

Judges 2:6-19 – “What Went Wrong?”

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Intro: “What went wrong?” Whenever there is a disaster of some kind, it is natural for us to ask that question. An investigation of the facts always follows the crash of an airplane; a “post-mortem” autopsy always follows an unexplained passing. We do those things because we believe that future tragedies might be averted by examining past mistakes. The Bible affirms the soundness of that point of view. In a certain sense, the stories that we will be reviewing in the coming weeks are a kind of “post-mortem,” an autopsy of the national collapse of God’s people following their entry into the land of promise. Tonight, we begin a study of four men of prominence, whom God used to deliver His people from their suffering during this very dark period of Israel’s history. The principles we’ll discover in our study apply universally to God’s people in every generation. What can we learn? How can we avoid making the same mistakes that unfortunate generation made? In tonight’s lesson, our study begins with a kind of autopsy, a post-mortem diagnosing the cause of Israel’s disease. In coming weeks, we’ll examine God’s medicine for Israel’s sickness applied by four men: Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah.

Proposition: It is a danger to reject God’s revelation, but God continues to reach out to those He loves.

Preliminaries: I said that in this book we will study the stories of four men who served as judges of God’s people: Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. If you’ve read the Book of Judges, you’ll know that these aren’t the only men used of God to rescue His people during the roughly 300 years of history the book covers, so it’s reasonable to ask, “Why these four? What is so special about them?” The answer is found in the Book of Hebrews: **Hebrews 11:32 - 32** *And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah.*¹ Here we find a remarkable thing – four names from the Book of Judges that God included in “Faith’s Hall of Fame.” That may cause a bit of head scratching. How did these four men get included in that chapter? As we read their stories in Judges, we discover that these four were anything but perfect. Gideon was a “Chicken.” Barak was a “Momma’s Boy.” Jephthah was “Reckless.” Samson was a “Knucklehead.” Yet, here they are immortalized as great men of faith. So, why are they listed as heroes of the faith? We hope to find out when we study their lives in the coming weeks.

Another question arises from a reading of the Book of Judges as well: Why is everything in this book so dark? Let’s be frank. This book is painful to read. Listen to Warren Wiersbe’s introduction to the book using modern day newspaper headlines: **“Family Feud Leaves 69 Brothers Dead! Powerful Government Leader Caught in ‘Love Nest’. Gang Rape Leads to Victim’s Death and Dismemberment. Girls at Party Kidnapped and Forced to Marry Strangers. Woman Judge Says Travelers No Longer Safe on Highways.”**² As Wiersbe points out, **“Sensational headlines like these are usually found on the front page of supermarket tabloids, but the above headlines actually describe some of the events in the Book of Judges.”** Why is this book so dark? What is going on here, and what does God want us to learn through reading

¹ This pattern courtesy of Elwood McQuaid’s book, *“Not to the Strong.”*

² Warren Wiersbe.

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these sordid stories? In a word, “What Went Wrong?” We’ll begin to answer that question tonight in our study of Joshua 2:6-19, to which we now turn.

Billboard:

- (vv.6-10) A Time of Peace
- (vv.11-15) A Time of Rebellion
- (vv.16-19) A Time of Retreat

(vv.6-10) A Time of Peace – Verse six begins an explanation of what went wrong by flashing back to Joshua 24:28, a time of hope and triumph for the nation prior to Joshua’ death. The people of God had taken the land as God had promised, and before dying Joshua had called them to a recommitment to God’s covenant, something the people had willingly entered. It was a time of peace for the nation, and there we pick up the story: **Judges 2:6–10 - 6** *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.* Here, we are given the genesis of the trouble that would stalk the people of Israel all the way through the remainder of the book: *And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.* What went wrong? Simply put, the faith of the Fathers was not passed on to the hearts of their children. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary puts it this way: The generation that succeeded Joshua’s “**Did not know God in a vital way. They had not seen the miracles their fathers had talked about. People cannot thrive on the spiritual power of their parents; each generation must personally experience the reality of God.**”³ How could this happen? Surely the children had heard their parents’ stories of God’s deliverance and power. How could the fathers not tell of crossing the Jordan River? Marching around Jericho and seeing its walls fall? The sun standing still while they defeated their enemies? To imagine that Joshua and his contemporaries were simply silent about these things, is beyond belief. That can’t be the answer. No. The problem must have been in the hearts of the children. Truth passed down is not enough. Each generation must experience the truth for itself. It’s all well and good to talk about past victories, but if you have no struggles of your own for faith to conquer, you’ll never come to know God in a vital way. And that was their problem: the Fathers fought the battles, but the children knew only peace. They felt no need for “**a personal, experiential knowledge**”⁴ of God for themselves. What had made Joshua’s generation alive with vital faith had been a desperate need for God’s presence in their lives. How does God bring the Scriptures to life?

³ Expositor’s Bible Commentary.

⁴ Rydelnik & VanLaningham.

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Through a living interaction with Him in life’s daily struggles. Is this not the lesson of the Wilderness journey?

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God uses tribulation as His gift to make faith come alive in the hearts of each generation.

[ILLUSTRATION] Gwen and I had the privilege of working with a group of young people at the Esteban Arce Church in Cochabamba, Bolivia during our time of language study. To say that we were “working with them” implies that Gwen and I were leaders, but the reality was far different from that! They were the ones that knew what they were doing. Gwen and I just tried to struggle along being helpful to them while they ran the church’s Awana program for children. I’ll spare you the laughable details of our “ministry” among them, but one thing stands out that we will never forget. When the time came for us to move on to our place of service in Paraguay, the Esteban Arce youth gave us a going away party. At that party we asked the assembled group of about ten young Bolivian believers what they wanted to do with their lives. What were their hopes and dreams for their future? Would they want to be doctors or lawyers? Would they dream of successful careers in business? Perhaps they would want to help lift their economically poor nation out of poverty by serving in government. To our surprise, not one of these things was mentioned as a dream for the future. Each one said that they wanted to become a missionary or a Christian worker. Gwen and I appreciated their humble attitudes as they shared their dreams, but frankly we were skeptical. These young people lived in the second poorest nation in the hemisphere. Their chance of getting the education and financial support required to fulfill their dreams seemed very remote to us. How surprised we were to learn years later from beloved coworkers that all but one of the youths in that group accomplished just what they dreamed of that day! How did that happen? I suspect a great contribution to their success came from the fact that they learned early in life to trust God rather than their circumstances. When God is all you’ve got, you learn that God is all you need! Faith becomes real, and you learn to know God in a vital way.

[APPLICATION] Someone has said that every generation of Christians can be the last generation of Christians if we fail to pass on to the next generation a vital knowledge of Christ. We must pass on more than mere information. Faith itself must be communicated, and faith is best communicated amid struggles. The struggle to live Godly lives in the midst of a filthy generation. The struggle to remain culturally distinct in the presence of a people demanding that we culturally assimilate. The struggle to refuse to compromise what we know to be true, when all around are calling on us to “tolerate” untruth. Perhaps the biggest mistake we can make as Christians is to ask God to give us peace in this world. It is not in times of peace, but in days of struggle that faith become real in our lives. Have you noticed in our New Testaments, that the early church never prayed for God to lift the persecution they were experiencing? Their prayer was always for boldness and power under persecution. Even today I am told, the persecuted church in China asks not that we pray for their relief, but that we pray for them to remain faithful. And do you know what they pray for us? That we would not give up in our

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prosperity, what they have kept in their poverty. God uses tribulation as His gift to make faith come alive in the hearts of each generation.

(vv.11-15) A Time of Rebellion – The generation that arose after Joshua’s generation, turned away from following the Lord because they had not learned to know the Lord themselves. These verses tell of their rebellion and of the retribution the Lord brought upon them because they abandoned Him: **Judges 2:11–15** - **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 Ashtaroath. 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.* How can it be that people to whom the Lord has given His precious Word, people whom the Lord has taken out of the world – how is it that such blessed people could turn their backs on the Lord? The answer is that they didn’t believe in Him. Belief is more than holding a right knowledge of God; it is committing oneself to the Lord from the heart, as well as with the head. These children of Joshua’s generation had no personal faith in the God they supposedly worshipped, even though their nation had a rich experience of God’s deliverance and faithfulness. J. Sidlow Baxter helps us understand: *“They did not love Jehovah one whit more for His painstaking patience [toward them]. The God of their fathers was simply a convenient resort in times of extremity.”*⁵ In other words, the faith they had received from their fathers had simply become mere religion to them. Like other forms of paganism, mere religiosity seeks to control the unwanted things in the world by manipulation of God through forms, ceremonies, and rituals. But how could people who had received the rich revelation of God through Moses turn aside to ugly paganism – to idolatrous religion characterized by illicit sexuality; child sacrifice; degrading practices? The answer is that they could turn away from God and toward these things because their unbelieving hearts craved those things. Being empty of the knowledge of God, they gave themselves over to the desires of their fallen hearts, and the vane imaginations of their unredeemed minds. They were defenseless against the evil one’s temptations because they refused the knowledge of the truth (cf. **John 3:19 - 19** *And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil*). God does not take lightly those who are offered His light yet turn away to darkness. In verses 14-15 we see God’s reaction to the rebellion of His people: **Judges 2:14–15** - **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.* When men and women who

⁵ J. Sidlow Baxter, “Explore the Book.”

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have received the truth about God, choose to turn away from God rather than bowing before Him, God in love brings terrible judgments upon them. He does this “in love,” because He desires to turn them from their blindness toward the light. He not only leaves the door open to them, but He also uses painful means to turn them finally to Himself. Notice the final phrase of verse 15: *“And they were in terrible distress.”* Sometimes the depth of God’s severity is the measure of His love. God loved His rebellious people, so He kept His promise to bring trouble upon those who refused His grace.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God uses trouble to discipline His rebellious people and turn them back to Himself.

[ILLUSTRATION] On the farms around where I grew up in Virginia, as a boy I sometimes encountered an electric fence. It seemed harmless enough when you looked at it. Just a simple strand of bare wire or two surrounding a pasture. I certainly didn’t appear to be as dangerous as the barbed wire most farmers used! But one of my friends persuaded me to touch a wire with my finger one day and I was never tempted to touch one of those wires again! The shock taught me a painful lesson: sticking my hand where it wasn’t supposed to be, wasn’t the smartest thing I ever did!

[APPLICATION] God’s discipline of His people serves a similar purpose. There are people in the Body of Christ who are not of the Body of Christ but might yet become part of the Body of Christ. God is not ashamed to bring judgment – sometimes severe judgement – down on those ones, seeking to turn them to genuine repentance. The judgments God might bring are various. Sometimes illness; other times grief; occasionally even an early death (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30). When we experience these things or see others around us experiencing them, we can know two things with certainty: God loves the one He is afflicting; God is inviting the one under discipline to turn to Him. God uses trouble to discipline His rebellious people and turn them back to Himself.

(vv.16-19) A Time of Retreat – The information contained in these verses paired with that in verses 11-15 introduces us to the repeated cycle of Rest, Rebellion, Retribution, Repentance, and Restoration that typifies God’s dealings with His people in the Book of Judges. **Judges 2:16–19** - **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.* As we read the Book of Judges, we will notice the pattern outlined in these verses happening time and again. The people would be in a time of **Rest** under God’s leadership through one of the

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Judges. Then, that judge would pass away, and the people would fall back into **Rebellion**. God’s inevitable response was to bring them under **Retribution**. When things got hot enough for the people, they would respond with **Repentance**. God would then raise up another Judge who would rescue them from their enemies and rule over them bringing **Restoration**. We might think that this would answer the need pointed out when we studied verses 6-10 – that this experience with God would result in the people coming to know God personally. After all, wasn’t that the experience of God’s people in the Wilderness? It’s impossible to miss the fact that the people who left Egypt under Moses were doubters, but the people that went into Canaan with Joshua were faithful followers of God. In their case experience with God was purifying, but in the Book of Judges we do not find that same thing occurring. In fact, we are told in verse 19 that the people simply went from bad to worse following each cycle: *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.* There are two important lessons here: Each time God’s discipline is rejected, the ensuing darkness becomes a bit more impenetrable; and Even though God’s people rebel against Him, He still, in love, seeks to turn them back to Himself.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] There is great danger in refusing the knowledge of the Lord; yet in love God continues to invite men and women to join in His family.

Conclusion: So, here is the pattern of God’s dealing with His rebellious people. And there is one more thing we ought to take note of before finishing our study tonight. The Book of Judges is a prelude to the story of Israel’s kings. The six books of the Bible following the Book of Ruth, which takes place during the time of the Judges, give us the story of Israel under her kings. We notice that Judges prepares the way for the coming of God’s king because four times in Judges we hear the refrain: **Judges 21:25 - 25** *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* We might think, “Well, that’s the solution then. If they only had a king, everything would be OK!” Yet as we read those six books, we find that having a king didn’t resolve Israel’s problem with unbelief. In fact, in many ways things only got worse! Prophets arose and faded away. Priests betrayed God and the people. Kings turned shamelessly to idolatry. Even the sacrifices ceaselessly offered seemed to make no difference. What in the world has gone wrong now? Reading the Old Testament in context we discover the answer. Each book of the Old Testament is like a link in a chain that stretches from the Tree of Life in Eden to the Cross of Christ on Calvary. Each link plays its part, but all of them together tell an essential truth: humanity will never be able to produce a prophet, priest, king, or sacrifice that rescues man from his darkness. The chain is only broken, and man set free again, at the Cross of Jesus, for He is the only Prophet, Priest, King, and Sacrifice that can bring fallen men and women back into freedom. The Book of Judges is dark, and that darkness won’t clear until the Light of the World arrives to dispel it. I invite you to join us in the coming weeks for our journey through the time of the Judges, viewed through four weak men, called by God to rescue His people from their darkness. The battle, as we’ll discover, is “*Not to the Strong.*”⁶

⁶ Elwood McQuaid.