

June 19/20, 2021

Harlots and Heroes

Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series

Judges 2:6-23

Pastor Bryan Clark

Most of Patti's family used to live in Montana. So, often we would drive up there and you drive right past the Little Bighorn National Monument. It's a place that commemorated the famous battle between George Custer and the seventh cavalry with the Lakota and Cheyenne Indians, often referred to as Custer's Last Stand. It's a very interesting place. You drive up and there's pathways, there's markers, there's all kinds of things on the ground to see. But if you just show up and start walking down the path and among the markers, it's really confusing to figure out what happened here. But if you go to the visitor's center, they have a wonderful presentation that explains exactly what was happening, how the battle unfolded, where everybody was, and what all the markers represent. Once you've seen that presentation, everything outside finally makes sense.

So, Judges, Chapter 2, is a visit to the visitor's center, and this is where we're going to get our important overview, in order that the stories that follow make sense. So that's what we're going to do today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Judges, Chapter 2. One of the distinctives in verses 6 through 9, is these verses are repeated, almost identically from Joshua chapter 24, the end of the book of Joshua. There are literally only a few words that are different. At the end of the book of Joshua, Joshua is an old man. He calls representatives from the 12 tribes to Shechem, and he gives them his final speech before he's ready to die. He encourages them to pursue the God who has been so faithful to them, and not to seek after the foreign gods of the Canaanites. This is where Joshua makes his famous line, "*As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*" The people in his generation affirm that and are committed to be faithful to the Hebrew God. He then sends them out into their territory. That's where we pick up the story in verse 6:

When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land. 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. 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. (*NASB, Judges 2:6-10)

So, Joshua sends the tribes out to their territory to possess the land, and then Joshua dies at the age of 110. The text describes him as **the servant of the LORD**. It's important to understand that title was rarely used in the Old Testament. It was used of Moses; it was used of David, and a couple of the prophets. So, this puts Joshua in very elite company, as a faithful, courageous leader from God. We also learned that as long as his generation lived, they remained faithful to God. It is interesting that he is buried **in the territory of his inheritance**. This is the first of

these great leaders ever to be buried in the territory that they possessed. Abraham dreamed of this; Isaac dreamed of it...Jacob, Joseph, Moses...but none of them would be buried in territory that they possessed. Joshua was the first one. So, it's a significant moment.

But once that generation dies, the next generation does not know God. Now, this does not mean they did not know about Him. Certainly, they did! It doesn't mean they didn't know about His works. Certainly, they did! What Joshua and his generation had seen, it's really quite remarkable! They had seen God's faithfulness in the wilderness in so many ways. They had seen God part the Jordan River, and they crossed on dry land. They had marched around the city of Jericho and had seen the walls miraculously fall. They had seen God give them one victory after another. But now they're gone, and the next generation does not **know God** in a relationship with Him. That word *know* is a word that means *experientially* they didn't know Him.

Now, this is not really unusual. You see it in lots of ways. For example, you see it in someone who starts a business. They work really hard. They pour themselves into it; they build it up, and it gets passed on to the next generation, sometimes to the next generation. But those generations receive something they didn't really work for, and they often take for granted what they've been given, and the story often doesn't end well.

You also see it in a nation. You have people that have sacrificed so much, for us to have amazing freedoms. But then you have generations that haven't sacrificed anything. They're just the recipients of an amazing freedom, and it's easy to take all that for granted. And then they wonder, "Why is this older generation so concerned that a younger generation would throw away this freedom, without realizing what it cost them to provide it?" So, then you have the same thing spiritually. This younger generation coming into Israel; they didn't fight the battles. They didn't have to trust God; they didn't have to walk by faith. It was just given to them as an inheritance.

Now think about this. Those that have gone before dreamed of this day. Abraham dreamed of this day. Isaac...Jacob...Joseph...Moses...they all dreamed of a day when they would inherit the land, but none of them would know that before they died. This is the first generation that has received the land as an inheritance. Verse 11:

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. (Vs. 11-12)

The language in that paragraph is very interesting, where it says that **they forsook the LORD**, and then it says they **followed other gods**. The Hebrew, literally, they *walked* with the other gods, the foreign gods. You can't help but think that's a hint back to Genesis 3, and the reminder what God always wanted for people made in His image, was to walk with them in a garden paradise in the cool of the day. But now, rather than trusting God, they're forsaking God in order to walk with foreign gods that are just idols of wood and stone, that could not possibly help them in their hour of need. The text tells us it wasn't just that they mixed in with them. It's very

specific that they actually bowed prostrate on the ground and worshipped the god of the Canaanites.

Now, if there was social media in that day, one can only imagine this generation posting on Facebook their images of their new gods—the idols of Baal—idols made of wood and stone. Perhaps they even show a picture of their visit to the temple and bowing on their faces before their new gods. And you can imagine, many in their generation liking the posting. And God is saying, "What are you doing?" for they are celebrating that which is deeply offensive to God, while thinking through all that God has done for them. And this is their way of saying thank you? They forsake Him; they betray Him, and worship the gods of the culture? The text tells us, "*This provoked God to anger!*"

Thinking of this in new covenant, 21st century language, it would be understandable that we realized that the God of the universe looked down and saw that we were sinners, desperately in need of a savior, and that we were lost with no hope. And because He is so gracious and merciful and forgiving, because He longs to spend forever with us in paradise, He actually gives up His own Son, knowing He would be tortured and crucified on a cross in payment for sin, that salvation might be offered freely as a gift. Unbelievable! And somewhere along the way we learned that, and we choose to believe, and we have our ticket to heaven.

But as time passes, and we so long to be accepted and loved by the culture around us, we forsake the God who has done so much for us, in order to bow and worship the gods of the culture. "God, I know that you sent Your Son. I know He died for me, and I really appreciate that I have my ticket to heaven. But honestly, God, what have you done for me lately? I think I'm going to pursue these new gods, because I long to be accepted by the culture around me." And that provokes God to anger!

Now, perhaps some of you are thinking, "Oh, here we go. That's the Old Testament God—the God of anger, the God of wrath, the God of judgment." Well, guess what? The gracious, forgiving, compassionate God of the New Testament is the same God of the Old Testament. Why wouldn't you think this betrayal wouldn't make Him angry? How do you expect God to react? Do you want God to shrug and say, "Oh, whatever, I don't care?" He's been deeply betrayed. Why wouldn't that make Him angry? This idea that we can do as we please and God's okay with it, is not true. God is provoked to anger!

It's very important to notice at the beginning of verse 11 that this is what was evil in the sight of God. The theme throughout the book of Judges is: "*Everyone did that which was right in their own eyes,*" which is the lie that goes all the way back to Genesis 3 when the serpent said to Adam and Eve, "You can be like God. You decide what's right and wrong." But what is evil and what is good is not up for grabs. It's not defined by the culture in which we live. It's defined by God. God defines good and evil. When we're talking about choices, choices have consequences. We're talking about choices as it relates to God's definition of what's good and evil. The culture has become very skillful at presenting what is deeply offensive to God as a virtue, and cancels any dissenting voice under the rationalization that that is a roadblock to this virtue that must define us.

But at the end of the day, God's moral laws are just as binding as the natural laws. So, you're free to have any opinion you want about gravity. But when you step off a 10-story building, the truth wins. Good and evil is not up to the culture. It's defined by God. And choices have consequences. Verse 13:

So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth. 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. (Vs. 13-15)

They're **severely distressed** and miserable. They are serving the two primary gods of the Canaanites—the male god, Baal, and the female god, Ashtaroth. They were both considered to be gods of fertility. And the idea was that the male and the female gods would have sex together and that would provide fertility for the people, for the animals, and for the land. The land was dotted with pagan temples, and many of the temples included temple prostitutes. So, the men would visit the temple, have relations with the prostitutes, with the idea that this would excite the gods, Baal and Ashtaroth, into having sex with each other in order to produce fertility in the people, in the animals, and in the land. It is very interesting how many of these ancient pagan religions have at their core sexual immorality.

So, God lets them have their way. This is very similar to Romans chapter one, where God says He turned them over to their own choices, which also has strong sexual overtones in Romans one. God lets them have their way. “If that's what you want, maybe cry out to that piece of wood or that piece of stone in your hour of need and see what happens.” So, the wording there is very clever. He turned them over to the plunderers, and the plunderers plundered them. Of course, they did. That's what they do!

They have chosen to mix in with a culture that is defined by, “Every person did that which was right in their own eyes.” They were a selfish, violent, dog-eat-dog law of the jungle culture. They were plunderers. Is this really who you want to move in next door? But if this is your choice, do you really think making friends with the world is going to create flourishing? Plunderers plunder; that's what they do. And so they plundered the Israelites. They beat up the Israelites; they killed the Israelites; they enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives absolutely miserable, and so in their hour of need, they were utterly miserable. Verse 16:

"Then the Lord raised up a club, and He clobbered them." Oh, wait a minute, that's not what it says. (*laughter*) If I was God, that's what I would do. But I'm not God. And God, again and again, shows Himself to be unimaginably patient and loving and compassionate and forgiving and faithful to these rebellious people.

Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. 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*. 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 (or compassion) 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. 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. (Vs. 16-23)

So, when it says God **raised up judges**, that language is very confusing to us, because these judges are nothing like what we think of as a judge. They were primarily military, spiritual heroes. Some of them were the most unlikely people that God called and empowered. And with courage, they trusted God, and God raised them up to deliver the people from their oppression.

So, what this text describes is very important here at the visitor's center to understand, because what we're going to see, as we travel the path through these fascinating stories in the book of Judges, is what we refer to as "cycles." There are six of these cycles throughout the book of Judges. The cycle basically looks like this: the people sin and rebel, and as a result of that, God allows the Canaanites around them to oppress them. So, they are oppressed, they are enslaved, and they are miserable. In their hour of need, their gods of wood and stone have no power to deliver them, so, they cry out to the God of the Hebrews to do something to deliver them from their misery. Then God calls and raises up a hero—a judge—to empower them, to deliver them, and to set them free. As long as that judge lives, the people obey. But as soon as that judge dies, the people go right back into rebellion, and the cycle repeats itself. Only each cycle gets worse and worse, and worse.

Over the years, I've heard a lot of people say that, "Hindsight is 2020." I'm here to tell you, after nearly four decades of ministry, that's not true. I've seen far too many people make the same stupid choices again and again and again and again. And we go through this same cycle, so we're really not that much different.

This is the first that we learn that the reason God did not have Joshua finish the job and clear out the land, is because each generation needed to learn to fight battles. They needed to learn to trust God. They needed to learn to walk by faith. And so God allowed these nations to remain, to test to see if the people would trust Him or not.

I want to finish by going back to verse 17 and the language used there, because it's very graphic. God says when these people forsook Him and chose to follow after the gods of the culture, **they played the harlot**. They've prostituted themselves, violating their marriage with God. It's a play on this idea of the temple prostitutes and what they were doing. But they're not just visiting the

prostitutes. They themselves have become the prostitutes—they've played the harlot—and they're cheating on God. All through the Old Testament we are told that Israel represents the wife of God, the bride of God. Just like the church in the New Testament is the bride of Christ. And when Israel would chase after foreign gods, God called it adultery. But in this situation, He's telling them, “You've become prostitutes. You're playing the harlot.”

Last week, I mentioned when Othniel married Achsah and she asked her dad for a blessing, he poured out His blessing on them. It was a glimpse of what God wanted for these people—to enter into this beautiful covenant marriage relationship, and for them to love Him and trust Him. He was more than delighted to pour out His blessing on them. But how do you do that when they're prostituting themselves before foreign gods?

I'm going to suggest this morning there are three groups of people represented here this morning. One group are those who, no matter what, you're going to play the harlot. You're going to rationalize. You're going to reason. You're going to figure out some way to explain why it's okay to worship the gods of the culture. And no matter what we say, you're determined to play the harlot. And I have to tell you, that just makes my heart sad, because what lies ahead for you is misery...it's misery!

The second group, I believe, will be those of you who will be really courageous to face into your stuff and to admit, “There's some stuff in my life that shouldn't be there. It's offensive to God, and I know it is.” And you're going to have the faith, and you're going to have the courage to trust God. And you're going to confess and you're going to repent, and God is graciously going to hear you, and with His mercy and His compassion, and His goodness and His faithfulness, He is more than happy to forgive your sin and to set you free. And I have no doubt that by the end of the summer, some of you are going to know a freedom you haven't known in years. And that's a beautiful thing!

The third group—and I have no doubt about this—is that from among us, God is going to raise up heroes. God is going to put a special call on your life and say, “I need you. I need you to trust Me. Let Me empower you to do something special that will not only make a difference in your life, but you're going to make a significant difference in the lives of people around you. And God is going to use you to do something special in the lives of others, that they too might experience the freedom that Jesus offers.

So, there you have it. Harlots and heroes. What is it going to be for you?

Our Father, we're thankful this morning, that You are such a gracious, loving, forgiving God. God, may we deal with our stuff. May You raise up heroes in these difficult days, to rightly represent Jesus to the world. In whose name we pray, Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2021 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.