

# OUR MISERY, HIS MERCY

By Steve Zeisler

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If your family is like ours, you've been watching the Olympics a good bit this last week, reacquainting yourself with luge, Nordic combined, and other obscure sports no one thinks about between the Olympic years. This year's Olympic Games in addition to being entertaining, testify to the political changes in the world. As we think of the changes that have taken place--the breaking up of the communist world---the obvious conclusion to draw is that the West has won the Cold War, and we have much to rejoice about in that.

Why, then, is this nation with no military threat poised against us anywhere in the world, so aggressively ruining itself? There's almost a death wish in our culture, a self-destructiveness and decay from within that are accelerating at about the same rate that the enemies on the outside are losing their ability to threaten us.

The current election campaign and the primary in New Hampshire have put before us a field of presidential candidates who trivialize each other and a press that is focused on nonessentials. The former head of the Ku Klux Klan in Louisiana ran a creditable campaign for governor of that state. The Clarence Thomas hearings, the William Kennedy Smith trial in Florida, and other things have put our national leaders in the worst possible light. The free speech clause of the Bill of Rights has been used in San Francisco to defend a group of pedophiles who want to hold meetings in a library in a neighborhood with children everywhere around them; the political leadership of the city did nothing about it until there was a public outcry on the part of parents. In Southern California the police are on trial for a five-on-one beating of a black citizen stopped for a traffic violation. Considering the nation as it's portrayed, you wonder what those outside wanting to be like us think as they look on at these things.

I say all these things because this morning we are going to re-enter a study of the book of Judges. Please turn to the tenth chapter with me. The period of Israel's history covered by the book of Judges was very much like the period we are living in today in this culture. They experienced cycles of decline and decay, in which the nation's loss of faith and righteousness brought about its own demise.

## A New Cycle

Let's begin reading at verse 1, chapter 10 and then we'll set the context a bit more:

Now after Abimelech died, Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, arose to save Israel; and he lived in Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died and was buried in Shamir.

And after him, Jair the Gileadite arose, and judged Israel twenty-two years. And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities in the land of Gilead that are called Havvoth-jair to this day. And Jair died and was buried in Kamon.

Now, Tola and Jair are minor judges. We don't know very much at all about their stories; we barely meet these two men. At the end of chapter 11 we're going to meet three more minor judges, each of whom gets a verse or two. I'm convinced that these stories are told at this time and with these details primarily to help us understand the story of the man Jephthah. He is the major figure we're going to consider next week. The book of Judges has a number of such major figures: Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Gideon's dastardly son Abimelech, then Jephthah and Samson. Next week I'll describe how these two minor judges help us understand Jephthah better.

Verses 6-9:

Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the sons of Ammon. And they afflicted and crushed the sons of Israel that year; for eighteen years they afflicted all the sons of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in Gilead in the land of the Amorites. And the sons of Ammon crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah, Benjamin, and the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was greatly distressed.

**The Lord God is committed to building character in us,  
bringing about change that lasts forever**

Verse 7 gives us another note of context so that we can begin to see where we are in the book and where we're going. It says that the Lord in his anger sold his children into slavery. He took his hands off them, let them have what they insisted on having. As a result of that, two primary oppressors took over. From the east, the Ammonites attacked them and made their life miserable, and Jephthah's story is of the breaking of the Ammonite oppression. The next major figure we'll meet in Judges, Samson, is going to deal with the Western foe---the Philistines.

## **A Powerful Indictment**

Verse 6 deserves particular attention: "Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD," and served in succession seven different idols or groups of idols. The end of the verse says: "...thus they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him." This is the most powerful indictment in the book. Both earlier and later we're told in brief that the Israelites deserted the Lord, served the Baals, and suffered for it. But here we're given the names of seven specific idolatries. And three times in this verse the author points that they abandoned the Lord. The general note is made first: They did evil in the sight of the Lord. Then it says they served the Baals, they forsook the Lord, and (toward the end of the verse) they did not serve him. Their rebellion was repeated, widespread, and whole-hearted. Seven is a number indicating completion in scripture; this is a full-blown and active rebellion.

Now, we might well ask, since the people of God had at least the books of Moses available to them in scripture and a knowledge of their own history, why they would be attracted to what Canaanite deities would offer. If we can discover what attracted them to make such a decision, we might very well discover the same issues in ourselves. It's worth taking a moment to talk about Canaanite gods.

The nation of Israel today is roughly the same geographical size as the nine Bay Area counties; it is not a lot of territory. Within this relatively small area we have seven different idols or kinds of idols mentioned here; one of the things that we need to understand about Canaanite religion is that it is very localized. Each god is a small god. They each have their own tribe. They have their own hill on which they are to be worshiped. They have a territory where they are counted on to be effective at bringing rain for crops and increase to livestock. They're limited in geography; you can't take an idol with you and make it work someplace else. They're also limited in time; they are brought into being, they wax in power and potency, and then they grow impotent and tired.

The contrast to the God of Israel is dramatic. Yahweh, the Lord God, is absolutely without limits. He existed before the creation of time, space, energy, matter, and everything that's created. He existed from eternity and will exist into eternity beyond. He is infinite in power and in wisdom. He is without rival. He has no beginning and no end. There is no place in the universe where he is not Lord of all. He is pure, holy, and immutable.

## **The Quick Fix**

Again we ask, why would his people choose to aggressively reject the infinite One and follow a Canaanite deity? The succinct answer is that Canaanite deities pay off more quickly; they give you what you want sooner. What the Lord God is committed to is building character in us, bringing about change that lasts forever. It requires humility to benefit from knowing him. We must reduce ourselves and glorify him.

We might think of it as the difference between having relief and being renewed. When we're suffering with a problem, often what we are willing to settle for is short-term relief from the problem or an anaesthetizing of the pain. What the infinite, limitless Lord God is interested in is renewing us. It's the long, character-building work of making us different people. But what the limited Canaanite god will offer us is perhaps short-term relief, some kind of anaesthesia, a way to set the problem aside and ignore it for the moment.

Further, it's the difference between building real community and settling for conformity. What the limitless Lord God, Yahweh, is interested in among his people is building real love in community, where barriers are broken down, knowledge of one another is established, and caring across divides takes place. But the quicker fix that a Canaanite deity (a modern one as well as the ancient one) would offer is conformity, where everyone dresses alike, looks alike, sounds alike, and appears to be united in that sense without any work being done on the heart.

Finally, it's the difference between being offered pleasure and being offered joy. The Lord God, the limitless One, has in mind for us that our lives be infused with joy. But joy has to come from the heart. It means that we understand who he is and what his purposes are, so that even in the midst of difficulties like those of Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail, hymns are being sung as the stocks are clamped down and the earthquake strikes. Joy comes from someplace very deep inside. It doesn't come easily or quickly; it is the long work of God. Pleasure, on the other hand, can be had very quickly indeed. It's the quick fix, the short-term jolt.

Canaanite gods offer the quick fix. That's the advantage of serving them. They promised that crops would grow if orgiastic rites were performed to their honor. And the ancient people of God in times of peace would often settle for the quick fix, for the same reasons that you and I are willing to do so.

Football fans among us will know who Lyle Alzado is. He's a former football player who played for the Raiders and the Broncos. He took heavy doses of steroids in college and during the pros, and his body ballooned up well beyond the size it ought to have been. Steroids have the effect of making you artificially large, strong, and nasty. He was very successful. The problem is that now he's dying. He has numerous cancers, and his body is withered. The steroid treatment that he took all those years has finally had the effect of reaching its limits. Canaanite gods wax and wane and their potency runs out. Eventually the steroid treatment that made Lyle Alzado an All-Pro will kill him. A relatively young man who wanted power, strength, authority, and dominance was willing to listen to a siren song that offered it to him quickly and falsely, and now he's dying. I think many women who have augmented their physical attractiveness with silicone for purely cosmetic reasons wonder if they haven't bought the same kind of lie.

Similarly, there are people who went to work for General Motors twenty or thirty years ago with the notion that it was the most powerful automobile manufacturer in the world; it was without rival and it was secure. Now they are finding out that they may be among the twenty-five or thirty thousand being laid off over the course of the next few years. Today's New Age guru who offers some kind of life-changing course for his or her followers will be forgotten like Werner Erhardt and all those other people we can't remember anymore because they don't last very long. Whether it's religion, economics, or whatever, there are Canaanite gods everywhere that can do only a little bit, last only for a little while, having limited capacity to bless.

## **An Inevitable Crash**

Inevitably, the result of following Canaanite gods, ancient or modern, is a crash. Verses 8 and 9 make the point clearly. The Lord took his hands off, and they became slaves of their enemies, who afflicted and crushed the sons of Israel for eighteen years. In verse 9, the sons of Ammon crossed the Jordan, marched on them, and fought against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim, taking more and more territory. The result, in the final statement in this paragraph, was that "Israel was greatly distressed." In anguish, the house of cards comes down.

Picking up in verse 10, what happened when the crash occurred, the affliction and difficulty arose?

Then the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against Thee, for indeed, we have forsaken our God and served the Baals." And the LORD said to the sons of Israel, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the sons of Ammon, and the Philistines? Also when the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hands. Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress."

Oops! Once again it's, "Oh, Lord, deliver us. We're sorry, we've gotten ourselves in this mess again. Oh, gosh, we've really stepped in it this time. Please come and deliver us." Only instead of sending a deliverer as before, what does he say? "You've chosen another god. You've appealed to the Baals, Molech, Ashtaroth, Dagon, and the gods of the peoples around. You said that they were the ones you would serve. Well then, let them get you out of the trouble you're in. Are they strong enough? Where's the deliverance from them?" He reminds them of his acts of deliverance in the past, "Go back to the exodus from Egypt, to the period of wilderness wanderings, to the times of earlier judges. Over and over again you've abandoned me, gotten yourselves in trouble, and called out for help. And over and over again I've delivered you. Enough is enough. What would make you presume on me that I should do it again?"

But the account doesn't end there:

And the sons of Israel said to the LORD, "We have sinned, do to us whatever seems good to Thee; only please deliver us this day." So they put away the foreign gods from among them, and served the LORD; and He could bear the misery of Israel no longer.

The last phrase of verse 16 is some of the best news you will ever hear. I don't think the Lord God was much impressed at all with the quality of their repentance. He rejected the first statement of repentance in verse 10. But they came back to him later and said in verse 15, "We have sinned. Do to us whatever seems good to Thee." Now, if they had stopped right there, that would have been a sign of a broken heart. "Lord, all we can do is cast ourselves on your mercy. Do whatever seems good to Thee." But they don't stop there: "Do whatever seems good to Thee, only deliver us." But they don't even stop there: "Only deliver us today." They are not repenting of their sin in any deep or profound manner. They just want out of trouble. So they're calling out to the Lord, "Do whatever seems good to you, only get us out of this thing, and get us out of it now!" And by rights, the Lord ought to have reacted as he did in verse 14.

### **Moved By Their Misery**

But he didn't react that way, because he couldn't stand their misery. He loved them too much. That's why I'm convinced that this is some of the best news that we can read--it doesn't even matter ultimately if our motives are mixed, if we don't understand ourselves very well, if our weakness is greater than we're even able to describe. Ultimately that doesn't matter because he is going to forgive us and intervene, because he can't stand to see us hurting, because he loves us too much. We don't deserve it. That's the amazing testimony of Romans 5: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." He died for us not because we were good, nor because we sought him out, nor because we deserved it, but for no other reason except that he loves us, and he can't stop loving us.

We took communion together this morning, and we were urged to examine ourselves. Communion, for me and I'm sure for most of you, is a time of confession and of honesty. Scripture says that we're not to partake in an unworthy manner, and I don't want to be offensive to God. And yet I confess the same sins and concerns at communion over and over again. I don't often see dramatic improvement. Or if there's improvement in one area, that usually just gets me up to the top of the hill so I can see a whole new territory of sin and rebellion that is as ugly as whatever I just crawled out of.

**Joy doesn't come easily or quickly; it is the long work of the Lord**

Perhaps sometimes you want to say, "Lord, I hate to bring this up again. I know we've been over this a lot of times, but I need help. I'm still weak, frightened, and burdened." Or we say, "Lord, this time I really mean it! This time for sure I'm going to turn over my life to you; it's never going to be the same again. This time I'm serious." And as much as we know ourselves when we make such statements, we're telling the truth. But we don't really understand very much about ourselves at all. Yet, thankfully, the quality of our repentance is not the basis on which we're forgiven. It's the heart of God, which cannot bear the misery of his people, and so he acts to save. Our hope is anchored in his loving heart, for before we ever thought to seek him out, he sought us out, and he'll continue to do so.

Let me just conclude by asking you what sort of world you live in. You and I have to choose a path to go on. We have to seek after some idea or person that will make sense of life, give us direction, and offer us hope. We may choose to listen to, become disciples of, and be changed by the limitless Lord God of scripture, whose truth works in every location, in every time, who wants to bring out real change from the inside. Or we may choose to serve a Canaanite god-the god of the quick fix, the short-term advantage, the pay-off now with the accounting to come later.

Yesterday afternoon I was with my family in a park nearby. There were great puddles all over and one particularly outstanding puddle in the middle of a basketball court. We were watching little boys play in the puddle, and right nearby was a homeless woman with a shopping cart holding her personal belongings, who as far as I could tell lived in that park. It was just getting ready to rain as we left, and I was thinking about the rainstorm. The rains we're having today can be interpreted differently by different people, can't they? There are weather forecasters who approach them technically. There are ordinary citizens like us who are concerned about drought. There are farmers and others who are concerned about crops. There are little boys who like puddles, something little boys haven't had a chance to play in in this community for a long time. But then you have someone else who has to live outside, and her perspective on the rain is totally different from that of any of the above: It is more threatening to her. She's praying against all those who are praying for rain.

The same set of circumstances, the same storms are interpreted differently by different people depending on the lenses we look through, the allegiances we have, who we are and who we're becoming. Judges presents us with an option. We can serve a God whose mercy extends to us even when our repentance is shallow, and we're immature and prone to foolishness, even when our weaknesses seem to clutch at us, when our sins are embarrassing for us to face. In all of that, he cannot bear the misery of his people, so he extends mercy toward us. We can serve that kind of God, whose power, purity, and wisdom are infinite. Or we can listen to some set of lies that says we can have it all much sooner and much more easily, without any breaking of our pride, without any learning of hard lessons. But if we seek to have it all quickly, we will find ourselves over and over again "crashing and burning," afflicted, sold into slavery. The choice is ours.

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