THE LORD RAISED UP A JUDGE FOR THEM

Judges 2:11-3:6

“Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them,

he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies

 as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them

as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.”

(2:18)

Today’s passage continues from last week as **part of the introduction to the book of Judges**. Last week we learned that prior to entering the Promised Land, God commanded the Israelites to drive out the idol worshipping Canaanites from their land. This was to ensure that the Israelites could live as a covenant people that obeyed God fully. However, as we saw last week, after the death of Joshua, only Caleb obeyed God’s call to wholeheartedly drive out the Canaanites. The rest of the Israelites, disobeyed God and ended up living among the Canaanites. In today’s passage, we will see the **devastating consequences** this had on the Israelite nation. Also, we will see God’s **great love and compassion** for his disobedient people, by raising judges to save them.

Now before we start with today’s passage, let’s first look at a common cycle of events that repeats itself throughout Judges. (Slide 1) **Step 1**: The Israelites falls into sin and idolatry, and do evil in the sight of the Lord. **Step 2:** God then allows the Israelites to be conquered and oppressed by a neighbouring nation. **Step 3:** Israel cries out to the Lord for help. **Lastly, step 4.** God raises up a judge to save them. After which the cycle starts all over again with step 1, with the Israelites falling into sin. This cycle is repeated over and over again in Judges. Sadly, each cycle took Israel **further downward** in its corruption and total disregard for God. **By the end of the book, Israel had become an utterly corrupt nation that violated its covenant with God in almost every way imaginable**. Amazingly, despite this, God never abandoned or gave up on them. But did all He could to save them and help them walk in obedience to Him. Namely: God raised up judges to save them. Secondly, God caused them much hardships through the wards they had to fight with the Canaanites. Through today’s passage, we will learn that God is doing exactly the same for you and me today. And His main goal for doing so, is to help us live as His covenant people in this fallen world. Amen!

Now, let’s turn to today’s passage. According to verse 10, the generation after Joshua’s generation was very different from their fathers. Joshua’s generation **walked in the way of obedience** to the Lord’s commands. (2:17, 22) They fought against the Canaanites and drove them from their land. They obeyed God fully. However, the generation of Israelites after Joshua’s generation, did exactly the opposite. Look at verses 11-13. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. This new generation of Israelites, forsook the LORD as their God. And replaced Him with Baal and the Ashtoreths of the Canaanites. We can ask ourselves: why did they do this? It all boils down to identity. Joshua’s generation of Israelites had a very clear identity, as God’s covenant people. Therefore, they understood that their **main purpose while living in the Promised Land was to obey God fully**. However, after living among the Canaanites for some time, the next generation of Israelites lost their identity as God’s covenant people. They failed to remember how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They failed to remember how God miraculously allowed them to enter the Promised Land. They also failed to remember the covenant God established with them at Mt Sinai. So instead of having a clear identity as God’s covenant people, the new generation of Israelites **began to identify with the Canaanites around them**. They started to think like the Canaanites, serve the same gods as the Canaanites and live **just like** the Canaanites. This new identity and purpose was very different to God’s original plan and purpose for the Israelites. For to God, the Israelites was His people and therefore must walk in obedience to Him.

Then how did God deal with the Israelites? Look at verses 14-15. (Read) Up to that point, God protected the Israelites against the enemies around them. Whenever Israel’s enemies came to plunder their land or take them captive, God fought against them. Consequently, the Israelites could defeat their enemies. However, when the Israelites forsook God, God in His anger……. **did not destroy or abandon them……. Rather, God pulled away from Israel.** Then suddenly, their lives were plunged into chaos and misery. The raiders they used to fight off in the past, became too strong for them. They would come to their homes steal their goods, their food and their clothes; and left them with nothing. Also their enemies came at will and took the Israelites captive as their slaves. All because, unlike before, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them. Look at verse 15b. The Israelites were in great distress. Without God, their lives fell apart and they had to live in endless fear and sorrow. In this way, God allowed them to experience life without Him. To help them realise who they are and what they should do in the Promised Land. They were God’s covenant people and belonged to Him. Therefore, their main purpose in life was to walk in the way of obedience to God.

Now in their time of distress, the Israelites groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. (18) This was really hard for God to bear. So, despite their sin and disobedience, God made a plan to help them. Look at verse 16. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. As we continue with our study of judges, we will see that God raised up 12 judges, consisting of 11 men and 1 woman. They each came from various tribes and regions in Israel. (Map 2 and 3) Now, these judges were not like the judges we see today in a courtroom, sitting behind a bench in a black cloak. They were very different kinds of judges. Look at verse 18. Can we read today’s key verse together? Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. These judges were elite military commanders. They were elite, not because they had specialised military training or some special human ability. Neither was it because they had great faith. In fact these judges were ordinary by human standards with many human flaws. No. They were elite military commanders, **because God raised them and was with them**. For one purpose only: **to lead the Israelites back to God**, by saving them from the powerful hands of their enemies.

Surprisingly, the Israelites did not welcome these judges. Look at verse 17. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. God’s aim with the judges was to help the Israelites repent of their evil ways. So they could return Him and walk in the way of obedience to Him. Yet [**the Israelites] would not listen** to their judges. Because, they did not want to listen to God. Instead, they wanted to continue to sell themselves, like prostitutes, to other gods and worshiped them. Because, to them this was more enjoyable and easy. In fact, we see in verse 19, that when the judge died, the people returned to ways **even more corrupt** than those of their fathers. Wow! These Israelites were really determined not to turn back to God. When they were in great distress, they cried out to the Lord. But the moment God saved them, they were so quick to once again turn from God. This tells us that their cry was not out of repentance for their sins. Nor was it out of a willing heart to return to God. Rather, the Israelites cry for help was merely a cry of desperation for the bad situation to change for the better. Yet, in their deep hearts they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. In a way we can say, that they wanted God to give them a comfortable life. Yet, at the same time they were not interested in God nor did they want to walk in His ways.But God can never be satisfied with such sinful and stubborn behaviour from His covenant people.

Look at verses 20-22. Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, “Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did.”

As we learned last week, God intentionally did not drive out before the Israelites any of the nations Joshua left when he died. Instead, God left these Canaanites among His people; to constantly attack and raid and oppress the Israelites. In this way, God made the Canaanites to be like thorns in the Israelite’s side. Thorns that constantly irritated them, and brought pain and misery upon them. Yet, after their blatant refusal to return to God, God firmly decided that these Canaanites would remain a constant nuisance and headache for the Israelites. Look at 3:2. He did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience. God left the Canaanites among the Israelites, in order for the Israelites to learn how to wage war against them. Through the hardships and struggles of warfare, God wanted His people to learn **who He is, how to rely on Him, how to follow Him wholeheartedly and keep their identity as God’s people**. In short, through warfare with the Canaanites, God wanted to *see whether they will keep the way of the LORD.* (2:22) At first glance, we might think that God left the Canaanites to simply make their lives miserable. However, the fact that God left the Canaanites to fight against the Israelites, shows the LORD did not abandon them. Moreover, it reveals God’s hope that they would turn back from the way of wickedness and return to Him.

**Then what about us? We also have to fight many battles. We fight f**inancial problems, human relationships, job issues, our studies, raising children, serving God’s ministry and living as a man or woman of God in this fallen world. We might wonder, why is it so hard? Why does God allow us to struggle so much? But we can learn from the Israelites, that through fighting these battles, God wants us to also learn who He is, how to rely on Him, how to follow Him wholeheartedly and keep our identity as God’s people. Then, as we do our best to keep the way of the LORD and obey Him, God transforms our inner beings to reflect our true identity: as God’s covenant people. A people holy to the Lord. Bought with the blood of Jesus and belonging to Him. That is why, we should accept times of trouble as symbols of God’s grace. Because through them, God is moulding our inner beings. Moreover, He tests us to see whether we will keep the way of the Lord and walk in obedience to Him.

Here we can see just how important it is, for us to understand who we are before God. Though we live in this world that is filled with Canaanite-like people, we are the covenant people of God. Bought with the blood of Jesus. Therefore, our main purpose in life is to obey God fully! Tragically, we easily forget this. Like the Israelites we forget who we are and what God has done for us. Therefore, we too begin to identify with worldly people around us. We adopted their ways and pursue the same life purpose of unbelievers: which is to live a successful and prosperous life in this world. To achieve this, we are all too quick to forsake the LORD as our God. Moreover, we do not regard our main purpose in life to be fully obedient to God. Instead, like the Israelites, we follow the sinful desires of our hearts as we offer ourselves to the world. To make more money, advance our careers, get a degree, or buy a house. Sadly, many believers today see nothing wrong with this. They think that only pastors or missionaries or shepherds must absolutely obey God. While, they can take a more casual approach to God. However, God established the same covenant with all believers. We are all called to obey God fully as of first importance in our lives**.**

But as we know, it is really not easy. Because, we are just like the Israelites. Like them, we too are stuck physically in difficult situations. Also, we are stuck spiritually in our sin. And no matter how hard we try, we all know, that we simply cannot save ourselves. The truth is, that only God can save us. Only God can change our life situation and bring us relieve. Only God can help us to walk in the way of obedience before Him. Then how does God help us to do this? He gives us His best and most powerful “judge” – His own Son, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, God forgives all our dirty sins and break the chains of bondage to sin. Through Jesus, God restores our broken lives. And helps us to walk in the way of obedience to Him. Sometimes we look elsewhere for solutions to our problems. We think that we need more money, a degree or a better job. However, what we need the most, is Jesus to save us and lead our lives. Only those among us who accept Jesus, as God’s ultimate solution for their broken lives, will be able to have a clear identity as God’s covenant people. And only those among us who accept Jesus as God’s ultimate solution, will turn away from following the ways of the world, to instead do their very best to walk in the way of obedience before God.

**In conclusion.** The thing that God wants the most from you and me, is that we keep the way of the LORD. In other words, that we do not conform to the ways and things of the world, but actively walk in obedience before God. Obedience is the foundation of our covenant relationship with God. And when it is not present in our lives and we too fail to listen, then we can be sure that God will not simply let it be. He loves us too much. That is why He sent Jesus to save us and help us return to Him. That is why, in love and compassion, God allows many hardships to come over our lives. So many times, we misunderstand the hardships in our lives as God’s unfair punishment. Yet, here we can learn that these troubles is proof that God loves us so much. To the point, where He will do everything possible to ensure that we do not forsake Him forever and so die in our sin. Even, allow us to experience hardships in life. Hence, the times when it feels like God has pulled back from your life, is the time for you to wholeheartedly return to the LORD. To newly accept that you belong to God and live in this world to walk in the way of obedience to God. Amen!