

Judges and the problem of forgetfulness * Judges 2 & 3

October 21, 2018 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning we have reached a watershed moment in our series here in Joshua and Judges. Joshua has led the people into the Promised Land, he has governed them and led them to walk in the ways of God and it appears that they were pretty faithful in that. Joshua's generation seems to have honoured God and faithfully served Him with their lives.

But now they have passed on to their reward and now it's time for a new generation to decide for themselves if they will serve the Lord or pursue other gods. They can't ride on their parents' faith – they need to decide for themselves whom they will honour with their lives.

And you know from that reading how that went. Joshua 2:10-11 says it all:

10 After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals (Jdg 2:10-11 NIV).

The generation after Joshua decided: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Baals. We will serve other gods."

And it wasn't just the generation after Joshua. It was the generation after that. And the generation after that. And the generation after that. In fact, as you walk through the book of Judges, you very quickly realize that you're reading the same story over and over again – the story of what happens when people forget about God's mercies and decide to do life without Him.

If that sounds familiar – good – because that's the culture that we live in too. Culturally speaking, we are quick to forget God's many blessings – and so the story of Judges is our story too. Our culture is quick to seek fulfilment in other things and slow to remember God's goodness. So let's dig in to find out what happens when people forget about God and lose sight of His mercies.

Now at the most basic level, the book of Judges describes that by revisiting the same cycle over and over. There are specific things that happen in each judge's story and so I want to highlight that for you right off the bat. I've seen this cycle described in a number of ways, but I got an idea this week that I'll use to describe the cycle of judges.

It goes like this – at first, everything is as it should be – you can see there God and His people are focused on each other. God is pouring out His love on His people and the people are responding with devotion and service. They are doing their best of walk in God's ways and He is supporting them as they go. Let's label this 'relationship.'

But then, His people's eyes start to wander. They start to wonder if maybe the grass is greener on the other side – if they can't get a better deal from another god. And so they turn their back on God and cease to give Him any say in their lives. Let's call this 'unfaithfulness.'

Well now we have a problem - God's people are chasing after other gods – how do you suppose He's going to act? Well, how did Joshua say a holy and jealous and spurned God would react? He'll turn His back on them, won't He? He can't tolerate sin; He can't tolerate divided loyalties and so He abandons them to their fate. And they end up in a heap of trouble. Let's call this 'rejection.'

Now, here's the thing. For all intents and purposes, this should be the end of the cycle. God's people have turned their backs on God? They've forgotten about His blessings and actually spit in His face by seeking blessings somewhere else? You'd think that this story was done and God would go find another Abraham.

But something really incredible happens here. God, because He is rich in mercy, hears the cries of His people and He acts to rescue them. They don't deserve mercy; they don't deserve a second chance – but God in His infinite mercy rescues them. He raises up a deliverer, a judge, a person who will redeem His people from the trouble they've gotten themselves into. Let's call this stage 'redemption' on our cycle.

And with that, we're back into relationship. Because of God's unfailing mercy, the people of God are delivered from the consequences of sin and restored to relationship with God.

But here's the thing – they're going to fall into unfaithfulness again and the whole cycle repeats itself.

And the book of Judges is just Israel going around and around again and again along this cycle. But there's a catch – each time they go around the cycle, the situation worsens. It's a real, second verse, same as the first, a little bit louder and a little bit worse situation. It's a downward spiral. Each time you go around, things gets worse, the judges get worse, until you finally hit rock bottom and it all falls apart. I'll tell you more about that in the weeks to come, but for now, let me take you into the book of Judges to how it describes this cycle.

So join me in Judges 2 and we're going to start at verse 6. Chapter one is an introduction that you can read on your own, but I want to go directly to 2:6 because this is where we find the cycle sketch in general terms. So verse 6 of chapter 2 – we pick up from last week.

6 After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to his own inheritance.

7 The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. (Awesome, so right now, people are in right relationship with God – they are following His commands and He is giving them success wherever they go).

8 Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten.

9 And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

10 After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.

11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals.

Now listen, I know that it says that they didn't 'KNOW GOD' but for sure, they KNEW ABOUT God. Joshua had all those stone memorials put up to remind people of God's faithfulness. The Hebrew handbook on parenting started and ended with 'Seven easy ways to teach your kids about YHWH's faithfulness.' There's NO WAY that they didn't know ABOUT YHWH, but they chose not to KNOW Him personally. They've decided that their parents knew nothing and so they decided to do their own thing and find meaning in other gods. And now we're into unfaithfulness, aren't we? They have forgotten what God has done for them and have turned their attention to other things that they think they can count on for life and security.

12 They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger
13 because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

Now – before we go tut-tutting the Israelites and saying 'how dumb could they be to go after these idols?', let's think about what these idols represent. Baal and the Ashtoreths are closely tied to provision and wealth. And so the idea was if you worshiped Baal, he would be sure to feed you and keep you safe. Now these days, we don't have little wooden statues representing Baal, but tell me, do people chase after security and provision and wealth at the expense of their relationship with God? Absolutely. Baal is alive and well in the pursuit of wealth and materialism that we see today and we need to be just as careful as the Israelites whom we are honouring with our time and effort.

So Israel has become unfaithful toward God – what do you suppose is going to happen? He turns His back on them. Rejection. 'You're not going to live in light of the blessings I've poured out on You? You'd rather shack up with some 'lesser god?' Fine. See how far it will get you.' Verse 14 -

14 In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.

15 Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

Now again, at this point, God could very easily say – you made your bed – you gotta sleep in it. I showed you nothing but love and you forgot all about it and and whored after other gods. I don't care if you're in distress – that's what you get for infidelity.

But that's not what He does, does He? Verse 16 -

16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.

And if you skip down one verse, you'll see why -

18 Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.

Even though their oppression is the direct result of them turning their backs on God, God is moved by compassion and rescues them.

That's real love. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love love.

And He rescues them by raising up a judge – a deliverer really. The problem with 'judge' is that it makes us think 'Judge Judy' but really the 'judges' here are military leaders – people who deliver God's people from oppression.

So that's the redemption part of the cycle and now we're back into relationship. That's verse 18 - Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived. God has restored them to relationship with Him and all is as it should be again.

But... verse 19 -

19 But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. Second verse, same as the first...

So that's the cycle but chapter two just lays it about in general terms. From here on though, the narrator is going to fill in the details and show us how it works on a case by case basis. Skip ahead to chapter 3, verse 7, and we're going to see the first of the Judges – Othniel.

So chapter 3 – The people of God begin in relationship with God, but then – verse 7 -

7 The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. (Unfaithfulness)

8 The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. (Rejection).

9 But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them.

10 The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. (Redemption).

11 So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died. (And they're back into relationship with God).

So judge number 1 is Othniel -

BUT... the cycle continues... verse 12 -

12 Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, (unfaithfulness) and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. (That's rejection).

13 Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. (Jericho – God's rolling back some of the blessings that He'd previously given).

14 The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.

15 Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer--Ehud, a left-handed man – now this is the redemption part – but I want you to notice something. No offense to lefties out there – but from the ancient Israelite point of view – being left handed is a detriment, a handicap almost. Othniel is 'the perfect judge' but this guy Ehud is one step removed from perfect – the Israelites would see 'left handedness' as a deformity. Nonetheless, God chose him to be the deliverer and so... ~~the son of Gera the Benjamite~~. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab.

16 Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. (Now here's where the left handed ness is actually an asset – when they pat him down, they're going to check his left side, where righties would have their sword – but here – it's hidden away on his right).

17 He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man.

18 After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it.

(Now there's a bit of a joke here, because not only is this king very fat, his name is Eglon, which means 'calf' – this is a fatted calf who is oppressing Israel.

19 At the idols near Gilgal he (Ehud) himself turned back and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." (And it's for you and you alone). (At this point he's traveled back to the king) The king said, "Quiet!" And all his attendants left him.

20 Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, "I have a message from God for you."

(And you can almost picture Ehud the fatted calf rising up out of his throne to hear – oh, what is it that God has to tell me?)

As the king rose from his seat,

21 Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.

22 Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.

You can almost picture Ehud saying 'That's what you get for messing with my people.'

23 Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

24 After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the house."

25 They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead.

In the meantime, Ehud got away, gathered up an army, came back and overthrew the oppressors and so, per verse 30 – the land had peace for eighty years. They're back in relationship with God. Until Judges 4:1 - After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the LORD. (Jdg 4:1 NIV). And now we're back into unfaithfulness.

It's a never ending cycle that reveals how quick people are to forget God's mercies, how zealous God is for exclusive devotion, and how gracious He is in forgiving faithless people.

So let's take a moment and think about what we've seen. What happens when people forget about God's mercies and turn their back on Him?

Well, first off, they do what's right in their own eyes. That's a phrase that appears throughout the book of Judges and it's a really pithy way to sum it all up. 'Doing right in their own eyes' means that people ignore God and do whatever they think is right. They decide for themselves what's good and evil, they decide for themselves what's right and wrong, and they have no higher authority than their own sense of morality. They seek fulfillment in all sorts of things that are less than God.

And on one hand, that may sound kind of appealing. But on the other, when you press into it, you will quickly see that 'doing right in your own eyes' has led to all sorts of trouble. It's led to racism, economic inequality, rampant sexual harassment and all sorts of messed up politics. It's the kind of thinking that makes jumping naked into a shark tank seem like a good idea.

But it's not.

And it's especially not because God is still there. He is still pouring out His mercy and His every day provision on even the most atheistic person and it angers Him when we imagine that those blessings come from someone other than Him.

And so we, just as much as the people of ancient Israel, need a deliverer.

And fortunately, God has raised one up – His own Son, Jesus.

Jesus came to be the ultimate judge, the ultimate deliverer, to set us free from sin's oppression and restore us to relationship with God. Just like Othniel and Ehud and all the other judges, Jesus lived to rescue us from sin and to win our hearts back for God.

And when we claim Him as our deliverer, He actually sets us free from this downward cycle of unfaithfulness and rejection and mercy – and good thing too – because God’s is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love – but His mercy will eventually run out. The people of Israel found that out the hard – they just kept riding this cycle around and around, presuming on God’s kindness, until finally He said ‘ok, that’s it. No more. We’re through’ and He sent them into exile – the North of Israel into Assyria and the south to Babylon. But even then, God had mercy and He brought back a remnant, from whom Jesus came.

Let’s not presume upon His mercy and keep ignoring Him, hoping that He’ll forgive us. Instead let’s let His mercy lead us to faithfulness. I know that by and large, we have accepted Jesus as our deliverer, our Lord and Saviour, so I want you to make a point this week of remembering what He has done for you. Fight again the tendency to forget and instead be quick to remember what God has done for you and let that move you to faithful living.

When you wake up in the morning, I want you to look in the mirror – and tell yourself: “You are a child of God. You are rescued by the ultimate deliverer to experience all the joy and blessing that comes from knowing God. Don’t look to other things for fulfilment – but find everything you will ever need in relationship with God.”

And before you go to bed, look back over the day and see all God’s mercies. The good food you’ve eaten, the encouraging words you’ve heard, the simple fact of having life and health and strength. These are all from God and we thrive when we remember those mercies and live faithfully in light of them.

The cycle in Judges shows us how quick people are to forget God’s mercies, how zealous God is for exclusive devotion and how gracious God is to forgive unfaithful people.

Let’s avoid the ‘quick to forget’ part and instead be quick to remember and quick to give thanks for God’s unfailing faithfulness.