

INTRODUCTION: As we continue our series on the book of Judges, we have learned two reasons why the Israelites in Judges 2:10-11 so quickly fell away from the faith. First, since they were the generation whose parents passed away in the desert wanderings, they suffered from a lack of parental instruction. Their parents neglected to have their children circumcised, (Joshua 5:4-6), and to teach them the ways of the Lord – with the result that this generation arose to become one which, “did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel”. A second reason why they so quickly fell away is that they were intimidated by the godless prosperity of the Canaanites, who urged them to adopt the worship of Baal the fertility god, *in addition to* their supposed worship of Jehovah. After all, the people of God then and now can be ground down by the demands of the harsh spiritual climate in which we live and work – and so seek an easier life with the gods of Canaan, instead of learning to wait on the Lord. May God give us grace to persevere with Him in the wilderness, *even while* the prosperity of this world urges us to take an easier way. In the end, though in this life we live in want, we will one day confess God’s goodness in all that He has done in our lives!

Mon/Tues: read Judges 2:11-23 and Deuteronomy 11:10-17. We begin this week with the final reason that explains how Israel so quickly turned away from the Lord and gave themselves up to Baal worship in Judges 2:11: It is the very *climate* of the Promised Land. Let me explain further.

According to Deuteronomy 11:10-12, the Land of Canaan was a land of hills and valleys, which flowed with milk and honey. This is in direct contrast with Egypt, where the Nile River made irrigation the mode of growing crops. Not surprisingly, Egypt in its self-sufficiency *looked down* on surrounding nations which were dependent on the crucial, but sparse, rains to send much needed moisture in the spring and the fall onto their desert soils. Historians record their scornful comments towards the Greeks, Syrians and others who lived in lands much more like Canaan, with a mountainous, desert climate.

The bottom line? Well, Moses is honest about the spiritual challenge of living in such a land as Canaan, where the life-line of water would literally flow from Heaven and down the valleys into the Jordan River and away. How, then, could Israel be sure that they would survive and prosper in that land? The answer in Deuteronomy 11:11 is that this land would continue to flourish... as long as the “rains of Heaven” flowed down upon it. In other words, as long as Israel stayed close to the God of Heaven, clinging to Him by faith for daily grace, then the Heavens would pour down blessing upon God’s people.

However, as Moses goes on to say in Deuteronomy 11:16-17 – Israel would quickly perish if they turned away from their God. Just as Elijah declared the disaster of drought to King Ahab as God’s punishment sent upon that king’s head because of his wickedness in 1 Kings 17:1, so God promises through Moses’ words that the faucet of blessing could be turned off by the sinful rebellion of Israel.

Meditate and Pray: *“Lord, please restrain us from covenant-destroying sins. Help us to learn from the idolatrous folly of your people Israel in the days of the Judges that you alone, “give food at the proper time” (Psalm 145:15). Help us to avoid spending our days, money, time and strength on idols which do not speak and cannot help – no matter what the sinful culture around us says! Amen.”*

Weds/Thurs: read Judges 6:1-15. God lays plans for His great work of redemption while no one is noticing! Remember baby Moses in a basket when the Hebrews were in despair because of Egyptian slavery; or little Samuel in the days of corrupt Eli. And don’t forget terrified Gideon in the days of Midianite oppression (Judges 6), or mighty Samson during Philistine bondage! God sends deliverance at the most unexpected times!

In all these cases, no one among God’s suffering people *knew* how God was going to hear their cries and send deliverance – until He caused these future human deliverers to be born miraculously into believing homes!

Moreover, in the book of Judges, no one knew how these children, raised in weakness under the bondage of foreign powers, would ever have the strength to be God's chosen judge for their day and age – until God sent the Holy Spirit to clothe them with power from on high! Look, for example, at how Gideon casts great doubts on God's assertion that he, as Israel's future judge, will be a "mighty man of great valor" (Judges 6:13-15).

But despite Gideon's fears, God always has the perfect response to every cycle of sin among His people! Where sin abounds, God's grace is mightier! This, then, is one of the most exciting ways to approach the book of Judges! See how God sends judges at just the right time – to counter every wave of sin among the Israelites! Even when God increases the level of punishment for sin in Judges 2:20-23 by permitting the wicked to remain in the Promised Land, He still raises up judges like Othniel in Judges 3:7-11. And how is Othniel able to stand against God's foes and for the deliverance of God's people? It is through being "clothed" with the power of God's Spirit (Judges 3:10), which gives Othniel both the courage and wisdom to effectively rule. The result? The "land had rest" for forty years (Judges 3:11)! And so it goes with every judge whom God raises up!

Meditate and Pray: How we need to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to help us hold on in our days of desert trials! Just because we don't see things changing in our areas of biggest concern, doesn't mean that God is not working! Look up! The clouds are breaking, and the waves of God's blessing will eventually arrive on our shores! God's saving work is never hindered by the rise of wickedness. Christ will build His church! Sing about Jesus' power to do this in hymn # 311:

*Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free,
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.*

*He comes, with succour speedy,
to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy,
and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing,
their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and dying,
were precious in his sight.*

Fri/Sat: read Judges 6:10 and 1 Samuel 12:6-24. Perhaps the most important command in all the book of Judges is given in Judges 6:10, where God says to Israel, (literally in the KJV), "Do not fear the gods of the Amorites". In other words, do not be intimidated by the prosperity of the idol-worshipping Canaanites, and do not give into the pressure which the Canaanites exert on you to compromise your devotion to the God who brought you out of Egypt. Do not worship with them! That is the warning!

Sadly, as we have seen, Israel did almost *nothing other* than embrace the idols of the Promised Land, serving the Baals. No wonder – when we get to the end of the Judges' era in 1 Samuel 12, Samuel the last Judge, sums up the 350 years of Judges as full of "forgetting God" (1 Samuel 12:9). Cut to the heart by Samuel's words, Israel then confesses in 1 Samuel 12:19 that they have "added one sin upon another" over their history. But how beautiful Samuel's response! Samuel says in 1 Samuel 12:20-22 (New King James Version):

"Do not fear. You have done all this wickedness; yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. ²¹ And do not turn aside; for *then you would go* after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they *are* nothing. ²² For the LORD will not forsake His people, for His great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you His people."

Meditate and Pray: *“Oh Lord please remove the fears which keep us from whole-hearted trust and service in your Name. Thank you that it is, “For the sake of your great Name” that you bear with us in our sin, opening the way time and again for us to return to you! Help us to quickly beat out a path of repentance back to you when you convict us of our sad histories of sin. Amen.”*

Sunday: read Exodus 19:3-9; 24:6-7; Deuteronomy 5:22-29 and Joshua 24:16-19. One major hindrance to Israel’s following faithfully in God’s ways – all through the life of Moses and then through the period of Judges, is that they had a proud self-confidence in their own abilities – both to choose what was right and to carry it out. This explains their repeated protestations that they will keep God’s law in Exodus 19:8 and 24:6-7 and Joshua 24:16-18.

In actuality, it was only when laid prostrate in fear before the dark clouds of God’s holiness that Israel’s heart *even began* to approximate the kind of heart that God desired for them – see Deuteronomy 5:29. Here is, in fact, one reason God sent the threatening clouds of His power and wrath on the Mount at the giving of the Law: As the old preachers used to say, it was to “drive Israel off of self-reliance” and into a humble desire for mercy.

No wonder that Joshua, in holy frustration towards his wayward people’s again claiming the ability to follow God in Joshua 24:16-18, thunders to them in verse 19: “You cannot serve the Lord... He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.” In other words, what Joshua is saying is – “As long as you insist on depending upon your own reserves of righteousness, and seek to build a life of faithfulness to God upon empty resolutions to change yourself, then God will not forgive your sins, since they represent an *unrepentant self-reliance!*

Let us close this sober warning against self-righteousness with this prayer:

Lord, save us from spiritual self-deception, which makes us blind to our true sinfulness, and makes us proud in our rectitude. Help us to learn the joy of running in the paths of your commands by your enabling grace, instead of the bondage of works-righteousness, which can never salve our consciences or cleanse our hearts. Amen.”