

“The LORD Was Moved to Pity”

The ninety-second in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 2:16-3:6; Acts 13:16-23

That generation which entered Canaan under the leadership of Joshua has now died off and has been gathered to their fathers. Their children—the first generation born in Canaan—have now risen to prominence. The difference between these two generations could not be greater. The generation of Joshua and the elders who led Israel into Canaan saw first hand the mighty deeds which YHWH performed to redeem his people. Joshua’s generation obeyed the LORD and enjoyed the covenant blessings of victory over the Canaanites as well as material prosperity. But most of that first generation born in Canaan had not heard about these things. Somehow the faith of Joshua’s generation was not handed down to that first generation born in Canaan. This is why we read of the sad state of this generation in Judges 2:10—*“there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.”* And this is why we should not be surprised that in the first 15 verses of Judges 2, the author recounts how the people of Israel had abandoned the LORD and then worshiped and served Baal and Ashtaroth, the pagan “gods” of the Canaanites. As a consequence of their actions, God brought down the covenant curses upon the people of Israel and they soon found themselves “in terrible distress.” Despite Israel’s distress—the direct result of the people’s sin and apostasy—God took pity on Israel. Time and time again he will rescue them from their dire predicament.

We continue our series on the Book of Judges, which is one of the most remarkable and difficult books in all the Bible. The Book of Judges recounts those tumultuous days in Israel’s history between the time of the death of Joshua until David becomes Israel’s king. No doubt, the reason why the Book of Judges is so difficult and why so many avoid preaching through this book has to do with the fact that the behavior of God’s people during this period of redemptive history is rather shocking. We will also see proof of the old adage that the Lord works in mysterious ways as we will witness God rescue his people from one disaster after another in the most remarkable of ways. In the Book of Judges we see the stark reality and ugliness of human sin in both God’s people (Israel) as well as in the practices of the pagans who surround them and who dwell in their midst (the Canaanites).

The behavior of the Canaanites depicted throughout the Old Testament is gross and disgusting to those of us with Christian sensitivities. We will also find it shocking that God’s people are so easily and strongly attracted to Canaanite practices. In this, we see that the Jews of that era are just like we are. There is nothing new under the sun. As we lament the plague of pornography, celebrity worship, the sexualizing and coarsening of our own culture, we will see much of the same thing in Judges. We are not the first to face such temptations springing from the lusts of the flesh. While technology has improved beyond all measure, none of the things which trouble us today are really new. We will see that people of Israel faced very similar challenges and temptations to those with which we are all too familiar.

That being said, we must not miss the fact that throughout this graphic display of human sinfulness, we will also see God’s faithfulness and grace. God will preserve his people despite their attraction to paganism and he will deliver them from their enemies despite their sin and their struggle to remain faithful to him. God sent judges to Israel. Therefore, while Judges graphically describes Israel’s sin and its consequences, the Book of Judges is, ultimately, the story of God’s grace. Although Israel as a nation has broken that covenant God established with Israel at Mount Sinai, and therefore will come under the covenant curses, don’t forget that God’s grace will triumph for those who, like Abraham, believe that

God will provide some means to deal with their sin and who believe that somehow God will save his people apart from their works or their merit.

As we have seen in previous sermons, the first chapter of Judges includes the account of the various tribes of Israel failing to fulfill God's command to cast all the Canaanites from the land. The Israelites also allowed displaced Canaanites to move back into the land captured by Israel. This failure starts the nation down that dangerous road to Canaanization. Then we read in Judges 2 that the Israelites were confronted by the Angel of the Lord because they failed to cast out the Canaanites as Joshua had commanded. While the people of Israel wept when they heard the Angel's oracle of judgment, we also learned their sorrow, while genuine, was very short-lived.

Sadly, Judges 2:11-15 describes Israel's spiritual condition shortly after this confrontation as follows. *"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 Ashteroth. 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."* From this it is clear that Canaanization was well underway, even within a generation of Joshua's death.

That first generation born in Canaan was completely unlike their faithful fathers who obeyed the covenant and served the Lord in the days of Joshua. That generation rising to prominence does not know YHWH or the great things he has done. They have not been catechized in the ways of the Lord. So, they turned their backs upon YHWH and abandoned him. Here are the people of Israel, now worshiping the Baals and Ashteroth in the vain hope that these figments of the sinful human imagination would somehow provide them with prosperity, fertility and peace. Instead of trusting in YHWH—who is the creator and sustainer of all things—and who had sworn on his covenant oath to give his people all of these things and more, if only they would obey the terms of the covenant, the Israelites were bowing before pagan "gods," daring YHWH to bring down the covenant curses. YHWH will allow such sin to reap the appropriate consequence. If it is pagan "gods" that the Israelites want, then its pagan "gods" they'll get.

The irony in all of this is that the more the Israelites seek to become like the Canaanites around them, doing what is right in their own eyes, the more the Canaanites will take advantage of the Israelites. As Israel comes under the covenant curses, the LORD stops causing the Canaanites to fear Israel. The Canaanites will attack Israel again and again, and it will not be long before all Israel is in terrible distress. And yet, the great irony is that in spite of Israel's apostasy and unbelief—to the point that the author can say that the nation has abandoned the LORD—YHWH still has pity on his people. He comes to their aid, again and again and again. He does so by sending a series of so-called "judges" (tribal leaders) at just the right moment to deliver his people. Therefore, even in the face of Israel's sin and rejection of YHWH, YHWH sends his people judges, who, in turn, point ahead to Israel's coming king, David. David, in turn, points us ahead to the king of kings, Jesus Christ. Human sin cannot thwart God's redemptive purpose, which is to send us a savior who will and can deal with human sinfulness.

As we turn to our text in Judges 2:16 ff, we see that even though the people of Israel have come under divine sanction and were plundered again and again by the Canaanites they have failed to cast out, God still comes to Israel's rescue when the people realize their sin and cry out to him for

deliverance. This is a pattern we will see play out throughout this entire period.

It is vital that we notice in verse 16 YHWH's gracious response the rank unbelief on the part of his sinful covenant people. *"Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them."* While we may be shocked (and rightfully so) at the bold assertion in the earlier verses about the gravity of Israel's sin and the depths of Israel's apostasy, we should also be taken aback by the fact that even though Israel will be subject to the covenant curses in which YHWH will allow the nation to be plundered by enemies, nevertheless, YHWH will rescue his people from the consequences of their own actions. He will do so by sending Israel a series of judges who will rise up and lead the people so that the Canaanites do not overcome the whole nation.

As I have mentioned before, when we think of judges in this period of biblical history, we shouldn't think of a jurist in a courtroom wearing a black robe. Israel's judges are more like tribal chieftains or warlords. Their role is to rescue Israel and deliver the nation from those calamities which come upon the people as a consequence of their sin. While the judges repeatedly rescue Israel from Canaanites armies, we must keep in mind that they do nothing to address Israel's real problem, its sin. We should recall that the LORD had made provision for the people's spiritual needs by scattering the Levitical priests throughout the country in the Levitical cities. It was their responsibility to conduct sacrifices for sin and to instruct the people in the way of the Lord. The complete failure of the Levites to catechize the people will become clear in the following verses, when we see that Israel's frequent cries for help, do not come from a resolute faith in God's promises. No, these cries for help come from a desperate people who would rather do what is right in their own eyes and get away with it, than obey the commandments of the Lord. Of course, we would never do anything like that!

As we read in verse 17, while YHWH is gracious in sending his people a series of judges to prevent the nation from going off the cliff and so as to rescue them from various attacks from the Canaanites, these judges do nothing to alter the spiritual condition of the nation. The author of Judges puts it this way: *"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."* Here is as clear a declaration as we have yet seen, as to how different that generation born in Canaan was from the previous generation which came with Joshua into the land of promise. That generation was faithful and obeyed the Lord. This generation finds itself in repeated distress because they commit spiritual adultery. YHWH graciously sends judges to help them. But they don't listen and the people still chase after Canaanite "gods." They refuse to obey God's commands, thereby subjecting themselves to the covenant curses. And yet, because YHWH is gracious and he loves his people, he still sends them judges, even though Israel loves its sin more than YHWH. Remarkable.

Both the grace of God and the sins of Israel can be clearly seen in the next two verses. As we read in verse 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."* Although God has pity on his people, how do they respond to God's grace? According to verse 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."* The series of judges about whom we will read in this book have God's blessing so as to accomplish God's purpose—rescuing Israel from the current crisis which YHWH himself has, in fact, brought down upon the nation. YHWH can do this because he is the supreme judge of men and nations. If God allowed Israel's enemies to plunder his people because the Israelites have abandoned him and broken the covenant, YHWH will also restrain the

Canaanites to keep them from wiping out Israel altogether. We also read that YHWH was moved by pity. The Hebrew word translated as pity is *yinnahem*, which can mean something “he changed his mind.” This means that even though God ordains all things, and nothing Israel does catches him by surprise, the point is that YHWH is genuinely moved by the suffering of his people (even though they bring this suffering upon themselves). When the people of Israel are in great distress, God takes pity upon them and “is moved” to act on their behalf.¹

And yet even though God is gracious and moved to pity, his people keep turning away from him because they are stubbornly addicted to their sin. The people of Israel will continue to worship false gods and bow before them. The pattern here is a series of cycles in which the people sin, YHWH sends a judge, the people repent, only to fall deeper into sin when that judge leaves the scene.² Things really are going down hill, especially when we consider that just a generation before the entire nation gathered on the mountains surrounding Shechem to renew the covenant and promise their allegiance to YHWH.

The sad consequence of all of this spelled out in verses 20-22. *“So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he said, ‘Because this people has 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.”* The people of Israel can only blame themselves for their great distress. YHWH bears witnesses against Israel that they have broken covenant and sinned against him. Because of the LORD’s righteous anger (God does not get angry in the same way we sinners get angry) he will cease fighting for his people. If the people of Israel are so interested in becoming like Canaanites, then they will have Canaanites for neighbors. YHWH will not give them victory over those Canaanite tribes on the fringes of the land which remained unbeaten at the time of the death of Joshua. But this too is part of God’s redemptive purposes.

At this point the author of Judges now gives us an important word of explanation as to why the LORD allows these things to happen to Israel. In verses 1-2 of chapter 3 we are told *“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.”* This whole ordeal is a test. This announcement should immediately harken us back to the time of testing in Eden, when the serpent deceived Eve after Adam had failed to cast him from the garden. In this case, the Israelites have failed to cast out the Canaanites from the land and will now undergo a time of testing of that first generation born in Canaan who did not about YHWH’s mighty acts in leading them to victory over the Canaanites. While Joshua’s generation secured this generation’s peace by fighting and defeating the Canaanites (because YHWH was their shield and defender), this generation will not enjoy the blessings secured for them by their parents and grandparents. This generation has kindled the anger of LORD. They will now lose the peace secured for them through the efforts of their forebears. They will now see the horrors of war, because YHWH will no longer cause the Canaanites to fear Israel. Soon the Canaanites will be taking up arms against the people of God, and those born in Canaan will soon taste the blood of battle.

¹ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 130-131.

² Block, *Judges Ruth*, 132.

In verse 3, the author lists those nations and tribes who will take up arms against Israel. *“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.”* First on the list are the five lords of the Philistines. Strictly speaking, the Philistines were not native to Canaan. Most scholars believe they had their origins on the Island of Crete. Known as “Sea Peoples” the Philistines eventually settled in what is now the southern part of Canaan near Ashkelon and Gaza after trying to enter Egypt, only to be defeated by the armies of Ramses III (about 1190 B.C.). The Philistines marauded throughout the area (southern Canaan, the frontier of Egypt), wreaking havoc on everyone.³

Next on the list are “all the Canaanites,” which is probably a reference to those Canaanites scattered throughout what is now Palestine and who should have been cast out of the promised land and who should have been driven off the frontier. Instead, some were allowed to remain. Others were allowed to return to their homes in Canaan. Although in some cases the Israelites subjected them to forced labor, we have seen how the Canaanites simply added YHWH to their own pantheon of gods, and how the Israelites soon adopted Canaanite religious rituals in the vain hopes of fertile fields and families. This is what I mean when I speak of Canaanization. The presence of these people in Canaan is the sad proof that Israel had already broken covenant with YHWH. And since YHWH will no longer cause them to fear Israel, the entire nation now finds itself dwelling in the midst of people who worship false gods and who will seek to remove Israel from that land they regard as their own. No wonder that Israel will be in great distress. The nation’s spiritual enemies are everywhere.⁴

Next the author mentions the Sidonians, who were probably the Phoenicians, the genetic forebears of all Canaanite tribes. Last on the list are the Hivites who lived in the region to the north of the Sea of Galilee on up into what is now Lebanon and the western edge of Syria. These nations/tribes indicate that Israel had enemies within their allotted land (the Canaanites) and powerful enemies to the southwest (the Philistines), to the Northwest (the Sidonians) and the northeast (the Hivites). This tells us that none of the twelve tribes (who are scattered about Canaan on the land given them by Joshua) will be spared from the tumult which characterize this entire period of the judges.⁵ God’s people could have lived in peace and enjoyed great prosperity, if only that desire to do what was right in their own eyes was not so strong.

Israel has broken the covenant and kindled the anger of the LORD by not casting out these nations. Even worse, the Israelites were already worshiping the Baals and the Ashtaroth, bowing down before them. And so YHWH allows the Canaanites to plague Israel for the reason spelled out in verse 4. *“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.”* Since Israel had disobeyed YHWH, he will not only put them to the test, he will see if the people will obey the commandments he gave them through Moses at Mount Sinai. It is not as though YHWH does not know the outcome of this test in advance. This era of testing is not for his benefit, but for that of his people. Again and again they will fail the test. They must learn the difficult but vital lesson that sin dwells deeply in our hearts, that our self-centered desires determine all that we do, and the commandments of God do not carry with them any power to obey them. In this time of testing, the law will do its work. God will now show his people their sin. He will show

³ Block, Judges, Ruth, 137-138.

⁴ Block, Judges, Ruth, 138.

⁵ Block, Judges, Ruth, 138-139.

them how tenaciously they cling to it, and how their constant turning away from their covenant Lord so as to do what they think is right, only robs them of the joy they would have otherwise known had they obeyed the Lord's commands. God was moved to pity and sent his people "judges" to preserve the nation and to demonstrate that any true solution to human sin, will require God to take to himself a true human nature and suffer and die for our sins, as well as fulfill all righteousness through perfect obedience to the law of God. It will take Jesus Christ to do what human judges cannot.

Sadly, the result of this test is spelled out in verses 5-6. "*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.*" The failure to obey God's command means the people of God will be surrounded by pagans and all the temptations that go with it. In fact, the Israelites were so thoroughly Canaanized during this time that they intermarried with Canaanites and didn't think twice about it, although such an act is expressly forbidden in the law (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). If we fail to see the similarities between this age and our own, we don't understand human sinfulness. Therefore, in the Book of Judges we see human sin in all its stark ugliness. And all the while, we see God's grace because the Lord was moved to pity and sent his people judges to rescue them from their distress. Lord willing, when we return to our series on Judges after the New Year, we'll take up the accounts of the first three judges, Othniel, Ehud and Deborah.

As we wrap up, what can we take with us by way of application?

AThe New Testament looks back on this period as one of transition. The fact and gravity of human sin showed Israel that they needed a king. This is clear when we turn to Acts 13:16-23 and read Paul's comments on this period in redemptive history. We read, "*So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: 'Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.*"

The era of the judges tells us that human sin cannot be subdued by covenant renewal ceremonies, or even by the revelation of God's commandments. Human sin must be subdued by an all-powerful king who can rule over the human heart. As important as king David was to Israel's history and to restoring Israel's fortunes after the terrible days of the judges, David's own testimony is that it is one greater than himself, that Savior whom God promised to Israel, who alone will do God's will and save his people. Indeed, God took pity on Israel and sent them judges to rescue them from the Canaanites. And because God took pity on us, he has sent us the promised king, Jesus Christ. This king died for our sins, was raised from the dead for our justification. This king sends his blessed Holy Spirit into our hearts to do what human judges and Levitical priests could never do—rescue us from something much worse than Hivites! Jesus came to deliver us from both the guilt and power of our sin. Because God was moved to pity by our struggle with sin, he sent Jesus Christ, who came to save us from our sins. Amen!