

The Downward Spiral

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 2:6-3:6

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Visitor's Film for Judges

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Gettysburg while I was on a trip with my kids' school. It was my favorite part of the trip. Before we toured the battlefield, we went to the visitor's center and watched a video. The video gives background and a framework to Gettysburg so that you can appreciate and understand what you're seeing in the park. Without this video (and the tour guide) you would be lost in a sea of monuments to that Alabama company or that Texas regiment. The film helps bring order to the details.¹ Our passage this morning does something similar. It functions as the visitors' film to the book of Judges. It gives necessary background and a framework to understand the rest of the book.

The book of Judges is held together by a cycle that repeats itself six times. We're given an overview of this cycle in our passage this morning. If you want an animated version of this cycle, I'd encourage you to look at the one I posted on our blog on Friday.² But for now, let me give you a basic rundown of how the cycle works before we read the passage.

The Cycle

It all starts with the relationship. The Israelites had a relationship with Yahweh, their God. This relationship was grounded in God's grace. He had saved them out of slavery in Egypt. They were called to remember the grace of God and their salvation from slavery. And they were called to serve and worship God and be obedient to him. But Israel didn't serve and worship Yahweh. Instead they rebelled against him and served other gods; they quickly broke the first two commandments. They had other gods and they worshiped idols. This rebellion led to God's retribution or his discipline. As a result of their disobedience, he gave them over to the Canaanites who oppressed them. When the Israelites were being oppressed they would cry out to God. They would repent of their sins and ask God to deliver them. In response to their cries, God sent them deliverers or judges. God used these judges to rescue his people. He delivered them from darkness. And this deliverance led to a period of rest. But when the judge or deliverer died, the people would again fall into rebellion and the whole cycle would repeat again.

Like I said earlier, this cycle repeats itself six times in the book of Judges. And we're introduced to this cycle in our passage this morning. As we read through it, we'll learn a lot about who we are as sinners. But we'll learn even more about who God is as Savior. If you weren't already convinced in the first introduction to Judges last week, I think you'll be convinced in this second introduction that this book is highly relevant for us today.

Judges 2:6-3:6³

⁶When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land.

⁷And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had

¹ Davis, Dale Ralph. *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*. Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2007.

² Black, Josh. [Judges: A Visual Overview](#). Blog post, February 17, 2017.

³ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

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-beres, 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.

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. ¹³ They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. ¹⁴ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. ¹⁵ Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so.

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. ¹⁹ 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, and he said, "Because this people has 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." ²³ So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

^{3:1} 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. ⁵ 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

To divide our time this morning, we're going to look at five of the movements of the cycle of Judges.

RELATIONSHIP (2:6-10)

First is relationship. We were made to be in relationship with God, remembering his grace and worshiping him. This is the way things are supposed to be. This is the normative pattern for the people of God. This pattern is drawn out through a contrast in verses 6-10. During the time of Joshua, the people of Israel served the LORD (v. 7). Joshua's generation saw the work the LORD had done for Israel in bringing them out of Egypt. And they responded by serving the LORD. That is they worshipped him and were faithful to him. But after Joshua died, another generation arose

“who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (v. 10). When it says that the generation after Joshua didn’t know the LORD or the work that he had done for them, it doesn’t mean that they didn’t know *about* the LORD or what he had done for them. It means that the things the LORD had done for them were no longer precious to them. Their lack of knowledge was a lack of relationship. This sets the stage for the rest of the book of Judges. A lack of relationship with God led to idolatry.

Remembering His Grace

We need to cultivate a relationship with God if we want to avoid the pitfalls we see in Judges. How do we cultivate a relationship with God? This passage seems to link relational knowledge of God with knowledge of God’s grace. We need to remember what God has done for us, especially in sending Jesus. This provides the foundation for living in relationship with God.

We see this laid out clearly in Deuteronomy 6:4-25. Because there is only one true God, the people of God are called to love God with a singular devotion. They shouldn’t divide their allegiance to God with other gods. They’re called to “love the LORD their God with all of their heart and soul and strength” (Deut. 6:4). But not only that. They’re also called to teach their children how to love God with all of their heart and soul and strength (Deut. 6:7-9). This obviously includes teaching our children the Ten Commandments. But it also involves teaching them the gospel.

Consider these later verses.

Deuteronomy 6:20-25.

²⁰When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ ²¹then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²²And the LORD showed signs and wonders great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. ²³And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. ²⁴And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. ²⁵And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.

Do you see? We are called to teach our children the way to live in relationship with God. But we also have to help them see that our relationship with him is based on his saving grace. God’s grace and salvation motivate our undivided devotion to him. It appears that the generation following Joshua didn’t teach their children these things. That’s why they didn’t know the Lord. We have to be constantly reminded of God’s grace and God’s ways if we want to live in relationship with God and if we want our children to. We can’t forget! We have to be diligent to teach these things. Now that doesn’t mean that if our kids walk away from the Lord that we’re responsible. Each person is responsible to know the Lord. Parents aren’t responsible for the salvation of their children. But we are responsible to preach the gospel and teach our children in the ways of the Lord.

REBELLION (2:11-13)

Let’s now consider the second movement in the Judges cycle, rebellion. When we’re not living in relationship with God, we’ll serve idols.

In verse 11, we learn what happened to the generation that forgot their God. “And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals.” This verse is repeated at the

beginning of all six cycles in Judges. It's a key verse in the whole book. What does this mean? We're told twice that Israel abandoned their relationship with the LORD (vv. 12, 13). And we're told twice that this led them to serve other gods (vv. 11, 13). You see, we're made to worship God, to live in relationship with him, to serve him. And because we were made to worship, when we don't worship the one true God, we will worship other gods; we will worship and serve idols.

Fertility gods

The word Baal simply means lord.⁴ When we don't serve the LORD, we'll serve other lords. More specifically, Baal was a fertility god. The Canaanites looked to Baal to bring them material prosperity like abundant crops. While we're no longer an agricultural society, we still want material prosperity. And so the lure of idolatry is still alive and well today. Baal worship in particular was quite disgusting. People would go to the shrines of Baal and offer themselves to the temple prostitutes. As they engaged in this "religious" sex they believed it would motivate Baal to have intercourse with Ashteroth. And they believed that this intercourse would bring them fertility or prosperity.⁵

Two-timing

Well what would incite the Israelites to engage in this gross idolatry? The Israelites were on Canaanite soil. They didn't know the rules of agriculture in Canaan. And so, like the Pilgrim settlers of America who had to learn how to farm from the Native Americans, the Israelites sought counsel from the Canaanites on how to farm. They believed that if you're playing an away game, you need to play by the rules of that team. But Canaanite agriculture was mixed with Canaanite religion.⁶ And so eventually the Israelites not only learned the rules of planting and harvest, they learned the ways of idol worship. It wasn't like they switched religions. It's more like two-timing. They still believed in Yahweh. They just started mixing their devotion to Yahweh with devotion to the Baals. They kept a foot in worshiping God and a foot in idol worship.

Isn't this exactly what we do? We want to have our cake and eat it too. We want to be Christians. But we also want to be prosperous in this world. And we've come to believe that in order to be prosperous in this world that we need to play by the world's rules. So we too bow down to the fertility gods of our age, the gods that bring prosperity. If we want popularity, we need to bow down to the idols of fame. And we need adopt the means of gaining position. We need to claw our way to the top. If we want possessions, we need to bow down to the idols of success. And we need to do whatever it takes to make it to the top, even if that means neglecting our families or the church. If we want pleasure, we need to bow down to the idols of sex and comfort.

What are the idols that are tempting you to divide your devotion to the Lord? The LORD says he's the one and only God and requires our exclusive allegiance to him and his ways. It's like the traditional wedding vows that say we're called to forsake all others and keep only unto him as long as we live! Or as the modern hymn says, God has bought our life and owns our love. Therefore, we should have no longing for another but be satisfied in him alone!

Our Deepest Needs

Only the one true God can answer the deepest needs of the human heart. But he calls us to take hold of his blessings by *his* means. He too promises us glory, but it comes by the way of humility. He

⁴ Block, Daniel Isaac. *Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999.

⁵ Davis

⁶ Ortlund, Raymond C. *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*. Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2002.

promises a rich inheritance, but calls us to surrender all we have in this life. He promises pleasure. But that pleasure is not found in the absence of suffering. The Israelites didn't trust God to provide for their deepest needs. Even though God had saved them out of Egypt, they didn't believe he was enough. So they whored after other gods. God has done even more for *us* in Christ. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, he has provided for us forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Surely he can provide for our lesser needs. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things" (Rom. 8:32).

RETRIBUTION (2:14-15; 2:20-3:4)

What was the result of this rebellion? That leads us to the third movement in the cycle, retribution. When we serve idols, it makes God angry.

Anger as an Expression of Love

We're told three times in this passage that Israel's rebellion led to God's anger (vv. 12, 14, 20). We don't like to think of God as an angry God. We like to think of him as a loving God. But these two things don't have to be in opposition. In fact, they go together. God's anger is actually an expression of his love. How is this possible? The Bible describes God's people as his bride. Imagine for a moment that a woman is married to a loving and faithful husband. But that woman decides to prostitute herself. She doesn't want to divorce her husband. She just wants to make a little extra money, so she sells her body to other men. What would a loving husband do in a situation like this? Would he say, "Well, you win some and you lose some?" Or "I guess that's just the way the cookie crumbles." No! If he truly loved his wife, he would be outraged; he would be angry.⁷ The same is true with God. When we try to live in relationship with God and whore after other gods (v. 17), it only makes sense that God would be angry. It's the only loving response. In Augustine's *Confessions*, he says to God, "What am I to you, that you should command me to love you and, if I do not, you should be angry with me and threaten great miseries."⁸ Who are we that God would even care to respond to our actions?

A Loving Test

When the Israelites served the Baals, God was angry with them. And in his anger he gave them over to plunderers; he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies (v. 14). This was God's loving and righteous retribution on his people. One reason we know that it was loving is because we're told what God was trying to accomplish in giving them into the hands of their enemies. This is found in 2:20-3:4. We're told three times that God left the Canaanites in the land to test them (2:22; 3:1, 4). God wanted the oppression they were experiencing to drive them to the LORD. He wanted them to think about their relationship with him that they had abandoned.⁹ He wanted them to see how much they needed God. He wanted them to depend on him in war (3:2). He wanted them to walk in the way of the LORD (2:22) and follow his commandments (3:4).

REPENTANCE (2:18)

In other words, he wanted them to repent. And that brings us to the fourth part of the cycle. When God disciplines us, it's meant to lead us to repentance.

⁷ Davis

⁸ Quoted in Ortlund

⁹ Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Co, 2013.

Repentance is not explicitly mentioned in this passage. And it's questionable whether or not the Israelites ever fully repent in the book of Judges. But they do cry out to the Lord for deliverance in most of the cycles. Here we're told that the Lord delivered them because of their groaning (v. 18). But we know that God's retribution was *meant* to lead Israel to repent. And the trials that we face are meant to lead us to repent as well.

RESCUE (2:16-19)

Let's now look at the fifth element in the Judges cycle, rescue. It's interesting, in this passage, that God's rescue of Israel doesn't necessarily follow their repentance or groaning. The text simply moves from rebellion and retribution to rescue. The text doesn't highlight Israel's repentance at all. Instead it highlights God's rescue. In fact, God's salvation of his people stands at the center of this passage. Why is that? I believe this teaches us that God delivers his people to display his grace.

When Israel rebelled, God gave them over to their enemies. But then when they cried out to him, he raised up judges who saved them (v. 16). These judges were not like Jeff Syrios or other judges you may know of today. A better term would be "deliverers" or "saviors." These men (and a woman) were empowered by God to defeat Israel's enemies and restore rest to Israel. This would bring the cycle to the end.

Downward Spiral

In many ways the cycle we see throughout judges is intended to highlight Israel's rebellion. In fact, Judges doesn't just repeat this cycle six times in the exact same way. Things go from bad to worse. The repeated cycle describes a downward spiral in Israel. We see this clearly in verse 19. "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." One pastor says this is like a second grade classroom. Let the teacher leave the room and everything turns to chaos. That's human nature. After the judges rescued Israel, they experienced rest. But after that judge left the classroom, so to speak, things go from bad to worse.¹⁰ That's sinful nature.

The cycle not only repeated; it got progressively worse. Israel was spiraling down. This comes out as the book unfolds. With each cycle, the thorns of idolatry go deeper; the snares of false gods get tighter around their neck (cf. 2:3). The rebellion gets worse. The oppression is heavier. The repentance is lighter. The judges themselves are more flawed. And the rescue and rest are weaker.¹¹

Light in Darkness

But I think the downward spiral in the book of Judges is not just there to highlight our rebellion. I think the main reason Judges takes pains to describe this downward spiral is to highlight God's grace. God continues to rescue his people even though they continue to do more and more evil! The book of Judges is not just about the sinfulness of man. It's even more about the *patient mercy* of God. We learn a lot about our depravity. But we learn even more about our long-suffering savior. The darkness of Judges makes the deliverance of God shine brighter.

I love Rembrandt's paintings. One of the techniques Rembrandt uses is darkness. But the darkness highlights the light in the paintings. Think of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. There's a lot going on in

¹⁰ Davis

¹¹ Keller

the shadows, the presence of the older brother being the most obvious. But all of this draws our attention even more to the loving father and the grace the wayward son is experiencing. The downward spiral of Judges paints in dark strokes. But these dark strokes make the presence of God's salvation all the more prominent. The book is all about God's deliverance in darkness; his patient mercy and long-suffering salvation.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And the wages of sin is death. This is the dark truth of sin and judgment. But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ. This is the light of the gospel. I hope the book of Judges helps us to understand our sinfulness and God's just judgment. I hope it leads us to repent and turn back to serve God faithfully. But praise God that even when we are faithless, he is faithful. He is our great deliverer. That's the main truth I want you to experience in this book.