

Week 2 - Generational Degeneration - Judges 2:6-3:6

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 11:13-21

Introduction

You've probably heard the children's rhyme about the old lady who swallowed a fly:

"There was an old lady who swallowed a fly. I don't know why she swallowed a fly - perhaps she'll die."

The fly was followed by a spider, a bird, a cat, a dog, a cow, and finally, a horse; each meant to catch his predecessor.

And the rhyme ends with the line: "There was an old lady who swallowed a horse...she died, of course!"

Sin is like that

We start with what seems to be a small compromise with sin, something on par with accidentally swallowing a fly

However, before long, we find just how quickly and thoroughly a small compromise can grow until we are trapped

As we will see this morning, that was the situation the nation of Israel found itself in

But first, let's back up a bit - last week, we saw how the opening of the book of Judges reveals how Israel failed to possess the land God had given them

And it would be easy to conclude that Israel had failed simply because they had been outmatched

After all, the Canaanites *were*, in many cases, stronger being more numerous, and better equipped militarily

But that would be a faulty interpretation of the events because God had promised to give Israel victory and to drive out the people of the land as Israel fought - although he would do it progressively so as to preserve the land [Exodus 23:29]

Israel had to fight a superior force, but God had made a covenant promise and, as we saw in **Judges 2:1**, God had promised never to break the covenant he had made

So we must deduce that the problem wasn't military deficiency - **the problem was that Israel decided they preferred to coexist with the Canaanites than kill them**

Israel failed to possess the land because they compromised with the inhabitants of the land

And, because Israel had done just the opposite of what God had commanded, God fulfilled the punishment clause of his covenant and removed his blessing from Israel, saying he would no longer work for them to displace the Canaanites

The messenger of God revealed that God would leave the Canaanites to dwell alongside Israel, where they would become a spiritual snare and thorns in the side of Israel [Judges 2:3]

And we saw the people of Israel cry out in pain and memorialize their misery and offer sacrifice to the Lord

The book of Judges begins with the death of Joshua

And we saw last week how often significant events in God's plan are precipitated by the death of one of God's leaders

Now, as we continue in Judges 2, we see the author offer a parallel perspective on the same time frame covered in Judges 1, starting again with the death of Joshua

We need to understand that the author's interest in recording the events of the book is more thematic and geographical than sequential, and we will see that some of the accounts occur concurrently in different locales

And the various accounts will follow a pattern that is first introduced in our passage today

Also, the parallel introductions serve a very significant purpose -

The first introduction narrates things from the view of Israel, while the second narrates them from the perspective of God and the second introduction gives us a summary of the spiritual background of the period of the judges

The author laid the two introductions beside one another to provide a more complete understanding to the reader, so it would be a mistake to gloss over this second introduction as a mere repetition

The passage before us this morning falls neatly into four paragraphs that correspond to our four main outline points
And it opens by telling us of two generations

I. Two generations

Remember that Joshua's generation had failed to rely on God's promise that they would be victorious and refused to enter the land

So God sent them to wander in the desert for 40 years until all but Joshua and Caleb had perished, leaving their children to go in to take the land

Those children are the first generation that our author tells us about in Judges 2:6-10a

A. A summary of the first generation

The author begins his summary of this generation with an almost verbatim quotation of **Joshua 24:28** –

So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his own inheritance

And we see in **Judges 2:6** that the people responded appropriately as each went to his allotted inheritance to take possession of the land God had given to them

Then we read in verse 7 [**Judges 2:7a**] that the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua

At this point, we want to insert the fact that Joshua died at the ripe old age of 110, as we read in **Judges 2:8**, which is, again, a virtual quotation of Joshua 24:29

Now, looking back to verse 7 [**Judges 2:7b**], we see that the generation that had survived the desert wandering continued to do well as they continued to serve the Lord after Joshua's death and burial

So far, this generation looks pretty good - doesn't it?

But all wasn't well with that generation, as our text reveals that they failed in a subtle but very significant way

Let's look back at verse 7 [**Joshua 2:7**] closely because it would be pretty easy to miss this fundamental point

And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel.

Do you see what our author says about the elders who outlived Joshua?

They had seen "*all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel.*"

That generation had been present during the desert wanderings and experienced God's guidance and provision - they had grown up with it

They had either lived through the Exodus as children or heard all about it from their parents and siblings

And, for the most part, that generation did well

But they failed miserably in one crucial area, and their failure would plague Israel for centuries

They didn't pass along what they knew to their children - they failed to do what Moses commanded in Deuteronomy 11

And in due course, that older generation shuffled off this mortal coil, as we see in verse 10, and we are introduced to the next generation

B. An introduction to the second generation

Look with me at verse 10 [**Judges 1:10**], where we see the sad description of that generation

And all that generation also were gathered to the fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

Let's park there for a moment and not rush past what that verse reveals because it should chill our hearts

The community failed to keep the memory of God's gracious acts toward Israel alive

The priests failed in their solemn duty to instruct the people as we see it in **Leviticus 10:11**; they also failed to continue the traditions, festivals, memorials, and other customs designed to pass along their religious heritage

Either that or they had allowed those things to devolve into mere formality

In Deuteronomy 6, we find what is known as the *Shema* - the most important prayer of the Jewish faith that was intended to be spoken daily

And it begins in verse 4 [**Deuteronomy 6:4**] - *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one*

That call to worship is then followed by injunctions to the community to love God thoroughly and to pass along the faith to their children - and it's a restatement and brief amplification of the *Shema* that we find in Deuteronomy 11

Obviously, those injunctions had to be more neglected than observed because the second generation did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel

It's rightly observed that the church is never more than one generation from apostasy

Each generation must choose for themselves whether they will follow God or abandon the faith

And it's the responsibility of the older generation to teach the younger about who God is and what he has done

Now, mind you, no generation can choose God for the succeeding generation

But, whether you are a parent, a grandparent, a great-grandparent, or just an older Christ-follower, you are responsible for passing on knowledge and understanding of the faith to those who come after you

The *Shema* is not just for Israel, and it is vitally important to us today even though we aren't commanded to pray it daily

It's so essential that Jesus recited it when the scribe challenged him to name the most important commandment

Look at how Jesus answered with a direct quote of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 [**Mark 12:29-30**] - "**Hear, O Israel: The Lord is God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**"

It's so crucial that we teach each successive generation who God is and what God has done because when people lose sight of God and his righteousness and his grace, they lose any sense of obligation to him

And when they lose their sense of obligation, the lapse into complete apostasy is inevitable even though it may be prefaced for a time by mere formalism, the inertia of tradition, and empty ritual

And so the fundamental problem of the second generation is that they didn't know God, and the result is the indictment we find in verse 11 [**Judges 2:11**] –

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals

Then, as if to hammer home the seriousness of their apostasy, the author restates the indictment twice more, saying, "They abandoned the Lord," "They went after other gods" in verse 12, and "They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth" in verse 13

I wish we had time to dig fully into everything about the Baals and the Ashtaroth

But, for the sake of time, it's enough that we understand that Baal was the weather god of the Canaanites

And, as a local deity, he had many manifestations in different localities

Astarte was a female god who was the consort of Baal or his spouse, depending on the locality

Baal and Astarte were fertility gods, and in Canaanite theology, the fertility of the land depended on the sexual relationship between Baal and his partner, and the revival of the land was due to sexual relations between them

And this thinking devolved into a whole cult wherein the Canaanites acted out the sexual relations between Mr. and Mrs. Baal, with the Canaanite men playing the part of Baal and temple prostitutes playing the role of Astarte

The idea was that witnessing this “worship” would incite Baal and his partner to do likewise, thereby blessing the land

And, as our author points out, the natural result of the second generation not knowing the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel - the consequence of ignorance leading to compromise - was for them to fall prey to the temptation to follow the Canaanites in their religious practices

In so doing, they openly violated the first two of the Ten Commandments

This is not a problem that ended with ancient Israel; amnesia still produces apostasy, only the gods people turn to have changed when they forget the Lord and all that he has done

Next, we will see how God responded as we consider what the author reveals about God’s character

II. The character of God

As we might suspect, verse 14 tells us that God was not pleased with the Israelite apostasy, and he responded in anger

But what we need to understand is that God was being faithful to himself and his covenant by becoming angry

A. God’s faithfulness in anger

Remember, God had repeatedly told Israel what would happen if they failed to fulfill his commandments and turned to other gods

He did so in **Deuteronomy 28:15** and the verses that follow telling them through Moses:

If you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you

God is a covenant-keeping God, and he will always do as he says he will do, and punishment comes to his children who disobey just as it does to his enemies

Israel should not have been surprised when God became angry and gave them over to their enemies

Furthermore, God is gracious, and he had been gracious and longsuffering with Israel in the past

But God is also jealous, and he will not stand idly by while his people give their devotion to other gods

Think of it this way:

Suppose a man finds out that his wife is having an adulterous affair - this isn’t a suspicion but a verified fact backed up by incontrovertible evidence

And suppose that the man had, for the most part, been devoted, attentive, tender, and generous with his wife

What would you think if the husband’s reaction was, “Oh well, that’s the way it goes. You win some and you lose some.”

Among other things, you would know that the man didn’t love his wife all that much after all because, if he did, he wouldn’t be so cavalier - he would be righteously angry

And God’s love for his people results in jealousy that bursts into righteous flames of anger when his people go after other gods

God stakes an absolute claim on those who are his, and his jealous love makes him faithful in his anger when his people stray

But then we come to verse 16, where we see an astonishing thing about God

In fact, putting verses 14 and 16 together reveals a most fantastic thing about God

B. God's graciousness in rescue

First, "the anger of God was kindled against Israel," and then we read, "the Lord raised up judges, who saved them"

God's faithful love demanded that he inflict punishment, but when he saw Israel's suffering, his love and compassion for them moved him to pity so that he provided for their rescue

We see this dual love in God's provision of salvation as well

God cannot tolerate sin, and he must punish it, but he also loves mankind so much that he provided salvation for any who will accept it

If not for God's gracious compassion, we would all be subject to his righteous anger, and the fact that God cares about us that much should cause us to be faithful

But we are often more like the Israelites in the period of the judges than we care to admit and, as we will see next, they are trapped in a cycle of sin that causes this punishment/rescue cycle to repeat again and again

III. The cycle of sin

In verses 17-19, we see that the people were set in their sin so that they not only committed apostasy from God's historical graciousness but also from his contemporary graciousness

And this is the pattern that we will see repeated again and again for the bulk of the book that remains

Let's look together at verses 16-19 to see this repeating pattern [Judges 2:16-19] Israel has sinned by worshipping other gods resulting in God sending punishment at the hands of their enemies and:

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from 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 afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

This is like an outline for the accounts we will be studying over the coming weeks

It's a repeating cycle of sin, punishment, crying out, rescue, and the return to sin - and even deeper sin than before

Each successive generation is said to experience greater degeneration and corruption than the previous one

They are in a downward spiral

I want to point out a few things that we need to understand

First, the "groaning" in verse 18 speaks of misery rather than repentance

They cry out under the affliction that God has imposed, but it is more a cry of pain than penitence

And yet, God is moved, and he is stirred to pity when they cry out, so he gives them another chance by sending another judge to rescue them

Second, we are going to see that the judges that God sends are far from shining examples to be imitated - at best, they are flawed individuals

But here we see the secret to the judges' success - in verse 18, where we read, "*the Lord was with the judge.*"

They were agents of the divine presence as God delivered the people through them

It's the same for any of God's servants because it's a wonder that God can use any of us

But we can be grateful that God chooses to demonstrate his power through weak things so we can have a partnership with him

The **third** thing we want to be sure to notice is that God rescued Israel simply because he was moved to pity by their groaning - not because of Israel's worthiness

On the contrary, God knew they would not listen to the judges he sent and that they would dive deeper into sin when each judge was gone

And yet he sent them anyway as a demonstration of his lovingkindness and grace toward them

But, sadly, the die was cast for these succeeding generations, as we will see next

IV. The die is cast

In verse 20 [**Judges 2:20**], we see God's complaint against Israel in two short statements:

Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice

We get a sense of the alienation between God and his people in his address of them as "this people," which itself serves as a reprimand against them as God declares they have broken his covenant and have not obeyed his voice

Then in verse 21 [**Judges 2:21**], we see God's response to the reality as he has just stated it:

I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died

God placed a moratorium on his involvement in the war against the Canaanites and left them to fight their own battles

And we see God's reason for doing this in verse 22 [**Judges 2:22**], where he says he is taking this action:

In order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their fathers did, or not.

Remember how the messenger of God told the people in verse 3 that the Canaanites would become thorns and snares to Israel

Now God declares that they will also be a test to determine whether his people will be faithful

And, after a listing of the nations that God was leaving to torment and test the Israelites, we see that the people of Israel continued to live among them

Then in **Judges 3:6**, we see the ultimate disobedience as Israel failed the test:

And [the Canaanites'] daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to [the Canaanites'] sons and they served [the Canaanites'] gods.

And, as we will see, the theme of the remainder of the book of Judges is the Canaanization of Israelite society

Territorial accommodation resulted in ethnic integration, and ethnic integration yielded spiritual transgression

And we will see two recurring patterns throughout the bulk of the remainder of the book - one concerning Israel and the other concerning God

Israel will commit apostasy, then suffer oppression, cry out in pain, be delivered by God's judge, and commit apostasy once more

God will react in anger to Israel's apostasy, send punishment at the hand of the Canaanites, relent at Israel's groaning, send a judge to deliver them, and get angry again at their continued apostasy

And those patterns will repeat as Israel spirals downward

Conclusion

There are many lessons we could take from this passage and apply to our lives

But I want to focus on two

First, I want us to recognize and take seriously the responsibility the older generations have to the younger

I want to repeat it - the church is never more than one generation away from apostasy - and there is no guarantee that those who come after us will be faithful

But there is one thing that we see in the example of Israel during the period of the judges - if succeeding generations don't know the Lord and what he has done, they are going to be more prone to wander

So we must do our part to make sure that we pass our spiritual heritage on to the younger generation

We must set the example by openly loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, and might

We must know God's Word and talk about it with our children, making God's Word a normal, everyday part of our lives

And we must formally teach them about the God we serve

Second, we need to thank God for his mercy and grace

As we proceed through the rest of the book of Judges, we are going to see God repeatedly come to Israel's rescue even though he knew that they were going to continue on their downward spiral

God didn't do that because of Israel's worthiness - he did it because of his love for them

God never gives up on his children

But he is faithful to discipline them and, as his Word tells us, no discipline is pleasant when it comes

And each time we fail, God steps up to deliver us and give us another chance

Therefore, we can rejoice in the knowledge that our salvation, and the future of God's church, don't rely on our faithfulness but on God's

While we do our utmost to do our part to prepare the next generation so that they might remain faithful and escape God's discipline

Let's pray

Deuteronomy 11:13-21 (page 155)

“And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.

“You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.”