

September 27, 2020

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL INTO SIN

Judges 3:7-16:31

(2 of 3 in a series through Judges)

Have you ever seen one of those paintings or pictures where if you look real close, you see that it is made up of all kinds of little pictures, but if you step back a good ways, you can see that all those little pictures serve to make one big picture? If you can picture that in your head, I want to use it as an illustration for what we're going to do this morning. Most of the time in preaching, we're looking at one of the little pictures that you can see when you get close. We are amazed that a small section of Scripture contains so much beauty, glory, and transforming truth. We had that kind of approach when we looked at Romans over several months in 2017-2018. But something that's not as common with regard to preaching is doing the equivalent of stepping back from that portrait and seeing how all the little pictures fit together and what larger image it shows us. That is what I want to do this morning as we look at a very large text of Scripture—Judges 3:7-16:31.

Most of the time when we think of the book of Judges we think of the heroic stories of the Judges freeing God's people from oppression. We remember Gideon and his small army overcoming the Midianites, Ehud stabbing his sword through the fat Moabite king so that the king's belly swallows it, or of Samson and his many exploits. And those are attractive stories to look at. In my very first sermon I ever preached I chose as my text the story of Gideon because it seemed like such a glorious example of what God can do through weak and feeble people who trust in him.

But if you step back from any of these individual stories and get a look at the picture this whole middle section of Judges provides for us, you'll actually see that it's a sad and wicked picture that each of these little stories makes when fit together. Judges 3:7-16:31 is simply an expansion of that formula that the author gave to us in 2:6-3:6. That formula is this: 1) Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord, 2) the Lord gives them into the hands of their enemies, 3) they cry out to the Lord, 4) the Lord raises up a deliverer (a judge), 5) the Lord delivers them, and then the whole thing starts over with Israel sinning again. And this formula is found in six cycles in the book. Each of these six cycles we see with regard to the judge whom the Lord raises up to deliver his people. So we have Othniel (3:7-12), Ehud (3:12-31), Deborah (4-5), Gideon (6-9), Jephthah (10-12), and Samson (13-16). Now, if you actually read book, you'll see that the author actually mentions six other deliverers—Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. But each of them is covered almost in passing. For example, the author only gives us one sentence about Shamgar saving Israel in 3:31. So, what the author is showing us is that he is picking six of these judges to focus on intentionally, and I think his intention is to show the great wickedness that was taking place and being tolerated in Israel because these deliverer stories ultimately contain sinful and painful elements. And it seems that with each new cycle—and judge—the behavior of those whom God is using to lead his people is only getting worse and worse.

Now, the reason I wanted us to look at Judges in this brief, high-altitude series through the book is because I wanted us to see this book as a warning. The Lord has made clear that the church is supposed to provide a distinct picture from the world. We're to be light and salt in a world of darkness and decay. But what we see with Israel is that ultimately they became nearly indistinguishable from the Canaanites who had possessed the land before them. And my prayer for us is that in the midst of all kinds of practices and ideologies that are swirling around us at a fever pitch in our culture, that we are on guard and aren't conformed to this world but are being transformed by the renewing of our minds to God's Word so that we might know how we are to think, live, and act.

Last week we looked at 1:1-3:6, and I argued that Israel's descent into living like the Canaanites began with compromised obedience and a toleration of sin that set the stage for them to move to greater and more perverse sin. The reason for this is because sin hardens and deceives so that what should be seen as clearly wrong and repulsive becomes to us acceptable or even attractive. This week, then, as we step back and look at the big picture provided through the fitting together of the narratives revolving around these six deliverers, we're going to get a look at the specific sins themselves. We know that the cycles are not merely repetitive but spiral downward. We've already been told in 2:19 that each generation was "more corrupt than their fathers." Therefore, I'm going to draw more from the later cycles (and judges) as my examples. And by looking at these sins specifically hopefully it'll serve to put a spotlight on any particular thing in our lives that we need to turn from. I'll group these specific sins under three categories. First, I want us to see cowardice and self-exaltation.

Cowardice and self-exaltation

I want to start this point by flashing ahead for a second to a moment in Judges 9. It's a story revolving around Gideon's legacy. Gideon's son, Abimelech, was a terrible man who murdered Gideon's seventy other sons, and ultimately he is killed as a woman threw a millstone at him and crushed his skull. Well, that's not exactly true. It doesn't completely kill him, which is what I want us to see. After the stone hits him, Abimelech turns to his armor-bearer and says, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest they say of me, 'A woman killed him'" (9:54), which the man does, killing him.

Now the reason I want to draw attention to that is because this wasn't some period in Israel's history where women were seen as warriors and men were expected to be passive, especially in battle. I would think this would be obvious, but it's important for us to understand this when we begin the Deborah narrative. We are told that Deborah was a prophetess, judging Israel at a time when the Lord had given the people into the hand of the Canaanites. And one day she summoned Barak to herself and noted to him that the Lord had said that he would deliver their enemies into their hands. This would seem to be a moment for Barak to stand and defend his people as a man. Instead, he says to Deborah: "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." She then assures him that she will go with him, saying, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:8-9), and sure enough that happens as Sisera flees

the battle field, goes into the tent of a woman named Jael, and she drives a tent peg into his head as he slept. But the point I want us to see is both the cowardice of Barak—which I believe is to stand out as these women step up in bravery—and his pursuit of glory, which is an ugly combination. He refuses to go into battle unless a woman goes with him, and even then, his concern is being exalted? We're supposed to be repulsed by this.

And these themes are seen again in the narrative that follows with Gideon. As the Lord calls Gideon to lead his people, Gideon is a cowardly man, hiding at every chance he can get, noting he is the least among a very weak clan (6:15). And the Lord pulls off something amazing with this weak man, leading him to conquer the Midianites with only 300 men. It should have been a moment to glorify the Lord alone. Yet, the Gideon narrative doesn't end on that triumphant note. The author continues well into the time after Gideon's victory, sadly.

And in these years after the victory, not only do we see Gideon acting ruthlessly against people unnecessarily, but he greatly exalts himself and acts as king. Now, someone could counter by saying that when the people asked Gideon to be their king, he specifically said, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you" (8:23). And that does seem pretty clear cut. But his actions immediately after that betray this statement. He collects gold earrings from the people in an amount worthy of a king, makes an ephod for himself that draws attention to himself and away from the Lord, takes many wives and a concubine as pagan kings did, and named a son "Abimelech," which in Hebrew means, "The king is my father." That seems to suggest that although Gideon might have said the right thing, he was clearly pursuing the glory that should belong only to the Lord. Therefore the first sin we see is cowardice among the men, combined with a pursuit of their own glory—a combination as odd as it is revolting. Second, we see sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality

I've already noted that after Gideon's victory over the Midianites, he took many wives and at least one concubine, and he had seventy sons. His son by the concubine, Abimilech, would end up killing all seventy of his brothers and reigned as a king over the people until his death. But already we're supposed to see Gideon taking many wives and a concubine as a gross picture of sexual immorality. We're then introduced to the next deliverer—Jephthah—as the son of a prostitute. And though we could realistically say that in the world we're going to have prostitutes and men who pursue them, we are supposed to be witnessing the lives of God's holy people here. In fact, it's our lack of surprise at this point that should jar us, a sign that sin is becoming commonplace among God's people. But sexual immorality is probably most clearly displayed with Samson.

Samson was given incredible strength by the Lord to overcome the Philistines, and yet his life is full of sexual immorality and disobedience. First, we read in 14:1-3, "Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw one of the daughters of the Philistines. Then he came up and told his father and mother, 'I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah. Now get her for me as my wife.' But his father and mother said to him, 'Is there not a woman among the

daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?’ But Samson said to his father, ‘Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes.’” Now this was explicitly forbidden by the Lord, but Samson’s immorality doesn’t stop there. Chapter 16 begins, “Samson went to Gaza, and there he saw a prostitute, and he went in to her.” Then, we read in 16:4, “After this he loved a women in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.”

The way in this is simply stated by the author again and again without note of judgment I think is to have the effect of letting us feel (again) just how commonplace and accepted this is. These are severe acts of immorality spoken of in the way that we might note one eating breakfast. But let’s move on in noting two other areas before we pause and reflect. A third notable sin in the text we might describe as the dismissal of God’s commands and the darkening of minds and hearts.

Disregarding God’s commands and the darkening of minds and hearts

Obviously we could have referenced everything above under the category of “disregarding God’s commands,” but I want to show you specifically what I have in mind in the story of Samson. In chapter 13 we’re introduced to a man named Manoah whose wife is not named. What we do know about his wife is that she was barren. They weren’t able to have children. Then, the angel of the Lord graciously shows up and says that they will indeed bear a son, but the child shall be a Nazarite unto the Lord. Now, what that means (according to Numbers 6) is that the child should never drink wine or strong drink, cut his hair, or touch a dead body, for if he did so, he would be unclean.

So here then is this miraculous birth. Samson comes into the world as a divine gift from God, whose life was to reflect dedication to the Lord in this unique way. We’ve already mentioned that right out of the gate he marries a Philistine woman, but then shortly thereafter we’re told in 14:8-9, “After some days he returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.”

Now, in isolation from any context, this might seem like no big deal. Perhaps it’s a bit gross, but what’s the harm? But what the author wants you to see is Samson’s blatant disregard for the Lord’s commands regarding being a Nazirite. And lest we think perhaps Samson was unaware of this Nazarite expectation, in 16:17 he will explicitly say to Delilah, “I have been a Nazarite to God from my mother’s womb.” And we will no doubt want to add—in name only! His practice has been anything but. This is simply seeing the Lord’s commands as something that can be easily discarded.

And we also see how lust, ambition, greed, and pride led to a darkening of the hearts and minds of the judges. Again, we see this with Samson and Delilah. After Samson joins himself with

Delilah, the Philistines approach her and offer her 1,100 pieces of silver to betray Samson. Of course we're told she does so without any mention of even wrestling with the decision. So, she asks Samson what the secret is to his strength, and he tells her that he must be bound with "seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried" (16:7), and the next thing he knows, he wakes up from a nap, bound with bowstrings, and the Philistines attacking. And of course, he'd lied to her, tears off the binding, and defeats the Philistines.

But here's the crazy thing, this bit repeats itself again and again. Delilah asks him again, Samson tells her, she betrays him, and we find out that he's lied to her. And finally after this has happened three times, Samson decides to tell her the truth. He says in 16:17, "A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man." And sure enough, she betrays him once more, and this time when the Philistines come his strength has left him. They seize him, gouge out his eyes, and put him in prison.

Now, reading that, we're supposed to feel frustrated, wanting to scream out loud, "How are you so foolish? What more did Delilah have to do to prove her willingness to betray you?" But I think we're supposed to see the blinding and darkening consequences of sin that leads us to greater and greater foolishness.

We see the same thing with Jephthah, and it's even more egregious. As the Lord was using Jephthah to deliver Israel, we read in 11:30, "And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.'" The problem is that his daughter—his only child—is the first to run out and greet him.

Now, some have said that maybe he didn't mean this literally, but I think this is simply driven by the fact that we can't imagine the evil that he's displaying. Others have suggested that this is simply a rash vow. In other words, perhaps it is pious, but he didn't think it through. But that misses the theme of spiraling wickedness here. "Jephthah was neither rash nor pious . . . he was outrightly pagan."¹ In other words, these are the very kinds of tactics pagans would perform in relation to their gods. They would bargain with them, offering sacrifices—including children if necessary—for the hope of gaining success. In other words, Jephthah is a picture of an Israelite judge acting no different than the pagans around him, and the fact that he makes this vow to the Lord only shows how darkened his heart and mind are. He's descended into a foolishness that's hard to comprehend. It would be like saying, "Lord if you'll do this good thing for me, I promise I'll do what you forbid." In other words, you're only promising more rebellion. The fact that Jephthah doesn't see the foolishness of his pagan practice while speaking to the Lord is meant to highlight his blindness. And we are to be appalled.

¹Daniel Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1999), 367.

Now we could point out more sin—the ceaseless violence (as Gideon goes on a vindictive rampage, Jephthah kills 42,000 Ephraimites, and Samson seems to do violence for sport), the selfishness, and the hardened nature of God’s people, as things are spoken of so briefly and callously that we actually feel how commonplace the detestable has become.

But let us remember, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10, that these things are written down for us so that we might not desire evil as they did. In other words, we’re not to look at these things and have conversations around our lunch table about how we’re grateful we’re better than them. We’re supposed to examine ourselves. American Christianity in many places and in many churches parallel this scene. There are many who say all the right things with their mouths while ignoring God’s Word, regularly practicing sexual immorality, and pursuing gross selfish ambition. One of the things we regularly pray for when we send interns to pastor existing churches is that they wouldn’t have professing believers who love power more than the Lord and will hurt and destroy our guys. We know on the final day the Lord tells us that “many” who claim to be his followers will be told that he never knew them. And we are deceiving ourselves to think that we are immune to following down the path seen in this book. Paul said to the Galatians, “You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? . . . A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Gal 5:7-8). In other words, Paul was showing us that good churches and godly people can go astray—quickly—if they turn their eyes from God’s Word.

So I want to end with two exhortations. Let us this morning renew ourselves in our commitment to God’s Word. Let us determine as God’s people to commit ourselves to reading, meditating on, and hearing the preaching of God’s Word. Let us demand of those who stand in this pulpit that they herald God’s Word. And second, let us not forget the grace of God. Perhaps Israel’s sinful spiral is only superseded in amazement by the Lord’s continued grace—hearing his people’s cry, graciously delivering them, and then after they rebelled, doing it again. Today, if you see your own dark heart, turn to him for mercy, and you will find it. Where our sin has abounded, we will find that his grace abounds all the more. And let us remember that as we come to the table. Amen.