction. That's what sin does. It ruins EVERYTHING. We deserve the wrath of God.

Which is why this is the most important thing that faithless people need to know about our faithful God – His mercy is RELENTLESS! As one old puritan puts it:

There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us.⁴

I should be outside of the reach of God's grace, but I'm NOT! You should be too far gone for His mercy, but you're NOT! It was this same mercy that was on display when Jesus – hanging naked on a cross for the sin of the world – while people mocked and spat at him, prayed:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34a ESV)

God sent judges to deliver His people, but those judges were never the final answer. Those judges were paving the way for the kings that God would send – kings like Solomon, and David, and Hezekiah – but those kings were never the final answer.

Each judge – each king – was simply a glimpse – a foretaste of the TRUE Judge and King!

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

Are you *groaning* in your sin this morning? Do you see yourself in the dumpster fire in these pages? Then don't waste another second! Look to Jesus and LIVE! The cycle can be BROKEN! There is a NEW LIFE available to you! There is a Judge who has come to deliver you. But He will not sit next to your idols.

Repent. Believe. And live. This is the fitting response of a faithless people to our faithful God. And this is the Word of the Lord.

Let's pray together.

⁴ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1630, 1998), 13.