

WOUNDED SOLDIERS

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 2:6-3:6

2nd Message

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In Thornton Wilder's play, *The Angel That Troubled the Water*,¹ a physician comes periodically to a pool at Bethesda in Jerusalem to be healed of his melancholy. Legend had it that at certain times an angel would stir up the waters and that whoever stepped into the pool first would be healed of his or her affliction. In the play, the angel appears, but he prevents the physician from stepping into the water and informs him that this healing is not intended for him.

Most of us probably would like healing for something: a condition, an emotional wound, a self-destructive tendency. Most of us probably also feel like the physician: the deliverance we crave is withheld from us. We cry out to God, perhaps, and as far as we can tell, he doesn't do much of anything. Could it be that God has redemptive reasons for not delivering us? For Israel's own good, God chose not to drive some inhabitants from the Promised Land, even though they would prove to be thorns in her side. Judges 2:6-3:6, then, is for all of us who have been denied the deliverance we have craved.

The passage constitutes Part Two of the prologue to the Book of Judges. As a whole, the prologue both summarizes and anticipates the entire book. Whereas Part One (Judges 1:1-2:5) mostly considered the perspective of the Israelites, Part Two mostly considers the perspective of God. Part Two therefore gives us a sneak preview of what God is doing in the Book of Judges.

The anger of the Lord

Judges 2:6-15:

⁶After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to his own inheritance. ⁷The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. ⁸Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. ¹⁰After that whole generation had been gathered

to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel.

¹¹Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹²They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger ¹³because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. ¹⁵Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

The faithfulness of Israel was enmeshed both with Joshua, her principal leader, and with other leaders who had participated in the conquest of the Promised Land. Despite the presence of Joshua and the other leaders, however, a generation arose that “knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.” The next generation is too dependent on the prior generation. One generation lives off the faith and experience of another. When the prior generation died, so did the faith of the next generation. In actuality, though the people “served” the Lord while Joshua and other leaders were alive, they did not “know” the Lord. They hear what the Lord has done for Israel, but they do not “know” what the Lord has done for Israel. They worship the Lord, but their worship is superfluous. If they lost their faith, they didn't have much faith to lose. Then, when they stopped believing in the Lord, they started believing in something else: the gods of the pagans who lived around them and promised to meet their needs and satisfy their passions better than the Lord.

The Lord had entered into a covenant, or partnership, with Israel. The scriptures speak of this covenant as if it were a marriage. The Lord was the husband, and Israel was his bride. So, how does the Lord respond when Israel rejects him and instead worships other gods? He feels what any man would feel whose wife leaves him for another

man: he feels anger. Because the Lord felt something, he also did something: in his anger, he “handed them over” and “sold them” to their enemies. Instead of being “with” Israel, as he was earlier when his people faced their enemies, the Lord was “against” them. Therefore, instead of being victorious in battle, Israel suffers defeat. The Lord, in fact, had warned Israel of this eventuality if she forsook him and worshiped other gods (Leviticus 26:17; Deuteronomy 28:25, 31:16-21). Israel paid a high price for worshiping other gods: she suffered great distress.

Believing in something else

Just as Israel became enmeshed with Joshua and others, some of us become overly dependent on spiritual leaders. We're impressed by their faith, their charisma, and their words—so much so that we learn neither to separate the wheat from the chaff nor to feed ourselves at the table of the word. You can't have a relationship with the Lord through someone else's relationship with the Lord. At their best, spiritual leaders teach and model dependence on the Lord. In the words of David Roper, a former pastor of our church, the goal of spiritual leaders is to help others become “independently dependent on Christ.”²

Recently, I took three interns whom our church has trained with me to teach a weeklong pastors seminar in India. On one particular day, the interns taught four times and I didn't teach at all. I didn't really plan for it to be that way, but that's the way it worked out. So I sat back and watched the Lord at work in each of them. This thought now occurs to me: they don't need me. They could have done the whole seminar without me. Praise God!

Although it is possible to be too dependent on spiritual leaders, it is not possible to be too dependent on the Lord. When we're too dependent on spiritual leaders for too long, we settle into serving the Lord without knowing the Lord. Then, if we turn away from faith in Christ, we're not turning away from anything that was really ours in the first place.

If we turn away from faith, we turn to something else. Those who abandon faith in Christ don't stop believing; they just start believing in something else. Deep in our hearts, we know that we are needy, passionate creatures. We know we need food, clothing, and shelter. But we also know, whether we believe in Jesus or not, that his words are true: “Man does not live on bread alone” (Matthew 4:4). If we stop looking to the Lord to meet our needs and satisfy our passions, we will look elsewhere. We live among people who worship not gods that go by the names

of Baal and Ashtoreth but by the names of Money, Power, Sex, and Success.

When we look elsewhere, to that which would destroy us, God gets angry, not least because he loves us. If your lover is not upset when you leave him for another man, then you never meant much to him in the first place. Yes, we want God to get angry; we need God to get angry. In his anger—in his loving anger—he hands us over to our false gods. The result is that we become attached to them and to the dehumanizing behavior they inspire. The punishment for sin is that you are free to sin more. Anything that is both pleasurable and repeated becomes enslaving—and, in the case of sin, increasingly degrading. The punishment for sin is sin. Like Israel of old, we pay a high price for worshiping other gods. Sin, like the enemies who surrounded Israel, is a raider; it plunders us, taking away our humanity.³

The Lord not only gets angry, he also feels compassion.

The compassion of the Lord

Judges 2:16-19:

¹⁶Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ¹⁷Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. ¹⁸Whenever 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. ¹⁹But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

The Lord, warning Israel against worshiping other gods, said, “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:5-6). In his anger, he handed his people over to enemies. In his compassion,

he raises up judges, or tribal leaders, to deliver his people from those enemies.

Nevertheless, despite the Lord's intervention in their behalf, the people continue worshipping other gods. The narrator equates the worship of other gods not with adultery but with the even more severe sin of prostitution. After all that the Lord had done for them, the people quickly, easily, and continuously offer their favors to other suitors. Furthermore, whenever a judge died, the people became even more corrupt. Just as they were dependent on Joshua and the elders, they become dependent on the judges, not the Lord, who raises up the likes of Joshua, elders, and judges.

Coming down from a spiritual high

The Lord is a God of deep, not capricious, passions. He gets angry and he feels compassion. Why? Because he is passionate about us. Both his anger and his compassion are expressions of his love. In his anger, he hands us over to sin, so that we might cry out to him. In his compassion, he delivers us in surprising ways, often in times of crisis, as he delivered Israel through the judges. The Lord's intervention in such ways can create for us a spiritual high and make us think that all is well.

A spiritual high doesn't last forever, though. Many of us, after coming down from a spiritual high, quickly, easily, and continuously return to our prior ways unless we commit ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to a daily walk with the Lord. If we try to live off of a spiritual high instead of living in spiritual discipline, we'll crash and burn. A spiritual high, if you're not observant, can make you spiritually lazy so that your latter condition (prostitution to other gods) becomes worse than your former condition (adultery with other gods).

Many years ago, a friend of mine nearly died from injuries suffered in an automobile accident. I visited him in the hospital a few times, and he spoke of how God had rescued him, how he felt the presence of God, and how he wanted to start living differently. After he was discharged, I visited him in his home, and he didn't want to talk at all about God anymore. Near as I could tell, when he came down from his spiritual high, he quickly returned to his prior ways. In fact, it seemed to me that he became even more wrapped up in the gods of the world and that his latter condition became worse than his former condition. We must fasten ourselves to the Lord, depending not on his means of deliverance but on the Lord himself.

The final step the Lord takes in response to his people's false worship is to leave the nations in the land.

The Lord leaves the nations in the land

Judges 2: 20-3:6:

²⁰Therefore 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, ²¹I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. ²²I 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." ²³The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.

¹These are the nations the LORD left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan ²(he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience): ³the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath. ⁴They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses. ⁵The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁶They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.

In response to his people's increasingly corrupt ways, the Lord gets angry again, although now he's "very angry." The Lord's anger intensifies along with his people's corruption. The people broke covenant with the Lord by worshipping other gods. Therefore, the Lord calls Israel not "my people" but "this nation," terminology that could be applied to any Gentile nation. In his anger, he will cease driving out the inhabitants of the Promised Land; instead, he will simply raise up judges who will only temporarily keep them at bay. Nevertheless, the Lord has redemptive purposes for allowing the nations to remain in the land.

First, the Lord leaves the nations in the land to test the people, to see whether they will "keep the way of the Lord" and "obey the Lord's commands"—in other

words, to see whether they will worship the Lord. In the face of persistent oppression, will the people turn to the Lord? The presence of oppressors will push them to the breaking point. At that point, will they turn to the Lord in their brokenness, or will they just break? That's the test. It is not a test the Lord wants to give, but, in view of the nature of the apostasy, and for the sake of his people, it's a test he must give.

Second, the Lord leaves the nations in the land to teach a new generation about war. The previous generation "had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel." Members of that generation crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. They saw the walls of Jericho fall. They watched nation after nation fall before them. They experienced the Lord's empowering presence in battle. The next generation, though, "knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel." The members of the next generation not only need to know what the Lord had done for Israel, they also need to know what the Lord can do for Israel. They need to take up the sword and know the Lord.

Alas, the Israelites "lived among" the inhabitants of the land instead of fighting against them. They not only settle down with the pagans, they also marry them, in violation of the law. The law warned them that involvement with pagans in the most intimate of relationships would turn their hearts away from the Lord (Exodus 34:12-16, Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Indeed, as the narrator notes, the Israelites serve the gods of the nations. The warning issued in the Mosaic Law against marriage outside the faith, echoed elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, applies today: believers in Christ should not marry outside the faith because by doing so they place their own faith in jeopardy. For example, Solomon's foreign wives turned his heart away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-8). The Israelites didn't learn war, and they failed the test.

Testing and teaching

Overdependence on spiritual leaders can lead to the worship of other gods. The true God lets us have our way but in his grace may deliver us, at least temporarily, which can inspire a spiritual high but not necessarily dependence on the Lord. When the spiritual high passes, we may fall back into false worship, even an increasingly corrupt version of false worship.

So, where does that leave us? It leaves us in a world dominated by sin, which God, for our own good, chooses at this time not to vanquish. He ceases to drive sin out, just

as he ceased to drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land. He leaves sin for two reasons: to test us and to teach us.

God uses sin to test us so that we will return to him in the face of oppression. False worship can be exhilarating. Money, sex, power, and success, for example, have their appeal. That's why we choose them. But in the end, they don't liberate; they enslave and oppress. One day, false worship just might break you and then you have a choice. Will you return to the Lord in your brokenness, or will you just break? The oppressive presence of false gods, and the ever-present opportunity for self-destructive choices that they inspire, forces the issue.

God also uses sin to teach us spiritual warfare. The Israelites who hadn't tasted battle needed to learn war; as followers of Jesus, we need to learn spiritual war. If we seem strangely bent toward sin, toward worshiping false gods even though we endeavor to worship the true God, then we have something to fight against, don't we? And if we have something to fight against, something that we can't conquer on our own, we need some help don't we? We find, in spiritual warfare, that we need the Lord, that we need to, in the apostle Paul's words, "put on the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11). We need to know not simply what the Lord has done but what the Lord can do.

The false god that I hear from on an ongoing basis tells me to seek validation away from the presence of the true God. I have cried out to God, but the lust for validation still haunts me. "I gaze into the doorway of temptation's angry flame And every time I pass that way, I always hear my name" ⁴ The Lord has tested me. He's taught me spiritual war. Because God has not removed the false god, I have continued pouring out my heart to him in my brokenness, year in and year out. Thus, I have drawn near to him, and he has drawn near to me. The oppressive presence of the false god, which the true God has not removed from my life, has served me well. It has helped me forge intimacy with God.

We find out what the Lord can do by taking up a sword against the false gods that torment us, yes, but also by getting outside ourselves, by living out the gospel, not just in the privacy of our own thoughts but in the lives of real people. Out there, beyond ourselves, we discover not only what the Lord can do but also the Lord himself. We take up the sword so that we might know the Lord.

In my late twenties, God lit a fire under me, motivating me to get out of the pews and into the war for hearts and minds. I began teaching and shepherding high school and college students in the church I was attending. In doing

so, I found that I needed the Lord—much more than I thought I needed him, especially on the night I came all studied-up to teach my Bible study and no one came. Later that night, I wore out the path in the park near my house asking God about that one. I didn't take up the sword in behalf of young people so that I might know the Lord, but because I took up a sword, the Lord took hold of me in a new and powerful way.

God has not delivered me, at least in the way I have asked him to; he's done something better. He's tested me. He's taught me. By testing me and teaching me, he's given not deliverance; he's given himself. "Then onward in my journey, I come to understand That every hair is numbered, like every grain of sand."⁵ Dylan's song does the same thing that Judges does: it understands the temptation to sin in light of the power and goodness of God. Now, I take all the brokenness, all the dashed hopes and ongoing struggles, and pour it into my vocation—into my sermons and writings, into my counseling and discipling. If I haven't been delivered, perhaps I can help heal someone else.

Most people feel that God hasn't delivered them, so much so that they have given up completely on faith in him. All people are weak, but most people don't feel free to open up about their weaknesses. We connect with others through the temptations we face, the sins we succumb to, and the brokenness we suffer. Therefore, the place where you have been tempted the most—where you have wrestled with God—may be the place where you have the most to offer. After God wrestled with Jacob and wrenched his hip on the banks of the River Jabbok, he blessed Jacob "there," in the place where he had wounded him. God converts the place of wounding into a place of blessing. God blesses us—yes, even with wounds—so that we might bless others. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, the name that would connote the people of God, so that all who belong to him would know that they are destined to be a wounded people (Genesis 32:22-32). Is it any wonder then that the Messiah of Israel, who wasn't delivered from his enemies—at least until after they had had their way with him—was wounded beyond recognition? With his wounds, Jesus blessed us: "by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). By our wounds, we bless others, meeting them where they are, in their pain, and dressing their wounds with the crucified love of the Savior.

Even sin, though not authored by God, becomes a tool of God. Don't serve sin; make sin serve you. Return to the Lord in the face of oppression, and take up a sword against the false gods, for your own sake and for the sake of others.

Broken on the wheels of living

God leaves false gods and sinful tendencies in our lives in order to test us, so that we might return to him, and that he might teach us spiritual warfare, all for the sake of knowing him. So, if you've been denied the deliverance that you crave, perhaps the Lord, for your own good, is testing you and teaching you. Perhaps he's whispering, "Come closer."

In Thornton Wilder's play, the physician pleads for help to the angel who stopped him from stepping into the pool. The angel responds,

Without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve. Physician, draw back.

Meanwhile, the man who stepped into the pool first was healed. He emerges from the pool rejoicing, but he also emerges to approach the physician. "Please come with me," the man tells the physician.

It is only an hour to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I do not understand him and only you have ever lifted his mood. Only an hour. . . . There is also my daughter: since her child died, she sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us but she will listen to you.⁶

Have you been broken on the wheels of living? And you haven't been healed? Ah, you're a wounded soldier then. In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve. Perhaps you can heal someone else.

NOTES

¹Thornton Wilder, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1928), 20.

²David Roper, *The Making of a Disciple, Part Three*, Catalogue No. 179: <http://www.pbc.org/files/messages/9797/0179.html> (Palo Alto: Discovery Publishing, 1968).

³I explore these themes in greater detail in my commentary on *World Gone Wrong, Romans 1:18-32*, 2006, <http://www.pbc.org/messages/15701>.

⁴Bob Dylan, *Every Grain of Sand* (1981).

⁵Dylan.

⁶Wilder, 20.