

Judges 2:11-3:31 – “The Vicious Cycle Begins”

We ended last week looking at the death of Joshua. All the people served the Lord while he was alive and while all the elders who outlived him were around. But after their death, things changed.

- **Judges 2:10**, *"When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel."*

This next generation drifted away from the Lord. Knowing *about* the Lord is very different than knowing the Lord. That was the difference between these generations. They knew about God but had no interest in really serving God and Him alone. They were missing out on that personal relationship and devotion to God. As a result, they were thrust into hard times. They began to experience the consequences of life lived outside of that covenant with God.

In the remainder of chapter 2 and into chapter 3 we get a summary of the whole book and the unfortunate spiral of sin and the suffering it brings.

This cycle of sin is repeated 7 times throughout this book. It's as follows:

1. Serving God.
2. Succumbing to Sin / Subjugated to Sin. Suffering and Slavery from Sin.
3. Sorry for Sin / Sorrow over Sin. Supplication to God.
4. Saviour is raised up (a judge/deliverer).
5. Salvation and victory.
6. Serving the Lord.

It's a dark, depressing time yet a marvelous and encouraging sign to see God intervene and answer the cries of Israel. We serve a loving and gracious God who does not give up on us. After Israel was led away by sin, God raised up a judge. Not a judge pronouncing order in a court and bringing the gavel down with a verdict, but a judge that would be a deliverer, or more along the lines of a military leader for the people.

- The Hebrew word for judge is *Shophet*, which means deliverer, saviour, along with the idea of ruler.

Judges is a book of failure on the part of the people because of their unfaithfulness, but it's also a book showcasing the faithfulness of God. What a gracious God we serve!

Throughout Judges God raised up 13 Judges in Israel:

1. Othniel – 3:7-11
2. Ehud – 3:12-30
3. Shamgar – 3:31; 5:6
4. Deborah – 4-5
5. Gideon – 6-8
6. Abimelech – 9
7. Tola – 10:1-2
8. Jair – 10:3-5
9. Jephthah – 10:6-12:7
10. Ibzan – 12:8-10
11. Elon – 12:11-12
12. Abdon – 12:13-15
13. Sampson – 13-16

*Samuel was the last of the judges.

1. The Details of Israel's Unfaithfulness – 2:11-23

2:11-13 - *Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals; ¹² and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. ¹³ They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.*

This is where we see this downward spiral of sin begin. The unfaithfulness of Israel began when they failed to remove the people that God told them to remove. This was to protect Israel and keep them from being polluted by the Canaanites moral corruption and idolatrous practices. Israel was to be a holy nation, separated unto God, but they are not off to a good start in their new home.

It says they ***did evil in the sight of the Lord***. What was the evil? ***They forsook the Lord God of their fathers... and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them...*** (2:12). There should not have been other people all around them. Israel was called to remove them. But instead, Israel slipped into **accommodation**, then **integration**, and then **participation** with them.

This is such a sad line, ***they forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.***

Israel saw the way that the Canaanites worshipped these false deities.

- ***Baal*** was a Canaanite god of weather. It was believed he controlled storms and the rain, and in this area that depended on agriculture, rain was a necessity. So, people sacrificed to Baal in hopes of good crops and good fortune.

Baal worship involved sacrifices of animals but then also became heavily involved with sexual activity. Baal became linked with fertility and there were prostitutes involved in worship and every debased immorality imaginable took place.

- ***Ashtoreth*** was also a counterpart to Baal. She was the goddess of fertility.
- There were different varieties of these same gods throughout different regions.

Interestingly, Ashtoreth is the same as the Babylonian god Ishtar (related to Easter) whose signs for fertility included rabbits and eggs.

Ashtoreth was also worshipped by having sex with temple prostitutes.

- You can see how these gods and their worship appealed to the baser instincts of man.
- Satan uses this same strategy today as we see the culture of sex becoming more and more of a hook for people leading them into idolatry and unfaithfulness to God. And does it add anything or help? It only brings people into further oppression. This is where we see the cycle moving to next.

We've seen this move into sin, and following sin leads to the subjugation and slavery to sin.

2:14-15 - And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. ¹⁵ Wherever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for calamity, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.

The result of Israel's unfaithfulness was that it provoked the Lord to anger. This is not God flying into a rage as some spoiled kid who doesn't get his way. This is the jealousy of God that wants His best for His people and wants to protect them from the harm that comes through unfaithfulness.

To wake up Israel, He delivered them into the hands of their enemies. If they think they're better off with their pagan neighbours than they are with God, God would let them see for themselves if they chose right. So, He removes His protective hand and lets them experience the heavy hand of their enemies. This brought Israel to great distress.

God desired to be a husband to Israel. Israel may have thought they were just having an open relationship with God. In their eyes, they may have thought they weren't forsaking the Lord, but to add any other relationship is to forsake the Lord.

- Think of that in your own relationship. How would your spouse respond if you said, *I really love you, but I was thinking of sharing that love with another. I won't love you less, I'll just add my love to another.* I'm going to believe that would not go over well at all. In fact, none of us would ever venture down that road knowing the absurdity of it. Yet this is what Israel was doing.
- God wants exclusive worship and devotion from us. He's jealous for us, and He's deserving of that worship. He's not to be a part of our life, He is to be our life where we live wholeheartedly for Him in obedience and faithfulness.

2:16 - *Nevertheless, the Lord raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them.*

Here's the amazing grace and mercy of God. When Israel least deserved it, God would raise up a judge; a deliverer to come to their aid and provide their rescue.

You may think that God shouldn't have been so gracious and delivered Israel. And it's true, they didn't deserve it because as we'll see, they kept this pattern going. But in the same breath, I didn't deserve the grace and goodness of God. I was enslaved to sin and walking apart from God, but He sent the Deliverer, the Judge of all, Jesus Christ to my rescue. I have received His mighty salvation. And for that I am eternally indebted to Him.

As we read on in this summary section, we'll see this cycle on repeat. The cycle of: succumbing to sin, slaves of sin, sorry for sin, and then saved from sin.

2:17-18 - *Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked, in obeying the commandments of the*

Lord; they did not do so. ¹⁸ And when the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and delivered them out of 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 them and harassed them.

It's amazing to see this heart of the Father. He's moved to pity because of the people's oppression and harassment.

- It's so similar to what we read of Jesus in **Matthew 9:36**, "*But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary [harassed] and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.*"
- God is a God of love and grace.

2:19 - And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.

If you're thinking that sin will not really have an affect or bring any repercussions, guess again. They reverted and **behaved more corruptly** than their fathers.

- When we don't cut sin off, it has a way of intensifying. We become desensitized to the danger and depravity of it and act more wickedly than we ever thought we would if we do not deal harshly with sin.

2:20-23 - Then the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not heeded My voice, ²¹ I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, ²² so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the Lord, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not." ²³ Therefore the Lord left those nations, without driving them out immediately; nor did He deliver them into the hand of Joshua.

God basically says, if Israel wants these nations around, I'm not going to drive them out for them. It's a very sad thing when God gives us over to our own desires. That's the path to misery and distress. May we give ourselves to the Lord asking not for what we want but for what He wants.

Now in all of this God will have a purpose that is meant to prove Israel. This will be a time of testing for them to see whether they will follow the Lord or not.

- These tests and trials are meant to reveal what's really in our hearts. They're not meant to hurt us or trouble us, but to grow us.

- Through these tests we will either cry and curse at the Lord, or we will come close to the Lord. Ultimately that's what the Lord's purpose and intent is. It's to reveal the path that we're on is not the right path, and it's one that leads to pain and suffering.
- These tests are to teach us to live in constant surrender and dependence on Him, knowing that His ways are always the best ways.

2. Training Time – 3:1-6

3:1-3 - *Now these are the nations which the Lord left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan² (this was only so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it),³ namely, five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal Hermon to the entrance of Hamath.*

The Lord wanted Israel to annihilate the enemy, but Israel chose to ally with the enemy. So the Lord said, if that's what you want, that's what you shall have. And He allowed the enemy to remain, but again, it was done to test Israel.

- This testing was to prove Israel's faithfulness and improve their relationship and reliance on the Lord.

Notice, there was an entire generation ***who had not known any of the wars in Canaan***. They were a bunch of softies hanging out in their mom's basement playing video games. This isn't what God intended.

- You see, there's a wonderful quality and character that is built in a person through times of adversity and struggle. This generation had become soft, so God allows this trial or test, not to sabotage them but to strengthen them.
- It's like the butterfly emerging out of its cocoon illustration.

The Christian life is not meant to be lived in ease and comfort. That's why it's recognized symbol is that of the cross. That's the picture of suffering and death!

- But if we look to the Lord and lean on Him through times of testing and trial, we will experience His strength and His peace that enables us to endure and continue on in joy. We experience great growth in Him as a result.
- **James 1:2–4**, *"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.⁴ But let patience*

have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."

3:4 - *And they were left, that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the Lord, which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*

God could have driven these enemies out for Israel Himself, but that not have been helpful. Keeping them there would rather reveal to Israel where their hearts were. It would reveal whether they were walking in faithfulness and obedience.

- As a parent, I can do everything for my kids, and take care of their messes, but it doesn't teach them or develop in them the importance of doing what is right. God wanted Israel to follow Him because they knew it was the right thing and best thing for them.

3:5-6 - *Thus the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁶ And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods.*

God had warned them of this very thing in **Deuteronomy 7:1–6**, *"When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, ² and when the Lord your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. ³ Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. ⁴ For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. ⁵ But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire. ⁶ "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."*

- We see clearly that Israel did not follow this recipe. They didn't take God's Word to heart and intermarried with their heathen neighbours.
- And this wasn't something that overtook them suddenly. We can sometimes justify sin by thinking it came out of nowhere, it wasn't premeditated.

- But this happened to Israel because they allowed the enemy to have territory. They compromised and chose these things.
- They didn't fall into sin, they followed after sin. They did this deliberately and step by step.
- This is why we need to deal harshly with sin and make no provision for the flesh (**Romans 13:14**, *"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."*).

3. Deliverance Through Othniel – 3:7-11

3:7-8 - *So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs. ⁸ Therefore the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years.*

Here is the repeated cycle of Israel in action. They succumbed to sin and are now slaves to sin. They are reaping what they have sown.

And they're reaping for 8 years! Was it 8 years before they cried out to the Lord? How sad that people spend wasted years in a desolate place because they fail to turn to the Lord and receive of His grace.

- Don't let sin keep you from the Lord, may sin be the cause to drive us back to the Lord.

3:9 - *When the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.*

After Israel experienced slavery due to sin, they are sorry for their sin and cried out to God. Get used to this, we're going to see this repeated often in our study of Judges.

And what's truly remarkable is God heard and responded. He didn't let them suffer longer in that state. He took action as they took the action of repentance. God raised up a deliverer – Othniel. He's the first of the judges that we read of.

- Not much is known of Othniel except he was the nephew of Caleb. He married his daughter when Caleb challenged anyone to attack Kirjath Sepher (Judges 1:12-13).

What we do know about Othniel is in the next verse...

3:10-11 - *The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim. ¹¹ So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.*

Othniel was a man who had the Spirit of the Lord on him. God always equips those He calls into action. God is not asking you to do the heavy lifting, He's simply asking you to be a willing vessel that He can pour His Spirit into. He will do the work through you.

- **Zechariah 4:6**, "So he answered and said to me: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' Says the Lord of hosts."
- This is the same power and help we have for ministry today (Acts 1:8).

And when the Lord steps in and carries out His work His way, the land had rest for 40 years. 40 is always a number of testing and trial in the Bible. They've been going through some tests but it's meant to lead them to the place of understanding to live with dependence on the Lord.

4. Deliverance Through Ehud – 3:12-30

3:12-14 - *And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord strengthened Eglon king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord. ¹³ Then he gathered to himself the people of Ammon and Amalek, went and defeated Israel, and took possession of the City of Palms. ¹⁴ So the children of Israel served Eglon king of Moab eighteen years.*

Under the leadership of Eglon, he gathered 3 nations together – Moab, Ammon, and Amalek. It's interesting to see the beginning of each of these nations. Moab and Ammon were the descendants of Lot's daughters who slept with Lot fearing nobody else was around. The Amalekites are the descendants of Esau. Each of these nations started off in iniquity and they have been a thorn in Israel's side.

- Again, nothing good comes from a work of the flesh.

Nevertheless, they took the City of Palms (Jericho) and from there were able to position themselves to rule over Israel for 18 years.

- This second stint of oppression lasted 10 years longer than the first one! Were they getting more comfortable in their sin and oppression?

- Sometimes we have not because we ask not (James 4:2). We need to have a desperation and desire to break free from that which robs us of God's best in our lives.
- **Jeremiah 29:13**, *"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."*
- Israel once again did this as we see in the next verse, but did it need to take 18 years?

3:15-16 - *But when the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for them: Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. By him the children of Israel sent tribute to Eglon king of Moab. ¹⁶ Now Ehud made himself a dagger (it was double-edged and a cubit in length) and fastened it under his clothes on his right thigh.*

This time when Israel sought the Lord and cried out to Him, He raised up Ehud, a Benjamite. And there's a noticeable description about him – he's left-handed. Nowadays that doesn't mean a lot to us, but in this day, a left-handed man was a weak man.

- We see terms like, *'at God's right hand'*, which speaks of that position of strength.

But now we see God raising up an unlikely man, one who probably would be overlooked in the eyes of the general public. But praise God that He works through unconventional methods. He takes the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.

- **1 Corinthians 1:26–29**, *"For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. ²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no flesh should glory in His presence."*

So Ehud is selected to bring the tribute to king Eglon. And we begin to see why this man was perfect for this role. We're told he had a dagger and because he was left-handed, he had this dagger fastened on his right thigh. Why is that important? Let's read a little more.

3:17-23 - So he brought the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. (Now Eglon was a very fat man.)¹⁸ And when he had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who had carried the tribute.¹⁹ But he himself turned back from the stone images that were at Gilgal, and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” He said, “Keep silence!” And all who attended him went out from him.²⁰ So Ehud came to him (now he was sitting upstairs in his cool private chamber). Then Ehud said, “I have a message from God for you.” So he arose from his seat.²¹ Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the dagger from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly.²² Even the hilt went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the dagger out of his belly; and his entrails came out.²³ Then Ehud went out through the porch and shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

What a great story! This is spy intrigue edge of your seat type stuff.

We begin to see why God raised up a man like Ehud, one who would have probably been overlooked by the world’s standards.

Having to pay this annual tax (tribute) gave Ehud an audience before the king. The king would have had security all around him. They would check anyone coming before the king to see if they had any weapons. Sometimes they may get lazy and only check the left side of people knowing that’s where a right-handed person would stash a potential weapon.

Ehud however got through this security. Perhaps they didn’t even think to check the right side or some wonder if Ehud was handicapped in some way. Either way, it seemed he posed little threat to the security team. He was given full clearance.

- Never underestimate what God can do through a willing and available agent. This was God’s instrument for deliverance.

When Ehud was alone with the king he made his move. He knew Eglon wasn’t going to be much of a challenge, there wasn’t going to be any ninja like moves of self-defence. Eglon’s name means *calf-like*. Not cat-like, calf-like.

This was one big immobile target for Ehud. And he took his sword from his right thigh and thrust in deep into Eglon’s belly and this sword disappeared, handle and all.

- This dagger was a cubit – 18 inches (assuming this is just the blade). The handle may have been another 10 inches. I’m sure Ehud was pretty shocked to see this thing get engulfed by Eglon’s gut.

When this happened, Eglon's **entrails came out**. The KJV says *the dirt came out*.

- What a great picture this is. You see, when we allow the Word of God, our double-edged dagger, to penetrate deep into our lives, it cleanses us. It reveals and then removes the crap. When the Word goes in, the dirt comes out.
- This is why we never tire of going through the Word of God. We need it because we keep picking up a lot of crap from the world that needs to be dealt with. It's the Word that deals with this.
- **Hebrews 4:12**, *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."*
- **Psalms 119:11**, *"Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You."*

3:24-26 - *When he had gone out, Eglon's servants came to look, and to their surprise, the doors of the upper room were locked. So they said, "He is probably attending to his needs in the cool chamber." ²⁵ So they waited till they were embarrassed, and still he had not opened the doors of the upper room. Therefore they took the key and opened them. And there was their master, fallen dead on the floor. ²⁶ But Ehud had escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the stone images and escaped to Seirah.*

After Ehud fled, Eglon's servants came to check in on him and they see that he's in the upper room behind locked doors. They assume he's taking care of business (ie. going to the bathroom). So they want to give him his privacy and let him do his thing.

- Remember, his entrails have all spilled out, they probably smell the excrement, but all this is so perfectly devised to give Ehud time to escape. Now as time goes on, the servants are thinking this is a little long even for Eglon. He's gotta start cutting back on his 8 meals before lunch. They're at the point of being embarrassed for him and then they decide to check on him. By this time, Ehud had made his escape.

3:27-30 - *And it happened, when he arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the mountains of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the mountains; and he led them. ²⁸ Then he said to them, "Follow me, for the Lord has delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand." So they*

went down after him, seized the fords of the Jordan leading to Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross over. ²⁹ And at that time they killed about ten thousand men of Moab, all stout men of valor; not a man escaped. ³⁰ So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.

When Ehud returned, he rallied the people on in victory.

Ehud was able to tell the people to ***follow me***. Is that something we're comfortable saying to others? Yet this is how we should all be living as followers of Christ. It's not to put the focus on ourselves, but the focus on Christ. Ehud was sure to put the focus on the Lord: ***the Lord has delivered your enemies...***

- We'll be much more comfortable telling people to 'follow me' when we have a handle on the Word and are living by it, giving all credit to God.

Israel enjoyed the longest period of rest and freedom under this period of the judges. It's what should have been the norm if they had initially walked in obedience to God's Word.

5. Deliverance through Shamgar – 3:31

3:31 - After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad; and he also delivered Israel.

We're introduced to Israel's 3rd judge in just one short verse. Shamgar delivered Israel from the hands of the Philistines with just an ox goad.

- An ox goad was a long pole about 8-10 feet long and pointed on one end to help prod and direct oxen.
- It's an unlikely weapon, yet it's what was in Shamgar's hand.
- God is ready to use whatever we make available to Him. What's in your hand today? Because when it's surrendered to the Lord, He can use it for His glory.
- Moses had a rod – God used it.
- Sampson had a donkey's jawbone – God used it.
- David had a sling – God used it.