

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. 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. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. 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. 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.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. 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. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. 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. 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.

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. 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. 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. 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. 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, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, 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." So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

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. 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. 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. 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. So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.

(Judges 2:6–3:6)

Introduction

When I was in school, we would occasionally take school field trips to museums, animal parks, or wildlife reserves. We would always begin the tour at the visitor's information centre. It wasn't the most exciting start to the day, but we endured it because we wanted to get to the real fun. In the end, though, the informational videos played at the visitor's centre usually proved importantly informative.

In his commentary on Judges, Dale Ralph Davis compares Judges 2:6–3:6 to the information centre for the book of Judges.

Readers familiar with the book of Judges don't necessarily spend too much time or attention at the visitor's information centre. We want to get into the action—to read about God working mightily through Gideon's shaky faith, Jephthah's rash vow, and Samson's great strength. These are the exciting stories that grab our attention and enlighten our imagination. But if we don't first stop at the information centre, the rest of the tour may well prove meaningless in terms of what Judges really has to teach us. This section gives us insight into what we should learn in the remainder of the book.

At the same time, we gain insight here into the nature of humanity, divinity, and iniquity. We will consider this text under those three broad headings.

The Nature of Humanity

First, the visitor's centre gives us some insight into the nature of humanity by focusing on the nature of the Israelites during the days of the judges.

Historically, this section focuses on the collapse of Israel into idolatry after the Joshua generation. We are told that the people served Yahweh during Joshua's lifetime and the lifetime of Joshua's elder contemporaries who outlived him, but the next generation was increasingly given to idolatry.

The question is, what led to this collapse? How did the people go from faithfulness to faithlessness within just a single generation? The text suggests a threefold explanation.

Apathetic Obedience

First, we see that the obedience described in this text was, at best, apathetic. This may not seem so obvious at first glance but it becomes clearer when you read 2:6–9 in the larger context of the book:

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. 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. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. 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.

(Judges 2:6–9)

The key phrase in this section is “to take possession of the land.” That is what the Israelites were called to do in the Promised Land and what Joshua dismissed them to do. However, readers have already been set up for the way in which the Israelites went about this task: They took possession without driving out the former inhabitants (see 1:27–33). The Lord had clearly commanded them to completely drive out the former inhabitants of Canaan, but their obedience to this command was half-hearted, and they allowed the Canaanites to dwell among them.

It is important to note that God’s command for Israel to completely dispossess the Canaanites was not a bloodthirsty, vindictive command but was driven by his concern for pure worship. If Israel did not obey, they would be tempted with idolatry. Sadly, they failed in their obedience and things unfolded precisely as the Lord said they would (see 3:5–6).

But what led to such incomplete obedience? Verse 7 offers a clue: “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.*” The first part of that verse is encouraging, but in the second part we see that the only reason they obeyed is because they had exposure to Yahweh’s great works. As soon as there were no great works on display, and no one who could recall the great works they had seen, there was no further impetus to obey Yahweh. Why? Because, at that point, Yahweh became to the people just like all the other gods around them.

In ancient pagan thought, the gods were ranked according to which one showed himself to be most powerful. When a god gave a display of great power, he was worthy of worship, but the same god could be quickly ignored when another god’s power eclipsed his.

For example, when Yahweh gave Daniel the correct interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the king was impressed: “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.” Daniel’s three friends, who worshipped the same God, were exalted to a place of prominence right with him (Daniel 2:46–49). Yahweh had proven his power and was worthy of recognition.

However, in the very next chapter, Yahweh’s great work of interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dream was forgotten. The same men were previously elevated to a place of prominence were cast into a fiery furnace when they would not bow to the king’s statue. When Yahweh again showed his power in delivering his

servants, Nebuchadnezzar was again suitably impressed. He made a bold proclamation of obeisance to Yahweh:

Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.

(Daniel 3:28–29)

Once again, the three friends were promoted to a place of honour (Daniel 3:30) because once again their God had shown his power, but in the very next chapter, all was forgotten again, until Yahweh once again showed his power by revealing and interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

This was the way that things worked: When a particular god offered a display of power, he was recognised—but only until another god showed his greater power, at which point allegiance was transferred. Allegiance to any god at any given time was apathetic at best, because it was dependent on that god's current display of power.

Sadly, while Joshua's generation served the Lord, they evidently only did so because they had seen his great acts. When those acts were forgotten, so was the God who had performed them. And that was no different from the surrounding peoples. When displays of great divine power stopped, the Israelites lost their allegiance to Yahweh and were tempted to worship the gods of the people they failed to drive out. Because they did not drive out the former inhabitants, as God had commanded, they were easily tempted by those people into idolatry when miraculous displays of divine power ceased.

If we are honest, we will admit that we face the same temptation. It is easy to serve God when he is doing great things for us, when his favour seems to smile upon us. It is harder to remain faithful in our allegiance in times of divine silence, or when providence seems to frown on us. In those times, it takes deliberate effort to maintain allegiance to the Lord.

This is why it is so important to maintain a clear distinction between the God of the Bible and the gods by which we are so easily tempted—particularly in times when we do not witness his great power. When we are not deliberate in our devotion to the Lord, we are far too easily distracted by the allures of the world.

To guard her devotion to Yahweh, Israel should have driven out the surrounding nations. To guard our devotion to the Lord, we need to separate ourselves from surrounding distractions and focus deliberately on the Lord. We do that by identifying and removing from our lives whatever might distract us from our devotion to the Lord, and by giving ourselves wholeheartedly in devotion to him. This means deliberately spending time in the word, fellowship, and prayer. It means exposing yourself intentionally to the ordinary means of grace given to you in the context of the local church. This is necessary because apathetic obedience will inevitably lead to blatant disobedience.

Generational Obedience

A second characteristic of the obedience described here is that it was a generational obedience: “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” (2:10).

We know that succeeding generations of Israelites were at least intellectually aware of the great acts of the Lord. Their theoretical and (to a degree) theological knowledge of Yahweh was not the problem; it was in their experiential knowledge of the Lord that they fell short. They knew lots *about* Yahweh, but they didn’t *know* Yahweh. Their parents passed to them the knowledge of the Bible, but not the fear of the Lord.

Once again, this is a temptation of which we need to be painfully aware. It is easy for us to experience God’s kindness ourselves, and to revel in it, without teaching the next generation the fear of the Lord.

Of course, this applies immediately and directly to parents: Do your children learn from you about God without learning to love God? Are you intentional in discipling your children to learn the fear of the Lord? Children can have a great deal of Bible knowledge, which enables them to parrot the faith of their parents, without experiencing true conversion. We need to teach our children, and discipline our children, and pray for our children to experience God for themselves, not only to know a whole lot about God.

But this applies equally to every member of the church—parents and non-parents. We all have the responsibility to pass true devotion to the Lord to the next generation. Sunday school teacher, children’s ministry worker, youth leader, is your goal to merely pass on Bible knowledge or to lead those under your ministerial care to true devotion to the Lord? Do you teach and pray with genuine fervour and desire for them to know the Lord? How dreadful a testimony it would be for a generation in our churches to arise who do not know the Lord or what he has done for us!

Amnesic Obedience

A third characteristic of the obedience here described is that it is amnesic—quickly forgotten:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. 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. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.

(Judges 2:11–13)

Notice the emphasis here: “They abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt.” Yahweh had a long track record of faithfulness to “their fathers,” but they quickly forgot what he had done and so turned to “the Baals and the Ashtaroth.”

How easy it is for us to forget God’s kindness to us and our forbears. How easy it is to suffer spiritual amnesia.

The Lord recognises this weakness in us, and so he provides us means of remembrance. One such means is the Lord's Table: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24–25). Why do we need to partake regularly of the Lord's Supper? Because we are prone to forget. We need tangible reminders of what God has done for us in Christ, and Communion is one such means.

In point of fact, everything we do in corporate worship serves this purpose. God has designed it that way. We hear preaching every week to remind us. We sing songs every week to remind us. We pray corporately every week to remind us. We read Scripture every week to remind us. We partake of the Lord's Supper every week to remind us.

The Nature of Divinity

The first thing we learn in the visitors' centre of Judges is about the apathetic, generational, amnesic obedience of Israel, which so often mirrors our walk with the Lord. But our text also teaches us something about the nature of God. In 2:14–3:4, we see three vital lessons about divine character.

Faithful Anger

First, we learn that Yahweh is a God of faithful anger.

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. 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.

(Judges 2:14–15)

It may sound strange to use the words "faithful" and "anger" alongside each other, but if that is so, it is only because we have lost sight of the character of God as revealed in the Bible. "The anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel" not in a spontaneous, off-the-cuff manner. No, it was kindled against Israel "as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them." Even when the Israelites broke their covenant with Yahweh, he remained faithful to his covenant with them. He had warned them, time and again, that there would be dire consequences to covenant faithlessness, and he proved true to his word.

This anger arose from divine jealousy. He had revealed himself to be a God of jealousy (Exodus 34:14), and as Dale Ralph Davis notes, jealous love necessarily manifests itself in righteous anger when it is offended. The God who calls us into covenant relationship with him requires our exclusive devotion, and when that devotion is not given, his faithful anger is aroused.

We live in an age in which the rallying cry of the world is tolerance. Defined one way, tolerance can be an admirable quality, but the kind of tolerance that the world calls for is really acceptance and approval. It is increasingly insufficient to merely *tolerate* what the Bible calls sin; we are now expected to approve it.

Historically, Baptists have strongly affirmed the separation of church and state. One of the outworkings of that distinctive is an embrace of the freedom of religion and worship. As the early Baptists intended it, freedom of religion is more than freedom Christianity. It is freedom for all religious expression. For example, historic Baptist theology would not oppose the construction of a mosque in your suburb. Christians who object to the construction of a mosque have no basis to complain when Muslims object to the construction of a church building in the same suburb. And so historic Baptist theology prizes the protection of every person's right to express worship in the way that they see fit.

That means that, when the house of worship for Islam, or Mormonism, or the Jehovah's Witnesses, is constructed, Christians shouldn't burn it down. We are tolerant of other expressions of worship in our area. We are even cordial and friendly toward those of other religious persuasions in our area. But to tolerate something is not to celebrate it. We believe and affirm and preach the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, and we are not ashamed to say that any religious expression that denies the exclusivity of Jesus Christ is wrong. That is not popular theology, but it is biblical theology. It is theology that flows from allegiance to Jesus Christ.

This principle extends beyond religious freedom. In our South African context, it is no longer sufficient to tolerate the various sinful expressions of the LGBTQ+ community; we are now expected to approve and celebrate those expressions. We are expected to approve expressions of lust and deception and abortion—indeed to celebrate the individual's personal choice to engage in these things. The Bible does not allow us to do that. God is angered both at “those who practice such things” and those who “give approval to those who practice them” (Romans 1:32). God does not approve of sin—he is faithfully angry at sin every day—and we who are his people have no right to approve and celebrate what he hates.

Unwarranted Deliverance

Second, we learn that Yahweh is a God of unwarranted deliverance:

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. 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. 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 2:16–18)

We are often told about the cyclical nature of the book of Judges: disobedience, judgement, repentance, deliverance, short-lived obedience, and then the cycle repeats itself. A visit to the information centre may help to correct this thinking, because the motivation for the Lord raising judges was not the people's repentance but the Lord's pity over their affliction: “For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them” (2:18). As you make your way through Judges, there actually is no consistent pattern of repentance before the Lord raised a judge. More often than not, the Lord moves out of pure pity over his people's “groaning” of affliction rather than in response to their “groaning” of repentance.

Fausset is correct: “Their groanings, by reason of them that oppressed them, moved his compassion. It was not their repentance of sin, but his repentance because of their cry in distress, that brought him to their help.” In this, says, Davis, we see “the fundamental miracle of the Bible: that the God who rightly casts us down to the ground should—without reason—stoop to lift us up.” The Lord’s deliverance portrayed here is wholly unwarranted.

Here we see another fundamental characteristic of the God of the Bible: He moves to save his people not in response to some good on their part, but purely out of mercy and grace. Yes, he responds with forgiveness and cleansing to repentance (1 John 1:9) but thank God that he began the work of salvation even without us first reaching out to him! Were it not for God’s initiating grace and mercy, we would all be destined for eternal destruction.

Enduring Patience

Third, we learn that Yahweh is a God of enduring patience:

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. 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, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, 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.” So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

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. 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. 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. 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 2:19–3:4)

We might expect God at any moment to completely annihilate his people. Despite his persistent longsuffering, they continued to turn their back on him. Surely, he would be completely warranted in just giving them over to irreversible destruction.

Not so the God of the Bible. Rather than destroying his people, he continued to “test Israel ... whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their fathers did, or not.” To the reader, it is clear that the people would *not* walk in the way of their fathers, but God was patient, still committed to forming a people who would walk in loving obedience to him. He was as committed to formative discipline as he was to corrective discipline.

Let us learn from this that our God is a patient God, who gives undeserved opportunity after undeserved opportunity to learn to walk in obedience to him. He would be perfectly within his rights

to utterly destroy us when we rebel against him, but, as the old King James Version puts it, “It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not” (Lamentations 3:22).

The Nature of Iniquity

Finally, we learn in 3:5–6 something of the nature of sin:

So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 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)

Despite God’s faithful anger, unwarranted deliverance, and enduring patience, how did the people respond? They dug their heels in and continued to flaunt their sin. Not only did they live among those whom they should have driven out, but they blatantly disregarded God’s explicit commands to not marry pagans and not worship pagan gods.

If we learn anything from these verses, it is about the enslaving power of sin. The Bible teaches plainly that we are born enslaved to sin. Paul teaches this clearly in Romans 6. There was a time, he says, prior to conversion that we were “enslaved to sin” (Romans 6:6, 20). And while Christians have been set free from this slavery (Romans 6:6), sin still holds a certain sway over us.

Paul knew of the power of sin, even having been set free from slavery to it (Romans 7:13–25). He wrote, “I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” He knew the struggle of having the desire to do right but not the ability to carry it out. Even when he wanted to do right, sin was close at hand. He then cried out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Happily, he had an answer to that: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Paul knew that deliverance from sin—both initial deliverance from sin to justification, and ongoing deliverance in the process of sanctification—relied on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. In his flesh, he was powerless against sin; through Christ, sin could and would be conquered.

If you are an unbeliever, you need to grasp the enslaving power of sin in your life. You are powerless to overcome sin, and sin leads only to death—eternal death. But Jesus died the death that sinners deserved so that sinners could receive the life that he deserved. He rose from the dead proving that his conquest of sin was full and final. Now, he stands offering salvation from death and eternal life to all who will repent of their sins and receive him as their Saviour.

If you are a believer, know that, in your flesh, sin still has tremendous power over you—at least potentially. Believer, you have been set free from sin and death, and you *can* overcome sin in your life—but not in your flesh. If you rely on your own power, you will soon find that you have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out. Thanks be to God, however, that Jesus Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, provides you with the grace you need to overcome sin. If you want to experience full freedom from the effects of sin in your life, you must rely on Christ, not on yourself.

Conclusion

As we step into the visitor's centre before making our tour through the book of Judges, we are immediately confronted with insights into the nature of Israel, the nature of Israel's God, and the nature of Israel's sin. At the same time, we gain insight, generally, into the character of humanity, the character of God, and the character of the sin that seems to wield so much power over us. Thankfully, we also gain insight into the character of Christ, who delivers us from the body of death. May we trust in his deliverance today.

AMEN