

# A NEW GENERATION---AN OLD WAR

By Steve Zeisler

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This weekend I passed a milestone that for me marked the fact of generational change. Twenty-six years ago, on a Friday night, I walked out under some barely adequate lights into a stadium with an off-key band playing and began warming up to play my first high school varsity football game. I was nervous, unsure of myself, and excited. Playing football taught me a number of important lessons-about achieving goals, being part of a team, and sacrificing current advantages to achieve something later on. There were some hard lessons about injuries, limits, and friendships that can be intense for a season but don't last because they are built on a weak foundation.

The reality of generational change was brought home to me, because what took place twenty-six years ago for me took place two days ago for my son. I was sitting in the stands above another off-key high school band, under bad lighting, in a very similar sort of stadium, and my son's team came out onto the field and got ready to play the first game of the season. This was his first experience playing varsity football. If I could, I would shortcut the process of his having to learn the lessons I learned. I would like to be able to pour them into his mind and life; to save him some of the struggles; to give him the things that God taught me over time with hurt, difficulty, and pressure; to give him the benefits before the struggle. But it isn't possible. We discuss things, as my father and I did, and there is guidance that I can share with him, 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 experiences and to fight the fight yourself.

## Passing a Torch

We have begun a study together of the book of Judges. You will want to turn to chapter 2 and the first six verses of chapter 3 this morning. This is a book about generational change, the passing of the torch from one generation to the next, and it is going to have a great deal to say about the learning environment in which God teaches us to trust him. That learning environment is going to be hard, but there's no avoiding it. I want to turn to chapter 3, verses 1 and 2 to start:

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).

God deliberately left in place enemies, pressures, and temptations for his own good purposes and as judgment on their failure. He left in place nations that would require the next generation after Joshua, whose life ended as this book began, to learn war on its own. Joshua had led the people of Israel, as we saw last week, on the conquest of Canaan, and they had had great beginnings under Joshua's leadership. The next generation did well as long as the influence of the first remained, but then they were on their own. And they were faced squarely with the need to love and trust God amid trials.

Let me orient you again a bit in the book before we look specifically at chapter 2. The book of Judges is a series of stories of individuals who were raised up by God as deliverers. They are called judges, but the English word "judge" is misleading. The idea of black-robed jurists determining points of law would mislead us if we applied it to this book. A judge in this account is a deliverer, someone who goes to battle with the enemies of the people of God and brings about deliverance from oppression. This book tells the stories of these judges.

It begins, however, with two passages (Judges 1:1-2:6 and 2:7-3:6) that are introductory. The first of these we looked at last week. It was a bit like the start of a movie; when the screen lights up and the music comes on,

scenes are displayed that give you a feel for the color and the location. You see whether it's an urban or rural setting, the time of day the events of the movie are going to take place, perhaps the mood of the characters. The music is upbeat, tense, or sad. Although you haven't seen any of the drama yet, you get a sense of what it's going to be about. That's how chapter 1 of Judges is. It is a series of vignettes, snippets of information that aren't thematically tied together, and few conclusions are drawn. The general impression, however, is one of weakness and compromise on the part of the people (whether it was the mutilation of an enemy, or the incomplete conquering of the land that each tribe was given).

**Our God is wise and gracious enough to place us into battles  
so that we will not settle for less than knowing him**

Now, chapter 2 is also introductory, but here we have the whole book outlined, if you will. We're given the themes very plainly. We're told of the cycles of failure that will repeat, and we are told why they do so. Both of these introductions, we should note, make the point that God did not drive out Israel's enemies. In verse 3 of chapter 2 the angel of the Lord says, "I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you." And in verse 21 of chapter 2: "I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died...."

### **Why God Doesn't Act**

One of the questions that occurs to us when we're hurting, frightened, or confused is, why doesn't God do more? That is, why doesn't he act more quickly? Why doesn't he do away with the problems? This is a question that I hope we'll come to grips with this morning, because he says very clearly, "I'm not going to remove the problems," and there are reasons for it.

Chapter 2, verse 6 of the book of Judges:

When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land.

The clear assignment was to take over the land, to expel or exterminate whatever resistance they met, and so possess the land.

Verses 7-10:

And 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. And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.

Joshua, the Lord's servant, was buried on the land of his inheritance, we're told, part of the Ephraimite territory. He evidently had taken the land that his family was to take, and he was buried with honor in the territory that he was to occupy. He had done what he ought to have done, and the men who led during his generation continued their influence as long as they were alive.

Then we come to the question, what about the next generation? What about the people who would follow them? It says they did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which he had done. They didn't know the Lord intimately, personally. They didn't know how to trust him for the details of their life. Now, they knew about him; they knew his name. They had information because they'd been taught about the Lord, but the point is that they didn't yet know him. And the question is, would they?

That is a very important point to come to in our lives, when we realize that we've been given a great deal, that we have significant information about God, that we have been preceded by men and women who are godly in their walk and who know both God and the works of God. This church has a rich heritage. Sitting in this room are some wonderfully godly people who have walked with the Lord, whose lives should be emulated. They are inspiring people, just as Joshua was, to me and to many of you. And yet we each need to ask ourselves the question, will I trade on the faith of another or be a man or woman after the Lord's own heart myself?

## **Synchretistic Religion**

Verses 11-13:

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 Ashtaroth.

This is another statement that we will see arching over the entire book. This is the conclusion that is drawn from what happens in the stories that we will begin next week. What the Israelites attempted to do when they moved into the land of Canaan was to wed the religion of Yahweh to the religion of the local gods. We know from the prophets and from the long history of Israel that they didn't completely abandon the Lord. They didn't say, "Yahweh is of no benefit at all; we'll forget him and become Canaanites." What they said was, "Yahweh is our God. He serves a useful purpose. There are holy days on which we will worship him. He has laws that we will acknowledge. We will show proper respect for Yahweh. But at the same time, we are now in the territory of Baal and the Ashtaroth. They live here, and we ought to show them respect as well. And so we'll have a syncretistic religion in which all of the gods in the pantheon get our attention, and maybe we'll learn from the ways Canaanite gods are worshiped and apply some of that to Yahweh. We'll gain the benefit of the local gods and retain the benefit of knowing the Lord."

They had moved into the territory, as it says in Deuteronomy 6:10-11, in which they were to take over vineyards they hadn't planted, fields they hadn't plowed, and homes they hadn't built. But they had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, and they had no agricultural background. They were attempting to grow crops in a land where they hadn't before. And Baal was the one who promised to bring rains to grow the crops. What if they didn't show Baal proper respect? Could they succeed? Could they grow comfortable and secure in this land they'd taken over without placating the local god? What is made very clear in verses 11-13 is they could not do it all. Yahweh forbids worship of him that contains worship of another inter-mixed with it. It is very clear that the more they served the Baals, the more they forsook Yahweh. Eventually they groveled before the Baals, bowing down before them, giving their allegiance to the gods of others. And as verse 13 said, "So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth."

The Ashtaroth was a female deity, and Baal was a male deity. I want to read to you what Gary Inrig has written in "Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay," about Canaanite religion:

The Canaanite religion was based on the concept of sympathetic worship. That is, you worship your god by behaving as he does. The result was that Baal was perhaps the most degraded and degrading form of worship ever practiced on earth. The Canaanites engaged in temple prostitution, fertility rites, drunken sexual orgies of the most debased variety, idolatry, snake worship, homosexuality and even human sacrifices. Baal worship was bad wherever it existed, but in Canaan it existed in its rawest form. Everything about it—its view of God, moral standards, ethics and values, and rituals—stood in absolute and total contradiction to everything that God had revealed about himself to his people.

The most degraded and degrading form of worship ever practiced on earth! And the people who knew God would bring his name into these temples, and acting out these orgiastic rites in all sorts of sexual perversion and drunkenness, would worship Baal one day and Yahweh the next with the same sort of practices. They

forsook the Lord by demeaning him. And it says that he became angry with them. Verse 19, which we will come to in a moment, notes that each time the Lord saved them they went back into sin more corruptly than they had before they had been saved. They made these decisions over and over again, and the decision landed them in a lower place every time they made it. They were on a descent into hell that they were unaware of. And even when the Lord acted to save them, they didn't hear. Verse 6 of chapter 3 records that they gave their children in marriage to Canaanite families. Not only did they sin themselves, but they gave away their children into the practice of this sort of sin.

## **Sin's Consequences**

Verses 14-15:

And the anger of the LORD burned 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.

The first thing we see the Lord doing is reacting in anger to what they had done. They had dragged his name into the midst of this kind of degradation, refusing to distinguish between him and the god of the prostitutes. It says that he also acted for evil against them. Now, evil as it's being used here at the end of verse 15 doesn't mean wickedness, but distress. "They were severely distressed." The Lord's actions had brought them pain and anguish. Their enemies dominated them. Their lives became an affliction to them.

Let me also note that these verses are consistent with the first chapter of Romans. In the great theology of human sin that we meet in the initial chapters of Romans, the point is made early on that God's wrath exists primarily in his taking his hands off, of stopping the protection process. "God gave them over," we are told three times in Romans 1. The primary way in which God's wrath leads to suffering for us is that he lets us have what we insist on having, and he doesn't stop the consequences from descending on us. That's exactly what happened here. The people of Israel gave their allegiance to the gods of Canaan. So the Lord God said, "All right, follow your leader. Trust in the Baal to provide for you." And the Baal led them into the hands of the Canaanite people. They were plundered and beaten by the nations and the people whose gods they had appealed to for help.

The same thing is true for us over and over again. We attempt to build our security on that which is insecure; and God loves us, but we don't listen. We try to buy pleasure, hope, or security; we try to gather power or promote ourselves; and the Lord warns, but we don't take heed. Then he finally says, "You can have what you asked for." And the life-shattering consequences descend on us.

## **Moved To Pity**

Verses 16-19:

Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. And 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. And 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.

Now, if the Lord's anger burned against them, and he was responsible for the suffering and distress that fell upon them, at the very same time he listened to their cries, he heard the weeping, and he saw the suffering. Every individual cry appealed to him, and he was moved to pity. His heart was broken, and he was as merciful as he could be in response to them. And he sent a savior, a deliverer to meet their needs. He himself was with the deliverer (v.18), not off at a distance. The God who is angry is also the God who is involved, who cares, who is merciful, "moved to pity by their groaning." And yet when he would act to deliver them, once they got relief from their problems they would immediately turn back to rebelling against him.

**The primary way in which God's wrath leads to suffering for us  
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Verses 20-23:

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.

Because of this process of repeated rebellion, because of the inclination of their hearts, given any degree of relief at all from problems to rush back into degrading and syncretistic worship, the Lord declared "I will not take away their problems. I am going to leave the nations in place." It was to teach them lessons, to test them, to create circumstances in which finally they might call out to him and know him with their whole heart.

### **The Lord's Purpose**

If the Lord removed every problem from us prior to our having real faith, if it were enough for us to know somebody like Joshua, cheer him on at a distance, and follow behind, liking the ideas but never gaining the heart that he had, if we were allowed a naive and shallow religious experience, we would never aim high enough in life. What the Israelites wanted was what many of us want, and that is a degree of security. They wanted their crops to grow, and they wanted the rain to come when they needed it. They wanted their families to be comfortable. They wanted to have happy children, to live in nice neighborhoods. They wanted to have enough spice in life to be interesting, but not enough to demand too much of them. They wanted the experience of Canaan to produce prosperity, peace, ease, and enjoyment of life. That's all they aimed for, and that's why they were willing to sell out.

What the Lord wanted for them was worship of a holy God. He wanted them to be his representatives on earth so that other people might come to know him, and to have an enthusiasm for the great things of their faith, for the Law and the Giver of the Law. And even if it meant more difficulty, more adventure, and more unknowns-because they were aimed at something greater, they would achieve something greater. If he would let us, too many of us would settle for knowing God well enough for him to give us everything we want but not for him to demand too much of us. And yet he wants us to aim for something higher.

Have you been following the story of Mark Wellman, the paraplegic ranger in Yosemite who is trying to scale the face of Half Dome? Wellman's legs don't work, yet he and a friend are climbing this mountain. Today was the day they were hoping to crest the top. They have been spending the nights on a nylon sheet suspended from two poles sticking out from the face of the rock over absolutely nothing. These men are living a life of unusual adventure and accomplishment on a physical level. The Lord intends the same for us spiritually.

If God were to remove the obstacles before we had any faith formed in us, we would also fool ourselves about the depth of wickedness of which we're capable. What the Israelites did by adopting Canaanite religion was despicable, and to use God's name in the midst of it was an abomination. And yet they were willing to do it over and over again.

We recoil from the stories of serial killers and sexually perverse societies that exist in the great cities of the world. We recoil from stories like the one you may have heard this week about a mother and grandmother in Houston using a three-year-old to sell crack cocaine. But are we really different from them?

The last section of the book of Judges is perhaps the most terrible in the Bible. It's a story of rape, dismemberment, and genocide. But after that a summary is given at the end of Judges that says, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The near extermination of the tribe of Benjamin would be done because the other tribes believed it was right. The dismemberment of the dead body of the prostitute would be done as an act of "righteous indignation." They didn't plan to do what was evil and wicked; they thought they were doing the right thing. Our capacity to fool ourselves, to act in these ways is extraordinary. So God leaves the enemies in the land precisely to teach us of our own inadequacy, our own capacity for evil. Our sin nature can't be fixed-only crucifixion and resurrection life in Christ are sufficient answers.

## **Battle Scars**

The conclusion of this section is the first six verses of chapter 3:

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). These nations are: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. And they were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses. And the sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.

These are the nations that were left behind to test the people, and the people regularly failed the test. And the Lord required them to need him, and he would not remove these obstacles. I know that each of us can identify fears we wish we were free of. Life would seem better if we had less pressure, less trauma, less temptation, and less struggle to deal with. Yet he knows that all of us would live lives of less faith if we had it easier, so he leaves behind those difficulties that will teach us war. They will teach us to do battle with what's wrong, to trust him, and to know him as a result.

As a last commentary on the importance of knowing the living God and the worthiness of the challenge, the final verses of the book of Galatians make an interesting statement. The apostle Paul wrote a combative book in Galatians. It was a book of debate against those who would dilute and destroy the gospel message. He railed against his detractors, and he taught them the truth, and then at the end of the book he said, "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus." Paul had been beaten, stoned, jailed, shipwrecked, abandoned, attacked by robbers, worked over in every kind of circumstance by Jews, Romans, and pagans. By the time he wrote the book of Galatians there were scars on his face, his hands, and his back and a limp in his leg. He stood before them figuratively in the book of Galatians and he said, "Look at my body. There are scars on it. But these are not ordinary scars; they are the brand-marks of Jesus." Paul's refusal to compromise meant that he was "taught war" (Judges 3:2). And the scars that resulted from his hardships he wore proudly because they testified to his intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. Our God is wise and gracious enough to place us into battles so that we will not settle for less than knowing him.

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