

Lesson 3

Pattern of Sin & Judgment

Judges 2:6-3:6

Introduction

Judges 2:5 brings a conclusion to the details of the time of conquest. Instead of embarking on this new era with hope and optimism – governed by a strong relationship with God – the nation is crippled going forward. Beginning at Judges 2:6, we have the second part of a two-fold introduction to the book, summarizing why the nation experienced such difficulty during the time of the Judges.

What is written in this section parallels what is presented in the opening chapter. Both cover the death of Joshua, and both outline God's decision to remove the Canaanites from the land no longer. When reading Judges 2:6-3:6, we are also reminded of what was said in Joshua 24:28-31:

Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance. After these things, the LORD's servant, Joshua son of Nun, died at the age of 110. They buried him in his allotted territory at Timnath-serah, in the hill country of Ephraim north of Mount Gaash. Israel worshiped the LORD throughout Joshua's lifetime and during the lifetimes of the elders who outlived Joshua and who had experienced all the works the LORD had done for Israel.

The verses here present God's activity during the time of the judges and a spiritual assessment of the people.

Judges 2:6-13 - What Caused Israel to Stumble

2:6-9 – An Absence of Godly Leadership

While Joshua was alive, the Israelites remained faithful to the Lord. This was also true while the elders alive with him remained for roughly twenty years. This faithfulness, however, did not equate to complete obedience to God's commands; instead, it seems an avoidance of Canaanite deities characterized it during this time.

The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel (2:7).

Serving the Lord describes a lifestyle deeply rooted in honoring God, reflecting His gift of the land to Israel. *Serving the Lord* involves God's exclusive worship, as outlined in critical commands found in Deuteronomy 6. However, its scope goes far beyond worship. It encompasses a comprehensive adherence to the commands in the Law of Moses, a principle central to Joshua's leadership. Having received the "book of the law" from Moses, Joshua exemplified this obedience, which underpinned Israel's successful settlement in the promised land. His life and leadership, celebrated as that of *the servant of Yahweh* in Joshua and Judges⁶, along with Moses, serve as the ultimate models of covenant relationship for Israel. Covenant obedience was not just an ideal but was lived out by the generation of Joshua, including figures like Caleb, who recognized the divine act of God granting them the land through Joshua.

After the generation of Joshua died, spiritually, Israel veered off course – headed straight for disaster.

2:10 - A Generation That Did Not Know God

While Joshua's generation had firsthand experiences of God's miraculous interventions for Israel, the subsequent generation lacked these personal encounters and understanding of God's mighty acts, highlighting a significant shift from knowing about God to truly knowing God. Verse 10 describes a new generation of Israelites marked not just by the passage of time but by a distinct shift in their spiritual identity.

This is similar to what happened in Egypt, where a Pharaoh rose to power without knowing Joseph and later openly defied God by refusing to acknowledge Him or follow His commands. In both scenarios, "not knowing" describes a deliberate rejection of the responsibilities inherent in a relationship with God. This new generation of Israelites strayed from the path of devotion to God that Joshua had exemplified, highlighting a significant departure from their forebears' faith and practices.

2:11 – Attraction to Baal

This verse notes the beginning of Israel's downward spiral. Their spiritual decline was gradual, stemming from an initial disregard for God's command to remove the Canaanites. This led to acceptance and eventual participation in the worship of Baal and Ashtaroah. This trend was marked by the allure of Baalism's fertility rites, which appealed to base human desires.

In the Old Testament, "Baal" often appears in the plural form (e.g., the Baals), suggesting it's used as a common noun to denote various local deities worshiped across different regions. Unlike "Baal," which is associated with multiple gods and places, the Lord, "Yahweh," is consistently referred to by a singular, personal name, without articles, plurals, or qualifying terms. This distinction underscores the contrast between Canaanite polytheism and Israel's monotheism.

The Canaanites recognized a multitude of "Baals," each associated with specific locations or attributes, reflecting their polytheistic beliefs. In contrast, Israel's worship was exclusively dedicated to God, viewing the worship of any other deity as apostasy—a grave sin in God's sight that incited His wrath. This delineates a fundamental religious divergence between the Canaanites' polytheism and Israel's strict monotheism.

2:12-13 – Ingratitude

The Israelites abandoned God, who liberated them from Egypt. By adopting foreign gods, they not only rejected Yahweh's unique status but also treated Him as one among many gods, eroding the exclusive relationship intended between God and Israel.

The Ashtaroah are described as female deities associated with the Baals, revered for their links to agriculture and fertility, which are crucial for crop and livestock prosperity. This worship appealed to the Israelites, especially as they transitioned from desert nomadism to sedentary farming, needing more agricultural expertise than the Canaanites. Faced with the challenge of survival in a new environment, the Israelites turned to their neighbors' practices, adopting their gods as a seemingly pragmatic solution.

However, this adoption differed from Yahweh's guidance, prioritizing practicality over faith. It underscored a lack of trust in Yahweh, who had sustained them through their desert journey and had promised to provide for them in the promised land had they remained faithful.

2:14-19 – How God Handled This

These verses offer a summary of three centuries, focusing on God's response to Israel's apostasy:

2:14-15 - Anger

Israel's betrayal kindled God's wrath, leading Him to allow plunderers to rob them and enemies to overpower them. This fulfilled God's warning, leaving Israel in great distress. Therefore, we must see God's anger as under control and fully justified. He punished Israel at the hands of plunderers and enemies.

2:16 - Compassion

Despite their apostasy, God mercifully provided deliverance by raising Judges. These Judges were divinely chosen and empowered to rescue Israel from their plight.

2:17 - Patience

Israel's failure to heed the Judges' guidance worsened their guilt. Their idolatry, likened to spiritual adultery, broke the covenant with God, akin to a marriage bond. Verses 16-19 suggest brief moments of recovery for Israel but primarily focus on the deepening apostasy trend during the Judges era. It highlights how rapidly the Israelites deviated from their ancestors' path following the Joshua generation's demise. Despite not being explicitly detailed, it is implied that the apostasy became entrenched shortly after this transition, pointing to the period's dominant theme of a persistent departure from faithfulness.

2:18-19 - Pity

God still showed compassion in their disobedience, moved by their suffering under oppression. He continued to appoint Judges who brought temporary relief and peace.

2:20-3:6 – The Outcome

Our lesson today should not be studied without considering what was written in 2:1-5:

Now the angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me; what is this thing that you have done? Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out from you; but they will become like thorns in your sides, and their gods will be a snare to you.'" Now when the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people raised their voices and wept. So they named that place Bochim; and there they sacrificed to the Lord.

Everything detailed between 2:6 and 3:6 explains why God decided not to drive out the Canaanites from their midst. The continued apostasy of the people moved God to anger⁷.

God's decree, revealed by the angel in verse 3, marked a significant shift in God's approach towards the Canaanite nations due to Israel's breach of covenant and disobedience. Israel's worship of other gods and tolerance of Canaanites went against God's commands, leading Him to alter His promise of expelling the Canaanites. Instead, these nations would remain a test of Israel's allegiance to God's ways. Beginning in verse 20, there is a shift from direct communication to speaking about them. God distinguishes the Israelites by using the term "this nation," indirectly aligning them with the foreign nations whose gods they have adopted. His anger is palpable yet restrained, communicated through a formal, legalistic tone that demonstrates the gravity of their betrayal.

The passage frames God's judgment within the context of His covenant with Israel, likened to a treaty where he, the supreme authority, dictated the terms to Israel. The reference to "my covenant" emphasizes his role as the judge and lord, highlighting the covenant's dual nature: both as an unbreakable promise from himself and as an agreement demanding specific actions from Israel.

This testing primarily targeted a new generation of Israelites who had not participated in the initial conquests and were unfamiliar with warfare. This generation would face oppression and conflict instead of peace. The nations involved in the testing, the Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians, and Hivites, were left to serve a purpose in God's plan to assess Israel's faithfulness.

Judges 3:3 mentions the Philistines for the first time in Judges. They were not originally from Canaan. The Philistines, part of the Sea Peoples, migrated from Anatolia and the Mediterranean to Palestine around the 12th to 11th centuries BC, leaving destruction in their path. They are believed to have come initially from Crete, aiming to settle in Egypt before being defeated by Rameses III around 1190 BC. Rameses III settled the defeated Philistines in southern Canaan's coastal towns. However, by the mid-12th century, they had ousted Egyptian control and established the Philistine Pentapolis, a coalition of five city-states: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza. While the Philistines managed to maintain cooperative ties with the Canaanites, their relations with the Israelites were fraught with conflict, likely viewing them as rival intruders. Significant battles between the Philistines and Israelites are noted during the times of Shamgar and Samson in the Book of Judges.

Conclusion

Following Joshua's death, the absence of godly leadership and the emergence of a generation unfamiliar with God's miraculous works led Israel into a pattern of disobedience and idolatry. This period saw the Israelites turning away from the Lord's exclusive worship to embrace the Canaanite gods, Baal and Ashtaroth, driven by a desire for agricultural prosperity and security.

God's reaction to Israel's unfaithfulness was multifaceted—anger and judgment through allowing enemies to plunder and oppress them, yet also compassion and salvation by raising judges to deliver them from their plight. Despite these deliverances, Israel repeatedly fell into apostasy, demonstrating a profound lack of faith and gratitude towards God, who had proven His willingness and ability to provide for their needs.

God permitted the remaining Canaanite nations to test Israel, which was not just for punishment but also an opportunity for them to return to faithful adherence to the covenant.

Judges 2:6-3:6 stresses the importance of covenant fidelity, the consequences of disobedience, and the complexity of God's relationship with His people. It serves as a reminder of the necessity of godly leadership, the dangers of compromising with sin, and the perpetual hope in God's mercy and deliverance. Let us remain faithful to our covenant with God, fully trusting in His provision and guidance.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How does the apostasy, oppression, deliverance, and peace cycle in the Book of Judges reflect human nature and our relationship with God?
2. In what ways do the consequences of Israel's disobedience to God's covenant in Judges serve as a warning to us today?
3. What can the leadership styles and outcomes of the various judges teach us about godly leadership and its impact on society?
4. How does the concept of "not knowing" Yahweh, as mentioned in Judges, apply to the modern context of faith and spirituality?
5. What lessons can we learn from the Israelites' temptation to adopt the surrounding cultures' gods and practices?
6. How do the stories of deliverance in Judges demonstrate God's mercy and patience with His people despite their repeated failures?
7. What does the Book of Judges reveal about God's character, especially in His responses to Israel's apostasy?
8. In what ways does the presence of the Canaanites and other foreign nations serve as a test and a lesson for the Israelites and us today?

9. How do the themes of faithfulness versus idolatry in Judges challenge us in our commitments and priorities today?

10. Reflecting on the entire Book of Judges, what are the key takeaways for maintaining a faithful relationship with God amidst distractions and temptations?

⁶ See Joshua 24:29; Judges 2:8.

⁷ See Judges 2:12, 14, 20.