

Sermon 2: Judges 2:6-3:6: How Israel Ended Up Under the Hand of God

OUTLINE

A forgetful generation
An unfaithful generation
A faithful God

INTRODUCTION

Judges 1 was a mess, and a mess that leaves us scratching our heads and asking questions. God has brought His people out of Egypt, out of slavery, sustained them in the wilderness but we see a very underwhelming conquest of Canaan that make us put the promises of God and His faithfulness in question. Last week we looked at Israel's half-hearted efforts at obedience and saw how God evaluated their obedience. That would have been a sufficient introduction to the book of Judges which will unravel itself as a repetitive story of Israel's unfaithfulness, God's discipline, Israel's repentance and God deliverance. But the book of judges has a double introduction as a way of underlining the issues of this book. Where the first introduction gave us a detailed narrative about the successes and the failures of the various tribes ending with God's evaluation of their so called obedience. 2:6-3:6 goes over the same ground giving more detail about Israel's covenant unfaithfulness and God's response to it. We must remember that Samuel is the likely author of this book, and he is preparing the nation to follow a godly king David. He does this by looking into Israel's past mistakes and helping them to see how not to be the people of God. As the people of God are about to embark into a new era as the people of God Samuel reflects back on an earlier period when Israel entered into the new era of taking the land. Samuel goes over the ground more than once trying to get us to see how a people go astray and end up under God's hand of discipline and there are many things for us to learn here. We will divide our section up into the three parts presented here. Firstly, we will see in 2:6-10 that one of the root problems was that this new generation of Israel were a forgetful people who did not know the Lord and His former deeds. Secondly, we will see how their unfaithfulness to God is described, v11-13. Thirdly, we will look at how the Lord responds and this gets the most amount of air time in 2:14-3:6. One of the functions of this section to help us understand the rest of the book. The book of Judges is predominantly a repeating pattern of sin, oppression, repentance and deliverance, this section is placed before it to help us see what spiritual dynamics are at play and help us to interpret the mess that is going to follow.

A forgetful generation

V6-7, '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.' We are told that the history of Israel is not one of complete failure, we are taken back to a time when Israel was obedient under godly leadership. We are taken back to the time of Joshua sending out the people of God to go and take their inheritances in the land. We are told that during all the days of Joshua, a godly leader, and during the days of those elders who had been with Joshua, who had seen all the great work God had done. During that generation the people of God were faithful. In other words, there are times when God's people can be faithful, and a godly

leadership is critical to this. V8-9 go on to tell us about the grave of Joshua and it is as if his death was the death of true religion in Israel, and v10 paints a sad picture, '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.'

Now the text says that they did not know the Lord, but technically they would have had the facts about God delivering their forefathers from Israel, how He kept them in the desert, how He helped them cross the Jordan and brought them into the land in fulfillment of His promises. It is not that they did not have the bare fact but that these facts did not feature in their minds and hearts to grip and move them. How does a generation fall away from God? There will have been a failure at various levels. The Levites whose job it was to teach and to read the law and help the people understand it were obviously failing to do their job. Lev. 10:11 says, 'and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.' Paul just before he was going to be executed wrote to Timothy to make provision for the future of the church that he had been serving as an apostle, 2 Tim. 2:2, 'You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, ² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.' It is the responsibility of every generation to ensure that the next generation will be well served with the truth of God. Paul took measures to train Timothy who in turn would propagate the truth by training others who would teach others. When those appointed to the office of teacher fail to teach God's word it is only a matter of time before the people of God drift from the truth.

What is so troubling about this generation is that God made sure that there would be many things that spoke to them of who He is and what He had done. The Israelite calendar had feasts which celebrated the Passover and God protecting Israel from the 10th plague in Egypt; the feast of Unleavened Bread which likewise pointed to the Exodus; the Feast of Booths which reminded the people of their wandering in the Wilderness and God sustaining and leading them. Monuments were built to remind Israel of God bringing them into the land; places were named in memory of what God had done there. These OT reminders and means of grace were neglected or ignored and the hearts of the people were no longer drawn in admiration and gratitude to the God who had done so much for them. Instead they thought the new idols of the area had more to recommend themselves than God. If we neglect meeting on the Lord's Day; if we neglect the Lord's Supper; if we neglect the gathering of the saints we will likewise grow cold. Those who neglect these things will become like this generation.

Likewise there must have been a failure in the home where parents who had the duty to teach their children failed to pass on their faith to their children. we have to say something about the parenting of this generation if the children grew up not knowing about God or His saving acts. Deuteronomy 6:7-9 tells the parents to teach their children, '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.' It is apparent that this generation was untaught, their parents had not instructed them as they should have. They did not know who God was and how He was the only God and superior to all the other gods. They did not know the history of God's

faithfulness and the commands that He had given them. Their ongoing good was dependent upon their faithfulness to God, Deut. 6:20-25, "'When 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?' 21 then 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. 22 And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. 23 And 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. 24 And 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. 25 And 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.'"

Good parenting is about what is said and about how it is lived. The parents may have spoken about God and their faith, but they were living out their faith before their children in a compromising way. As children listen to their parents, and suffer under their discipline they begin to hone their ability to discover hypocrisy. All parents will be hypocrites because they are sinners, but there are those whose lives a contradiction to their confession not just inconsistent from time to time. That generation was busy fighting, building, and settling. However we see in chapter 1 that they used worldly means, they compromised with the enemy, they enslaved the enemy, they did not totally obey God and destroy the idols, they were enamoured with the fully developed culture, and their children watched them apply their faith. The sensuality of the false religions ensnared their parents; the hunger for security which led them to idols that supposedly guaranteed rain and fertility were paraded before their children; like someone winning the lottery the Israelites inherited a land of milk and honey with houses and cities already built and were hardened by the many material benefits. If one generation are liars who claim to believe in God and don't live it, the next generation rejecting the sins of their parents will give up the lie altogether and abandon nominal religion. There is a challenge hereto live out our faith consistently, practically and transparently.

It should be noted that there was probably some nominal religion but the hearts of that generation were not gripped with the amazing grace of God that rescued them in such a powerful way. In other words they did not know the gospel. They would have had religion, they would have had holidays, they would have kept some of the rules, but without a knowledge of God's holiness, their sin and His love in saving them; without a knowledge of His faithfulness in keeping His promises to Abraham so that He would save even sinful people who were little different from the Egyptians; without the knowledge of the many miracles, and the many times God endured with the people who tested Him over and over again, it is no wonder that they left His ways and were attracted to the false gods of the nations. Religion without the Gospel is dead and it is not long before it is abandoned. This is not only true for children growing up in nominal Christianity, but even born again Christians lose their way unless they are setting before their eyes the wonder of God's person and the marvel of His saving work. If your heart is wandering away from God, if you are flirting with the world and your sinful desires, the cure is to know who God is and what He has done for you. Who He is in inexhaustible and incomprehensible majesty; what He has done in the infinite grace of saving us in Christ, there is nothing greater. If you are not enraptured with it you are viewing Him and His work incorrectly, you are looking at them in a shallow fashion they will fail to impress, if you are preoccupied with

fleeting things and not seeing with eyes of faith, you will forget you will drift and the lesser magnetic pull of sin will win.

An unfaithful generation

The text goes on to tell us about the particulars of their sins, v11, 'And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.' There are several descriptions of sin here which are fruitful for us to consider. Firstly, note that sin is doing what is evil in God's sight. Today sin is defined by what hurts other people; or that which acts against a person's ability to love themselves; or that which denies us the right to love anyone we want, or to express that love anyway we desire. The Bible's definition of sin starts with God not us. Sin is that which is against God, His law, and is determined to be sin by what He approves and disapproves, not us. This is important because when we sin we always make excuses so that our sins seem to be done for good reasons. I need to watch this questionable movie with inappropriate content so that I can relax; I need to express my anger against that person who has wronged me so that my emotions don't eat me up inside; I need to follow these sexual desires so that I can be true to myself. We are all familiar with these sorts of lies by which we make sin seem reasonable, but sin is what God calls sin not us. Our hearts are deceitful above all things and we pull the wool over our own eyes, but here we have God's objective view of sin helping cut through the lies. The Israelites' sins no doubt looked very reasonable to themselves as they adopted the culture of the people they invaded; as they took on the gods that were already providing rain and growth; as they made alliances through marriage with the local businessmen making quick headway into this new land they were in, adopting its ways and thinking so as to make the adjustment quicker. All the while God is being sinned against.

V12, '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.' Abandoning the God who has brought them out of Egypt. Sometimes we tell ourselves the lie that we are sinning understandably against a tyrannical and demanding judge, but here is the truth, when we sin we sin against the generous, serving God who has done so much in delivering us from our enemies. We sin against a God who has held nothing back in seeking to save us from ourselves and our sins. The Israelites had the Exodus to consider, we the cross, John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' We see as well that our sins provoke the Lord to anger. God is not naturally angry and cantankerous looking to vent His spleen on anyone. God's anger is His holiness in relation to sin, the wrath of God is something that we provoke because of our sins. As sinners we break God's law and He as a holy judge acts in justice against them. The language here is the accommodated language of anger that is seeking to illustrate this reality. The point we need to see is that we are sinners before a holy God and that our sins must be judged. The narrator is at pains to show that the failure of Israel to inherit the land is not because God is spiteful or a liar who does not keep His promises but that Israel has brought God's justice upon themselves.

V13, 'They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroht.' Here we see some of the things taken instead of God. Baals in the plural refer to the many Baal sights where Baal worship would have taken place, Ashtaroht is also

in the plural for this reason. Baal is a word that translates as Lord/master. Baal has several iterations but in Canaan Baal was associated with the clouds as the rain god and fertility god; Ashtaroth was the goddess of love and war. These were seen as husband and wife, and the religious practices often included sexual rites. One of the reasons that the men of Israel were so often carried away into these religions is because of the 'free sex' that went with it. The devil has always led people away from God through the lure of sexual sin, it is no different in our own day. The God who made marriage and sexual intercourse to be between a married man and woman was in opposition to the promiscuous and permissive sexuality and idolatry of the day. It would have been as counter-cultural to remain sexually pure in that day as it is today.

There is one more description of their unfaithfulness that we should consider, v17, '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.' Prostituting or whoring after other gods is a common description of Israel's unfaithfulness. Hosea 1-3 uses the idea of a marriage and the married woman, Israel abandoning her husband, God to go after other lovers, idols. This is a gripping metaphor which speaks powerfully to the nature of Israel's betrayal and the nature of sin. It has been pointed out that prostitution is a fitting picture to describe sin. Think about the desperate lives that those in prostitution live, the thin and meagre existence. Sin prostitutes us; but God marries us. Sin humiliates us and sells us to its friends; God is jealous for our devotion. Sin makes promises it cannot keep; God makes promises and keeps them. Sin uses and destroys us; God saves, protects, nourishes and heals us. In the ancient world a prostitute was a scandal and would lose face in society being disrespected by all; God marries us to Himself dignifying our existence as He bestows His gifts and His likeness upon us. Sin will pay any price to have its desires satisfied; Christ our Bridegroom has paid the highest price to have us.

A faithful God

How does a faithful God rule this unruly and willful people? That is what 2:16-3:6 outlines. In line with the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant God will afflict His people for their sins, seeking to restore them to Himself. We have here a summary of the rest of the book from the perspective of what God is doing. It is well summarized in v20-23, 'So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he said, "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." ²³ So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.' The ongoing presence of these nations is not a failure on God's part but His justice in action against the sins of Israel. Secondly, this is not a final judgment but an ongoing test to help the Israelites lean into God and take care to walk in His ways. There is fatherly mercy wrapped up in this fatherly discipline.

V16-19 give us in a generalized form the repeating cycles of the judges that will unfold in the rest of the book. In v16 we see the Lord raise up a leader, a judge, a savior type of person to deliver Israel from justice they have brought upon themselves. In v17 we see that Israel is hard hearted and does not respond to any godly leadership, going after other gods and the sins of the nations. V18 is

full of language about what the Lord does because of His compassion, '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.' Israel is hard but God is soft; Israel does not listen to the voice of reason but God listens to the groans of Israel. Whenever we see verses like these as Christians we cannot help but think of the gospel. We were not seeking God but He sought us; we were selling ourselves and paying with ourselves in the service and slavery of sin, He laid down His life to rescue us from our sin and to put us into the liberty of His service. We were His enemies, but He loved us by giving His Son to rescue and adopt us. Our wounds were self-inflicted, He took the punishments that we deserved to set us free. Sadly, we are blind to this God who is so good, v19, '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.'

Our section ends with a spelling out of what a good God is doing in ruling a bad people as He allows the Canaanites to stay in the land for the purpose of testing, improving, and teaching Israel. 3:1-6, '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. ²It 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. ³These 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. ⁴They 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. ⁵So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁶And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.' This dark ending is what makes the rest of the book in its repetitive cycle of affliction and deliverance intelligible.