

Introduction: We assume in dark days that God is somehow *less active* in our lives, our families, our communities, our nation and our world. Some Christians even blame other believers by accusing them of inactivity and cowardice. The thinking today among some more activist pastors and churches seems to be, “If *you and your church* were more active like *ours* is, then you (with us) would be more effective in changing our national scene. You should let your voice be heard more loudly. *Then* we would be having revival instead of apostasy.” I receive e-mails or even phone calls urging my greater involvement in such political and public protest more often than my parishioners may realize.

But such an activist view of Christianity can fail to submit to the sinless *Divine permission* of *evil* by which God rules even ungodly men. When times are bad, and the wicked go from bad to worse, *it actually is a false judgment to say that God has left the field of battle*. We need to believe in God’s activity in our worst days, and not just for our best. This is the lesson of the book of Judges, and it is expressed well in the hymn, “Workman of God, O Lose Not Heart” by F. W. Faber. I highlight the second verse:

*Workman of God! O lose not heart,
But learn what God is like;
And in the darkest battlefield
Thou shalt know where to strike.*

*Thrice blest is he to whom is giv’n
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field, when He
Is most invisible.*

*Then learn to scorn the praise of men,
And learn to lose with God;
For Jesus won the world through shame,
And beckons thee His road.*

*For right is right, since God is God,
And right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty,
To falter would be sin.*

Mon/Tues/Weds: read Judges 2:16-3:6. We saw last week how the Lord showed mercy to His wayward people, even though in their wickedness they fell away almost immediately after Joshua’s death in Judges 2:10-15. We see this divine mercy in Judges 2:18, where God’s *reason* for sending saviors (called ‘judges’) is that “He had compassion on his people as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.” Why was God committed for the long-haul to such an undeserving and rebellious people? The same reason He is committed to us in our waywardness: Because He will never break His covenant with us, (Judges 2:1), since it is His blood-sealed pledge that *He will be our God!*

But you may well ask, “Is that the most we can expect of the life of faith, that we will continually fail like Israel of old, and need continual visits to the ER in order for God to repeatedly perform spiritual CPR to revive us and mend our broken professions of faith?”

Alas, were we left to ourselves, we would indeed simply spiral out of control in denial of God’s saving work in our lives. But notice the constructive, saving purpose which God applies even to Israel at this time, in Judges 2:22-3:4. Though *they will keenly suffer the spiritual effects* of living with the Canaanites and adopting their practices – and even giving away their sons and daughters to them in marriage – God will at the same time save a remnant, who will learn through this great apostasy how to withstand sin and to war against ungodliness – see Judges 3:2. Moreover, this same remnant will be subject to

the fatherly care of God – even while so many of their Israelite neighbors reap a terrible harvest from their sin!

In other words, God always has His own who *do not bow the knee to idolatry*. They will benefit from the testing purposes of God in Judges 3:4 – just as Israel under Moses benefitted from being tested in the desert in Deuteronomy 8:1-5:

² “And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. ³ And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. ⁴ Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years. ⁵ Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.”

Meditate and Pray: “Lord, our uppermost prayer as we begin this week is that you would remember your highest purposes for us as your people. Even when we sin, use such failings to test and humble us, that we might seek your face again. Oh, please, send the kind of Deuteronomy 8:3 hunger into our lives that can only be satisfied with the Bread of your Word. Help our feet not to swell up as long as we are walking in your way. Give us the spiritual clothing we need to endure the spiritual drought in our day – and help us to know that we will only live when we eat by faith of the Bread of Life. Amen.”

Thurs/Fri: read Judges 2:1-5; Judges 2:18 & Judges 3:7-11. How we should be comforted by God’s *compassion* for his people in their groaning under their punishment at the hands of their enemies in Judges 2:18. This compassion is from God the Father! For you see, there is a reason why, in the Benediction at the end of our worship services, we often use the blessing, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the **love of God the Father** and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” It is because the Father is the source and spring of the familial love which his children need! And this is why, in the book of Judges, the Father is continually moved to rescue his recalcitrant people – because *he cannot rest until he has restored his people to the place where he can love them once again!*

Of course, we also see in Judges that the Son of God is active as the ‘Angel of the Lord’. He appears, for example, in Judges 2:1-5 in order to argue against his people’s falling away – since it was he who rescued them from Egypt at the Exodus! Judges 2:1 is indeed remarkable – since here it is this angel who claims to have done exactly what God had declared as his work in Joshua 1:6! This ‘angel’, who is more properly defined as ‘messenger’, must be a second person in the Godhead, since he also declares that the covenant and redemption out of Egypt was his work too!

And what about the Spirit? Well, he is sent by the Lord to empower the judges whom God raises up to rescue his people. For example, we see God’s Spirit come upon Othniel, the first judge, in Judges 3:10.

So we see that the work of God in the book of Judges is a whole-heartedly Trinitarian concern. Each member of the Godhead is concerned with the salvation of sinners and is intimately involved with their redemption! The Father decrees his plan to rescue his own, moved by a compassion and longing to be reconciled to them after each rebellion. The Son delivers God's covenant words and acts mightily to redeem Israel out of Egypt! The Spirit is sent from the Father and the Son to work conviction of sin in Israel, and to clothe the deliverers, like Othniel, raised up to judge.

Meditate and Pray: Sing about the close and daily involvement of God in your salvation, using the following hymn by Isaac Watts:

*Blest be the Father and His love,
To whose celestial source we owe
Rivers of endless joy above,
And rills of comfort here below.*

*Glory to Thee, great Son of God,
From whose dear wounded body rolls
A precious stream of vital blood,
Pardon and life for dying souls.*

*We give the sacred Spirit praise,
Who in our hearts of sin and woe
Makes living springs of grace arise,
And into boundless glory flow.*

*Thus God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit, we adore;
That sea of life and love unknown,
Without a bottom or a shore.*

Saturday: read Judges 2:1-5; Judges 2:18 & Judges 3:7-11. We are thankful to find so much illuminating and comforting evidence of the Light of God's grace in the dark days of the book of Judges. And it is exciting to see all three persons of the Godhead involved in salvation – ours and Israel's! However, we must also soberly reckon with the faithfulness of God *in* his judgements, and not just in his compassion.

For example, the calling of the first judge Othniel takes place amidst the first inexcusable rebellion of Israel, when their sins erupt so badly that God has a 'fire-sale' in Judges 3:7-8. We read there that the Lord literally, "sold" his people. In other words, God is compelled to come down to earth and "find a buyer" of his people. He finds Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram, who 'buys' the right to enslave Israel for eight years. His name literally means, "Cushan of double-wickedness". This is indeed a severe picture of divine chastisement. What does it mean?

It means that God hands over his loved ones, (when they are determined to sin brazenly against their Savior), selling them into the workhouse so that they can learn by their captors' cruelty how much they have lost of the lovingkindness of their God. Such chastisement *does not mean* that God abandons his own or turns away from them in disgust. Rather, even this punishment is about God's covenant faithfulness, since both the blessings *and* the curses of the covenant are both followed to the letter by our holy God.

In short, God only raises up wicked kings, (like Eglon in Judges 3:12 and Cushan in Judges 3:8), in order to use them for a prescribed time until his people turn back to him. Not one more minute at the hands of the wicked does God allow, but that is necessary to bring his people back in repentance and restoration!

Sunday: read Judges 3:7-11. Weeping may tarry through the long night of eight years of suffering under Cushan, but joy comes in the morning, when God at just the right time sends his deliverer, Othniel, the nephew of Caleb: ‘brother’ being a loose translation for close relative in Judges 3:9.

Notice how the holy Spirit empowers Othniel to be the savior of his people: The power of the Spirit of God comes upon him in Judges 3:10. This denotes the Spirit’s power to overcome any resistance in Othniel, thus enabling this judge to accomplish far more than in himself he could ever set his hand to do. The Spirit is the power behind all courageous works of salvation in the bible, including here in Judges 3:10. It is not by human wisdom or might that we are saved – but by the mighty Spirit of the Lord involved in our lives.

I close this week’s notes with one further illustration of the Spirit’s work in the days of the judges. In Judges 6:34, we read of Gideon that, in order to equip him to be the judge for Israel’s salvation in his day, “the Spirit came upon him” – but this time, the verb describing the Spirit’s empowering of Gideon means “to clothe” him with warming, reassuring and wisdom-giving Spirit of God.

We all know what a sad discovery it is when we head out into a challenging day weather-wise, only to find that we are ill-equipped for the sudden change in temp or conditions. At certain times of year, and in the face of ‘ill winds which blow no good’, such poor clothing choices can indeed be dangerous! But the Spirit’s warming presence means that we will *never be alone to face unexpectedly vicious environments!*

What a beautiful picture: The Spirit is not a raw power that coerces servants like Othniel and Gideon to take a stand for the Lord’s cause. He is the Comforter who “clothes us” with the garments of salvation. Before we are ever asked to serve the Lord by way of duty on behalf of others, the Spirit warms our hearts with His love! He is truly the “Counselor, the Advocate and the Comforter” who we need in days of trouble. We will see more about the Spirit’s mighty work in days of trouble as our studies in Judges progress. For now, let us be thankful for this line (in **bold**) from hymn # 335 in our Red Trinity hymnal:

*Gracious Spirit, dwell with me—
I myself would gracious be,
And with words that help and heal
Would Thy life in mine reveal;
And with actions bold and meek
Would for Christ my Savior speak.*

*Truthful Spirit, dwell with me—
I myself would truthful be;
And with wisdom kind and clear
Let Thy life in mine appear;
And with actions brotherly
Speak my Lord’s sincerity.*

*Mighty Spirit, dwell with me—
I myself would mighty be;
**Mighty so as to prevail
Where unaided man must fail;
Ever by a mighty hope,
Pressing on and bearing up.***

*Holy Spirit, dwell with me—
I myself would holy be;
Separate from sin, I would
Choose and cherish all things good;
And whatever I can be
Give to Him who gave me Thee!*