



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1274-2
Judges 2:6-3:11
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April 25, 2004

The Purpose of Testing

This past weekend my family traveled down to L.A. because my son was competing in a basketball tournament with teams from all over the country. It was a big deal because it was an all-star team and we had to win a tournament up here to qualify. The opening ceremonies were at the Anaheim Convention Center and the games were played at local high schools. Although basketball wasn't really my sport, I couldn't help but think back to similar experiences I'd had as a kid and the many hard but important lessons I learned through participating in competitive sports.

For my 12-year-old son this was one of his first experiences competing at that level. I think I was more anxious for him than he was. It was like I wanted to shortcut the process of his having to learn the lessons I learned. I wanted to pour them directly into his mind and life; to save him some of the struggles; to give him the things that God taught me over time through disappointment, difficulty, and pressure; to give him the benefits before the struggle. But it isn't possible. I can talk to him about it and try to guide him through it, but I can't do it for him. There are a lot of lessons that you can't learn any other way but to go through the experiences and the battles yourself.

This is one of the challenges of raising kids and particularly in trying to pass on to them our faith in Christ. As much as we might want to help them bypass all the battles and pain we've had to go through, we can't. We can warn them and guide them, but we can't do it for them. In order to learn the hard lessons of faith, they have to go through it themselves.

This was an issue that Joshua and the first generation of Israelites who entered the Promised Land had to face. Last week we began our study of the book of Judges. The book of Judges is mainly about the generations of God's people who hadn't crossed over the Red Sea and hadn't wandered in the wilderness for 40 hard years. This is the issue that comes up starting in 2:6. The writer goes back and surveys three generations of Israelites and how they responded to the Lord.

I. The Lord blesses those who have seen his great work and serve him.

The first generation is that of Joshua.

"When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land. 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. Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred and ten. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. All that generation also were gathered to their fathers;..." (Judges 2:6-10a).

As we can see, the first generation started well. Joshua dismisses them and each of them head back to their territory to drive out the remaining Canaanites. The feeling you get is that they did what they were supposed to do. It says that generation served the Lord, not just while Joshua was alive, but all the days of the elders who were with him. Notice what it says: they had seen "the great work of the Lord which he had done for Israel." What a privilege to see what they had seen! Sweet manna from heaven, cool water gushing out of a rock, the Jordan River rolled back like a throw rug, the walls of Jericho tumbling down like Tinker Toys. They had the privilege of firsthand experience with God's power and grace. But with great privilege comes great responsibility. Seeing must translate into serving! And for that generation it did.

You can see that, as a result of their obedience, God's blessing was on them, even in their death. It says they "were gathered to the fathers." And notice how Joshua is eulogized. It says he was "the servant of the Lord." That's a special title reserved in the OT for superstars like Moses and Isaiah. It says he died at the age of 110, which was believed in those days to be the ideal lifespan. And finally, it says he was buried in the territory of his inheritance. That was huge to these guys—remember how Jacob made his son Joseph promise not to bury him in Egypt, but to take his bones back to the Promised Land? Joshua is obviously blessed and honored even in his death.

A few years ago Lynn's grandfather passed away. It was a little bit like the death of Joshua. He was 91 years old. He was the son of a Baptist preacher, and he'd spent

his life serving the Lord. His memorial service was held at the little church where he had served as a deacon for many years. His two adult children were there; his seven grandchildren and his fifteen great grandchildren. It was one of those times where you just appreciate this great heritage of faith that exists in a family. But as great as that is, his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren can't live off of his faith. The battles he fought with temptation and sin, the victories he won, can't be poured directly into their lives. They have to learn it the same way he did—the hard way. God has no grandchildren. He has sons and daughters, but no grandchildren.

II. Those who don't know the Lord won't serve the Lord and will reap the consequences.

We see that in the case of the generation that succeeded Joshua. Look at vv. 10-15.

**“...and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger. So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the
against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.”**

This is a sad but oft repeated story. The next generation falls away. Look at the verbs: “They did evil in the sight of the Lord...they forsook the Lord...followed other gods...bowed themselves down to them.” You get the idea. These are the things Joshua had warned them about; things the LORD had forbidden them to do. They were supposed to drive them out and utterly destroy them, but instead they just blended in.

We wonder, how could that happen? How could they fall so far in such a short amount of time? The writer gives us a hint at the end of v. 10. He says this second generation “did not know the Lord nor yet the work which he had done for Israel.” What a telling

line! On the one hand I want to say, “Why didn't their fathers teach them to know the LORD? Why didn't they tell them about his great work?” I want to blame this on Joshua and his generation. Isn't it the job of each generation to pass on their faith to the next? But that's not the issue here. When it says they didn't “know the Lord,” it doesn't mean they lacked information about the Lord. They had all the information about the Lord they needed. I'm sure their fathers taught them all about the Lord and the Red Sea and the manna and the walls of Jericho. But the idea behind the word “know” is to personally and intimately experience someone. When Genesis says that Adam knew Eve, it's talking about more than just information! I know all about George Bush, but I don't really know George Bush. That could only come from firsthand experience.

Knowing the Lord involves experiencing his great work. It involves seeing him answer prayer, being in his Word and hearing him speak to you in a personal way, obeying him in some tough decision and then watching him come through for you. I think the main reason we don't know the LORD in this way is that it is just neglect. Like Israel, we think we can rest on the the victories of yesterday. We allow our relationship with God to slip. We stop praying. We stop reading the Word. We stop stepping out in faith. It's usually not one big leap where we say, “I'm done with God.” Rather, it's the cumulation of small choices; it's a slow slide. But the result is that we begin to be influenced by the gods around us, and soon we're worshiping them. They may not be the Baals, but they're idols nevertheless; idols like money, or sports, or a relationship. We fall into our own brand of idolatry.

We see the results in verses 14-15. The Lord responds in anger to what they had done. He allows them to be plundered. The very people he had bought were now sold to their enemies. It says HIS hand was against them for evil. As a result, “They were severely distressed.” The same thing happens to us over and over again. We attempt to build our security on that which is insecure. We try to buy pleasure, hope, or security; we try to gather power or promote ourselves. The Lord warns us, but we don't listen. Eventually he lets us experience the shattering consequences of our actions. Someone said: “The most miserable people in the world are professing believers who won't commit themselves to the Lord Jesus.”

III. The Lord graciously and sovereignly works in his people's lives that they might know him and serve him.

A. The Lord graciously delivers us: Now that could just be the end of the story. But one of the things we know is that God is faithful. So we see here that in this generation and the succeeding generations God responded to their misery. Look at vv. 16-19.

“Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for

they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers. When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered 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 oppressed and afflicted them. But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways.”

Here we find the cycle that will continue through the period of the Judges. It breaks down into several stages. The first stage is **sin**, which we already looked at. The second stage is **slavery**. God allows oppression; he sells his people into the hands of their enemies. The same thing happens to us. Like the weeds in my yard, if left unchecked sin will take control of your life. Sin plunders us. It steals our joy. We don't enjoy relationships with our families or friends because we're caught up in bondage. Finally, we come to the third stage in the cycle, and that is **supplication**. In our distress we cry out to God. It's as if God puts us in a full Nelson until we're willing to cry "Uncle!" Sometimes we have to be in a lot of pain before we're willing to give up and look to God, but when we do he is there for us. The fourth stage is **salvation**. Verse 16: **"Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them."** There are 13 judges in this book, seven of them are described in some detail. The first one, Othneil, is found in chapter 3. Let's skip ahead just for a moment. Look at 3:9-11.

“When the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died. “

You can see that these weren't judges who sat in a courtroom, like today. Rather, they were leaders/deliverers upon whom the Spirit of God fell for a specific time and a specific purpose. God raised them up to overthrow their enemies and usher in a period rest.

Do you recognize this pattern in your own life? We find ourselves reaping the results of our sin, and we cry out to God. He delivers us, but when the problem goes away, then we think we can coast. Since we don't deal with the root problems of sin in our lives but with the symptoms only,

then sin returns and the pattern repeats itself all over again. Take resentment. If you allow resentment to live in your life, sooner or later it will take control of you, turn into bitterness and anger, and ruin your relationships. You'll become miserable. You cry out to God, and he's faithful to deliver you. But if you don't deal with the root problem of the resentment, sooner or later you'll forget God again and the whole pattern will be repeated. Or take sexual sin. If you allow lust to live in your life, then you'll forget God and walk in the flesh. Your sin will manifest itself in pornography or adultery. It will gain control of you and you'll feel miserable. You cry out to the Lord, and he's faithful to deliver you. But if you don't deal with the lust that's in your heart, then the pattern will be repeated and the second time will be worse than the first. Sooner or later we have deal with the root issues. God doesn't want us to keep repeating the pattern. You see, Christ is the ultimate judge/deliverer. And he's our only hope. Just as Israel couldn't deliver themselves from bondage, so we can't deliver ourselves from the bondage to sin. The flesh is too strong; sin is too controlling. Like Israel, we need a deliverer. God, of course, has provided that deliverer for us: His name is Jesus. Paul wrote of him, **"For he delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son"** (Col 1:13). The judges are a type of Christ. They foreshadow how Christ delivers us. Through Christ these patterns of sin can be broken. Paul says in Romans, **"Sin shall not have dominion over you"** (Rom. 6:14).

B. The Lord sovereignly tests us: But God uses this whole process in our lives. Remember, he wants us to know him; not just know about him, but really know him through our experience. That's what God wants. He wants us to have first hand knowledge. So what does he do? He tests us. Look at 2:20-3:2.

“So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, ‘Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers and has not listened to My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk in it as their fathers did, or not.’ So the LORD allowed those nations to remain, not driving them out quickly; and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua. Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them (that is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly). “

The Lord says he'll not drive out the nations which Joshua left. Instead he'll use them in the lives of his people. He'll use those nations to test their obedience and to train them for warfare. The very things that they would love most to get rid of are the things God will use to grow them up into the people he wants them to be.

God tests his people. He does that in different ways. One of the ways is what we see here. We're surrounded by enemies. We battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. Why doesn't God just get rid of them for us? To test us. Sometimes he tests us by asking us to give up something that is precious to us. Remember Abraham? God gives him a son after years of waiting, then God tells him to offer up his son to him on the altar. Sometimes God tests us like he did with Job and allows some calamity to befall us. I've seen couples severely tested by the death of a child, or by infertility. If we belong to him, he'll test us. It just goes with the territory. Let me tell you what the basic issue always is in testing. The basic issue is trust. Will I trust God? And trusting God will always be manifested in obeying God. So God says, "I want you to be faithful in your giving to the work of my kingdom." And we say, "But God, what about this and that?" He says, "Trust me and do what's right." We say, "God, my marriage is dead. I want out." God says, "Trust me. I specialize in raising the dead." We say, "If I let my friends at school or work know I'm a believer they'll reject me." God says, "Trust me. I'll give you a friend that sticks closer than a brother."

Some of us have a hard time with the idea that God tests us. When we think of test, we think of failure. We think that the whole point is to reveal what we don't know so that the one giving the test can give us a big fat "F." But the purpose of God's testing is not to fail us, but rather to confirm us. It's like a new GM car. Ralph Nader might run that car through a series of tests. His purpose would be to reveal the weaknesses of the car. But GM might also run some tests on its own car. What would their motive be? They would want to prove and confirm its strengths. That's why God tests his own children; not to flunk us, but to confirm us and to refine us. The Psalmist wrote, **"For you, O God, tested us. You refined us like fire"** (Ps. 66:10). It's because of that refinement that James says we should rejoice when tested (Js. 1:2).

As he tests us, we get strengthened and prepared for battle. In 1995 Rasham Salaam won the Heisman Trophy. He was a great running back. But in

his rookie year with the Chicago Bears, the pros uncovered a weakness in his game: he was prone to fumble. In his rookie year he fumbled the ball nine times. So the coaches devised a practice drill just for Rasham. They tied a long strap around a football. When Rasham ran with the ball clutched against his chest, a teammate ran behind him yanking on the other end of the strap. Rasham had to squeeze the ball with all his might to keep from fumbling. God's testing is a lot like that. He uses our enemies to yank against our faith, not so we would lose it, but to teach us and train us to hold on to it even tighter.

Let me tell you something else about God's testing: God knows our limits. Have you ever been on the freeway and seen those weigh stations where trucks have to get off so they can be weighed? You see, trucks have load limits. The reason for the load limits is that the roads are only designed to support a certain amount of weight. Too much weight and the road collapses. God has designed a load limit for each of us. He knows what we can bear. It's not that he won't give us more than we can handle. It's that he won't give us more than we can handle WITH HIM. The testing will SEEM to us way more than we can handle, but when we come to him we learn that his grace is sufficient. Remember the purpose of the testing? The purpose is for us to know him like the first generation knew him. How will that happen? It will happen through the testing. It will happen through the training.

CONCLUSION

In the movie *Jurassic Park*, there is a splendid moment when world-class paleontologist Allen Grant, who has spent his life in the study of dinosaurs, comes face to face with the real thing—he is confronted with a real live Brontosaurus. He falls to the ground, completely dumbstruck. The reason is obvious. It's one thing to pick through fossils and bones and piece together information about dinosaurs. But to encounter an actual dinosaur—well, that's different.

For many people knowing God consists of picking through the artifacts of faith that survive from long ago and far away. In that bygone era, humans saw God, heard his voice, and experienced his awesome power. But that was another generation. What about us? The answer to that question is found here in this story of the Judges: We come to know God as we experience his gracious deliverance from sin through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and we come to know God through times of testing; testing that will give us firsthand experience of his love and power.

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