

Week 12 - Israel's Problem/God's Exasperation - Judges 10:6-16

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 63:7-10

Introduction

How do you define a bad day?

Let's say a man was to come home at the end of the day and complain of having a bad day because he got a speeding ticket on his way to work; his wife would probably agree that that would undoubtedly put a damper on one's day

But suppose you were like the boss I once had years ago - and this is a true story, by the way, that I will tell to the best of my recollection

I was at work early on a Saturday morning when my boss answered a phone call that happened to be from his wife

As he was talking, I heard him say, "Okay," "Yeah, okay," "Okay, I'll be right home."

He came over with a look of concern mixed with just a hint of a smile and told me the following tale

It seems his wife had gotten up after he had come to work and headed for the bathroom, only to discover that their toddler son had spread a tube of toothpaste all over the bathroom floor

Aggravated, she went to find the lad only to discover him in the living room merrily driving his toy trucks through the entire box of table salt that he had dumped onto the carpet

She scooped him up to head to get a mop to clean the bathroom floor, and when she got to the utility room, she found that the washing machine had somehow overflowed, and her once-clean laundry was now floating

And turned to go back to the bathroom, she stepped in a pool of vomit left by the dog who had decided to help with cleaning up the toothpaste mess

That's when she called her husband, my boss, and informed him that she was having a bad day

I think you would agree that - compared to a speeding ticket - the compounding of issues made that a *really* bad day

As an aside, I think he must have been able to suppress the urge to smile when he got home because he came in to work on Monday, and he wasn't limping

The reason I shared that illustration with you is that we see a similar piling on in our passage today

We are going to see that Israel has completely gone off the rails and compounded their rebellion against God

And we're going to see something that might surprise us as God doesn't react precisely as we might expect - at least, he initially responds differently than the pattern we've come to know in the book of Judges

Through what we see today, we're going to learn something significant about God and our relationship with him

Our passage is Judges 10:6-16, and you can find it on page 210 of the visitor's Bibles if you are using one of them

I. Israel's rebellion

Let's begin by considering Israel's rebellion as we see it related in verse 6 [**Judges 10:6**]

The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him.

At first glance, the passage reads as we would expect at the beginning of a new judge cycle, "The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord"

We've seen that exact precise phrase four times already, and we've seen it once without the "again"

But there is a subtle but notable difference this time

Whereas the phrase has previously been used to introduce the fact that Israel fell into apostasy; now the author makes clear that they had *really* committed apostasy

They weren't merely serving Baal, nor were they serving Baal and his consort, Asheroth

Just look at the list of false gods that had captured the affection of Israel:

The Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines!

Israel hadn't merely fallen into apostasy; they jumped in and dove deep into apostasy to serve seven false gods

And our author finishes his list of sins by saying that Israel "forsook" the Lord and they ceased completely from serving him

According to our Webster's 1913 dictionary, to forsake means "to quit or to leave entirely; to abandon; to renounce; to reject; to refuse"

So, while they were obviously not against being polytheistic, they had no time or energy left for the Lord as we see Israel had ceased serving him completely

Think back over what we've seen in the book of Judges so far of God's loving care for Israel

Five times, God had come to their rescue and delivered them from their oppressors when they cried out in pain

And that's not even taking into account God's prior history with the nation

Yet this is the sixth time that Israel has turned their backs on the living God to chase after and serve lifeless idols

But Israel wasn't just going around in circles; they were sinking lower and lower in a downward spiral until they finally reached the point where we now find them

It appears they would prefer to serve anyone or anything but the God who loves them

I heard tell of a pastor who once visited a man who had wandered far from the Lord while professing to be a believer

And after talking with the man for a bit, the pastor told him, "I want you to go outside and look to the heavens for ten minutes. When you do, you will receive a revelation about your condition."

The man protested, "But it's pouring rain out there!"

Still, the pastor insisted that it was essential, so the man went and remained outside looking up into the heavens for ten solid minutes

When he returned, he declared, "I did as you said, but I didn't receive any revelation. All I got was soaked to the bone, and I feel like an idiot!"

"Nicely done," the preacher replied, "That's not a bad revelation for a first try."

They say one definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing while always expecting a different result

And it appears that Israel had completely lost their senses and sunk deep into spiritual insanity

So, for the sixth time, God had to deal with his people

II. God's reaction

We see God's initial reaction in verse 7 [**Judges 10:7**], which says:

So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites,

This time God uses two oppressors - one on the east and one on the west - to oppress Israel, and, in verses 8-9, we see that they did just that [**Judges 10:8-9**]

They crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

We will be looking at the details of these two oppressors and the oppression they inflicted on Israel in greater depth later on

The Ammonite oppression takes up the remainder of chapter 10 through chapter 12 with the Jephthah cycle, and the Philistine oppression is covered in chapters 13-16 with the Samson cycle

Suffice it to say for now that these two nations had Israel clamped between them like a pair of pliers, and they put the squeeze on them - and it hurt

While our ESV translation conveys the effect of the twin oppressors, it loses some of the flavor that I think the author intended with his verb choices

The first verb means “crushed” as it is rendered for us, but the literal meaning of the second is “shattered” rather than “oppressed” - and that’s much more picturesque as it depicts Israel as a crushed and broken people

The Ammonites not only thoroughly stomped the Israelites who lived in their territory of Gilead, but they also crossed over the Jordan and wreaked havoc with Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim

With the result being that Israel was “severely distressed”

So far, things have gone according to the pattern we have come to expect, and we aren’t surprised by what we read next in verse 10 because it also fits the pattern perfectly [**Judges 10:10**]

And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, “We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals.”

Thus we see that the first three steps of a judge cycle are complete - sin, oppression, and crying out in pain

Israel is distressed enough by this oppression that they even throw in a limp-wristed confession of their sins as they cry

But as the narrative continues, we see the pattern break, and where we expect to read that God sent a deliverer, we find something completely different

Something that seems contrary to God’s character - exasperation

First, God recites the history of his dealings with Israel in verses 11-12 [**Judges 10:11-12**]

And the Lord said to the people of Israel, “Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand.”

Like the list of pagan idols that Israel had turned from God to serve, this list contains the names of seven of Israel’s past oppressors

I believe it does so to show how completely God has been faithful to his people

And we naturally expect that God will once again raise up a deliverer to end the oppression - just as he always has

Israel tended to treat God the way a person would treat a useful tool - and, sadly, that tendency hasn’t gone away today

When a repair was needed, they would take the tool out and rely on it to do the job

But once the crisis was over, they placed the tool back into the toolbox and closed the lid securely until it was needed again to solve the next crisis

But, apparently, God was tired of the same old song and dance he had heard so many times before, and he had had enough

They say there are no atheists in foxholes, and any prison chaplain will tell you about the vast number of jailhouse conversions they have witnessed

There is ample evidence that times of extreme difficulty and stress tend to cause people to turn to God

After all, forgiveness is God's job - right?

God is there when you need him, and he will get you out of any scrape if you only turn to him with a smattering of repentance

It might also help to throw in a promise of future obedience, too - just for good measure

After all, God's just a big ol' softie, and, let's be honest, he's pretty naïve and forgetful about all the times in the past when we've sought his help and then forgotten all about him once the crisis was over

It's all a game, and God knows the part he's assigned to play in it

So we are surprised when God finally has enough of Israel's treatment of him and comes right out to set the record straight in verses 13-14

Look with me first at verse 13 [**Judges 10:13**], where God turns his back on Israel - he says, I delivered you seven times – *Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more.*

Israel thought they could turn to God any time things got tough, and God would be there to save them

Now they discover that there is a vast difference between a prodigal son who, having rebelled, comes to his senses and returns home to stay and a wayward wife who begs for her husband to take her back only until she finds someone else

God has had enough of his people's unfaithfulness, so he absolves himself of responsibility toward them and tells them he will rescue them no more

And with intense sarcasm and irony, he tells them in verse 14 to go and do what they find natural [**Judges 10:14**]

"Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."

Do you find God's answer shocking?

I doubt you would if you were on the receiving end of the betrayal and disobedience that God has endured at the hand of Israel

Yet, we don't expect God to be sarcastic - and we don't expect him to turn his back on his people

But God knows the intentions of the heart, and his judgments are always righteous

Look with me at **Jeremiah 17:10**, which says:

"I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

While Israel had cried out in what seemed to be genuine repentance for sinning against God by serving the Baals, God saw through their words and saw the manipulation they were employing

They used pious words, thinking that was the way to get what they wanted from God, and responded by telling them to show some consistency by following their wayward affections to the end

What a distance Israel has traveled from **Deuteronomy 7:7-9**

There God tells of his graciousness toward them in choosing them from among all the people of the earth

In that passage, God swore to keep his covenant and steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments

And now God says that Israel is on the verge of becoming an abandoned people because they have despised his mercy

God's stern rebuff of their plea surely must have rocked Israel right down to their socks, as we see in their reply in verses 15-16a

III. Israel's "repentance"

And we see the Israelites surrender as they express their reaction to God's response both in word and in deed

In verse 15 [**Judges 10:15**], we see them not only admit to their sin but also seem to throw themselves on the mercy of the court, so to speak, as they appear to submit themselves to God's righteous judgment

Had they stopped with the first sentence in verse 15, I would say they were showing true submission as was appropriate

But the final sentence reveals something quite different as they plead for God to rescue them from their present distress right now

Amazingly enough, they are still trying to manipulate God!

What appears to be a sincere acknowledgment of sin and the punishment it deserves is diluted beyond recognition by the addition of what amounts to the phrase "but not this time"

They seem to be unaware of how that last statement completely negates their surrender - it's a complete contradiction

They also reveal a fundamental blindness when it comes to how God has been working during the relatively recent period of history recorded in the book of Judges

That because of their penchant for doing what God says is evil; God has been doing what he sees as right all along

Sending foreign oppressors to serve as his agents of judgment and correction is precisely what seemed good to God

God was also doing what seemed good to him by sending deliverers and deliverances in the past

But perhaps their most egregious oversight is the fact that they didn't recognize God's graciousness in continually providing those deliverances

God could have righteously written Israel off years ago because they had affirmed and re-affirmed their covenant obligation to him and then gone on to offend and re-offend by giving their affections and allegiances to false gods

Now they find themselves at their lowest point, serving a plurality of false gods and with no demonstrated allegiance or affection for God

They cried out yet again, only to have God respond to them with exasperation and even sarcasm as he stated that he was through with them

So they mouth words of repentance in the hope that it will be enough to cause God to delay the punishment they deserve and give them just one more chance

They are like the chronic speeder who asks for a warning every time they get pulled over, swearing that's all that's necessary because they've learned their lesson this time

In Israel's favor, we do see them back up their words with action as our author records how they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord

We aren't told what form that service took, but I think it would be safe to assume it probably involved presenting sacrifices and other expressions of devotion

And so we come to the last phrase of verse 16, which tells us of God's response to Israel's verbal and non-verbal repentance [**Judges 10:16b**] –

And he [the Lord] became impatient over the misery of Israel

I almost hate to tell you, as I have done so many times in our study of Judges, that the scholars are divided on both the sincerity of the people's repentance and the nature of God's response to it

The way most of our English Bibles render the Hebrew in this verse might lead us to understand that God did as he has so far in Judges in that he acted to end Israel's suffering when they cried out to him in pain

For example, the NIV translates the phrase as "He [God] could bear Israel's misery no longer."

The Contemporary English Version takes this thought even further as it reads, "Finally, there came a time when the Lord could no longer stand to see them suffer."

And the International Standard Version goes too far down this path, saying, "When they put away their foreign gods and served the Lord, he brought Israel's misery to an end."

If you accept that the verse is best understood as God having grown weary of Israel's suffering and acting on their behalf- the outpouring of divine pity on Israel's desperate need - you need to understand one thing

The text doesn't say that God was swayed by Israel's words and acts of repentance - he has seen that song and dance too many times - he was simply being gracious once more and removing Israel's pain because he loves them

That much is clear

Still, if we understand God's emotion here to be grief or weariness brought on by compassion for Israel and her situation, it would be the only time it is understood that way in the Old Testament

I think our ESV Bible renders the verse fairly because the Hebrew used is used to express frustration and anger in the face of an intolerable situation in its four other appearances in the Old Testament

That's the way it's translated in **Numbers 21:4**, where we read: "the people became impatient on the way"

The exact Hebrew wording is also found in **Judges 16:16**, where we see our author report of Samson, "his soul was vexed to death" by Delilah's badgering

The two final places where we find this language used are in **Job 21:4** and **Zechariah 21:4**, where the word "impatient" and the idea of being exasperated are found both times

That still doesn't fully answer our problem, though, because we still have to determine what God was impatient about, and the Hebrew word that most English Bibles translate as some version of "misery" can also mean "efforts"

If our author meant misery, some scholars argue, some other words would have worked better, so they conclude that God grew impatient over Israel's attempts to manipulate him

I can't be dogmatic about it, but I think the idea that God grew weary of his chosen people continuing to slight him in favor of the Canaanite deities repeatedly calling for help only to lapse once more after he removed their pain best fits the tone of our passage

I think what our author is saying is that God sees through their cries and their actions to see that they are only interested in relief from their oppressors

And because their confession lacks sincerity, God is going to withdraw at least for a time and let them reap the harvest of their actions

That understanding also seems to fit well with the judgeship of Jephthah, which we will look at in a couple of weeks as we will see that God is totally absent from the rise of Jephthah to leadership in Israel

Conclusion

So, what can we take from this passage to apply to our lives?

Undoubtedly, we would much prefer to think of God as compassionate and merciful, just as we've seen him be in all the instances so far when he heard Israel cry out in pain and provided deliverance to them

I think we would prefer not to see this picture of God being exasperated and turning his back on his people

And the reason might well be our propensity to want God to show up and perform when we want him to and then to retreat to the background of our lives the rest of the time

Like ancient Israel, we want a God who will dance to our tune according to our agenda and our criteria, and we want him to come to our rescue even when we are reaping the consequences of our deliberate and willful actions against him

So we don't like the idea that God might one day have enough of our antics and withdraw his help from us

We find a safe, loving God a better fit for us

And God is loving; God is compassionate; God is merciful; God is patient

But God is also not safe

In his popular book, The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe, C.S. Lewis includes the scene where Mr. Beaver explains to the children what it will be like when they meet the Christ figure of the story, the lion, Aslan

The dialogue goes like this:

"Who is Aslan?" asked Susan.

"Aslan?" said Mr. Beaver, "Why don't you know? He's the King. . . . It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus. . . ."

"Is—is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan, a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

You would do well to disavow yourself of any notion that Jesus is only meek and mild and begin to see his wild side

Consider for a moment how every person who ever saw Jesus in all his glory fell on their face before him in fear and open your eyes to the truth that he is not to be trifled with

We dare not think the problem Israel faced is limited to the time of the Judges or even to the Old Testament itself

Jesus is also portrayed as growing exasperated and showing righteous anger toward religious hypocrites and manipulators, and he also used a fair amount of sarcasm as he lashed out in anger

I often point out how we haven't progressed all that much, if at all, from the people we read about in the pages of the Bible

And we can be just as self-centered and manipulative as Israel was in the time of the Judges - and we can be just as addicted to idolatry in whatever form it takes for us personally

Believers today are just as capable as those ancient folks of merely going through the motions, of offering God insincere and superficial repentance, doing all the right things on the surface, and putting on a performance for God

But God sees through our charade - he knows our hearts better than we ourselves do

And he will not be manipulated by us forever

God didn't turn away from Israel forever, but he did turn away, and that's a horrible situation we don't want to be in

Let's pray