

# Recalling the Book and Israel's Tragic Apostasy

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well friends, while you remain standing, I'll pray. Our Father, we pray today that you'd help us to hear your word rightly and to respond rightly in faith and obedience.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, Her Majesty the Queen sent a personal message and it read like this.

The whole world is the poorer by the loss of his many-sided genius, while the survival of this country and the sister nations of the Commonwealth in the face of the greatest danger that has ever threatened them, will be a perpetual memorial to his leadership, his vision and his indomitable courage.

And the following day, a statement came from the Prime Minister of the day and he said, With deep regret, I've heard of the death of Sir Winston Churchill. He will be mourned all over the world by all who owe so much to him.

He is now at peace after a life in which he created history and will be remembered as long as history is read. Our thoughts and sympathy are with his family. And President Johnson broadcast this across the United States of America.

[ 1 : 10 ] When there was darkness in the world and hope was low in the hearts of men, a generous providence gave us Winston Churchill. He is history's child and what he said and what he did will never die.

There are some of the eulogies and obituaries that flowed after Winston Churchill's death. He was a great man, a colourful man, an articulate man and a man whose many stories, of whom many stories are still told and many books are still written.

Compare them with an obituary that appeared in yesterday's age newspaper. I've changed the name. But it goes like this. Family and friends are invited to attend a memorial service for Mrs. to be held at Ocean Grove Uniting Church next Saturday.

No flowers, please. The difference is really stark, isn't it? Fullness, richness, flavour, emotion compared to?

No content, brevity, no flavour and complete absence of emotion. Well, there's a bit of the same contrast if you look carefully in our passage for today.

[ 2 : 22 ] You might remember two years ago I began a series on the book of Judges and I took a rest from it last year and I'm back to it this year and I'm going to resume that series today. Hopefully we'll finish it this year and perhaps you might remember just parts of the previous series.

It was filled with colourful characters. A number of them had their exploits sort of paraded before us with great literary art. Maybe you remember some of them and their names.

Othniel. You might remember Ehud, the left-handed man who smuggled a short sword to slay a fat oppressor of God's people while he was on the toilet. That is, not Ehud but the other one.

Or you might remember Deborah who pushed a reluctant barrack to wage war against the oppressive Sisera with his chariots of iron. Or you might remember Gideon or his son Abimelech who was more colourful but also more corrupt.

And I want you with that in mind, look at how our passage begins today. We are introduced to even more judges. But there are no stories about them. No colour. There is just simple, stark, somewhat bare obituaries.

[ 3 : 30 ] Obituaries. However, their lives and the character description of God and his people that follows is rich and poignant. And it will teach us much about ourselves, about God and about how to relate to God as God's Christian people.

So, let's remember the book of Judges. You might remember my first Bible talk on it. I gave it the title, The Weird, Wonderful, Worrying World of Judges. Boy, it is. I gave the context.

First, remember what the context of the book of Judges is? Moses is dead. Joshua is dead. Israel has entered into the land of promise but they don't yet have kings.

But what they do have is a series of spirit-empowered judges. And you might remember that at least initially there's a general pattern as to what happens in the lives of those judges and in Israel. And it can be summarised in a diagram and I'd encourage you to have a look at the diagram. It's in the outline that I've provided for you. This diagram represents a cycle of human and divine action that occurs, that crops up in the book of Judges.

[ 4 : 35 ] Do you remember the pattern? We saw a typical cycle goes as follows. It generally starts with downward human character. Israel does evil and becomes even more corrupt.

Then what happens is the Lord's anger is aroused at Israel's sin and he gives them into the hand of a foreign aggressor. Israel then cries out to the Lord and begs for his favour and repents often of their sin.

What the Lord then does is he relents and he raises up a deliverer. And that deliverer is often filled and empowered by God's spirit. And the Lord then turns the tide through this judge, turns the tide of oppression and gives that foreign aggressor into the hands of the deliverer, the judge.

And then what we're told finally in the cycle is that the land has rest for a certain number of years. Well, as time has gone on in the book of Judges, that pattern has somewhat slipped from view. The focus begins, is starting to fall on the judges themselves. And although they are somewhat colourful figures and although initially some, they have some devotion to God, we're finding that that's dissipating.

[ 5 : 55 ] And that's particularly true in the last two figures. Gideon and his son are moving away from the Lord and have moved away from the Lord. They're becoming more and more indistinguishable from their surroundings.

They're increasingly using ambiguous language in relation to God. The leaders of Israel, you see, are becoming more and more like their neighbours. Moses, more and more like the Canaanites, less and less associated with the true God and his ways.

And that brings us to our short passage for today. Have a look at your Bibles at Judges chapter 10. And I want you to notice how verse 1 begins.

I'm not sure of the page number, but maybe it's up there somewhere. Anyway, 249, was it? Good. Open it in your Bibles and we read the first line. After the time of Abimelech.

Now, let me tell you, this is the only time in the book of Judges that a preceding judge is mentioned as an introduction to the next judge. But there's more. Remember how I said the Lord is gradually disappearing from the vocab and lives of his people?

[ 7 : 03 ] Well, now he's not even mentioned in the raising of a judge. There's even more. Gone are the long, expansive stories of judges like Gideon and Abimelech.

Gone is all the colour. Gone is the opportunity to assess these judges. Gone is the reference to God raising them up. They just rise. Not at God's beck and call, as it were.

They just rise. All we have are bare bones obituaries. Look at them. We're given a name, a pedigree, the years of their tenure as a judge or a leader of Israel, a death notice, a burial place, and maybe one or two personal details.

And that's it. Look at the first judge. After the time of Abimelech, a man of Issachar named Tola, son of Pua, son of Dodo, rose to save Israel. He lived in Shemir, in the hill country of Ephraim.

He led, literally it is, he judged Israel 23 years. Then he died and was buried at Shemir. Look at the next judge. He was followed by Jair of Gilead, who led, again it's literally judged Israel, 22 years.

[ 8 : 13 ] He had 30 sons who rode 30 donkeys. Now you wonder why that's been put there, don't you? My guess is, it's to say he was a wealthy man.

Probably with lots of wives as well. In fact, necessarily I would say with lots of wives. He's doing pretty well. And he's got his sons over all 30 cities.

They controlled 30 towns in Gilead, which to this day are called Havath Jair, even named after him as it were. When Jair died, he was buried in Cammon. Now the picture here is one of wealth and control.

So when you think about these two judges who have very little said about them, what is the overall impression created by their short obituaries? Well, when you put it together, I think it's like this.

God is continuing to recede into the background in Israel's life. Nevertheless, so has the turmoil that came with the earlier judges, particularly the last one, Abimelech.

[ 9 : 14 ] So short, tumultuous rule has been replaced by long, stable rule and the absence of blood, thunder and chaos.

So this passage, I think, looks both backward and forward. It looks back to what has preceded and notes that chaos has been replaced by stability. And it gives an impression of a welcoming oasis in an expanding wasteland of Israel's life.

Just two judges who did a good job, as it were. But it also looks forward. It raises the question as to where is the Lord in Israel's life now?

And that's where verses 6 to 16 come into play. Let's look at them. You see, where verses 1 to 5 are full of brevity in the absence of God, that cannot be said of the verses that follow. So the brevity of the story of those two judges allows us instead to explore the nature of Israel and the nature of God.

Let's see what we can learn about God and Israel. First, take a look at what we learn about Israel. And I want you to notice the words used to talk about them. Look at verse 6. Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

[ 10 : 33 ] Literally, it is the Israelites did the bad thing in the eyes of the Lord. Second, they served the gods of the surrounding nations. Third, they forsook the Lord.

Fourth, they no longer served him. You see, the Israelites did the evil thing in the eyes of the Lord. They forsook him and did not serve him. Notice the repetition, verse 6.

The Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him. So what's the result of all of this? Well, it's predictable, isn't it? God will act. And his action is the one we've seen a number of times already in the cycles that we've looked at before.

God hands them over to foreign rulers. Look at verses 7 to 9. They tell us that the Lord became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines, the Ammonites, who that year shattered and crushed them.

For 18 years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. The Ammonites who also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim.

[ 11 : 37 ] Israel was in great distress. Now, we who have been following the cycle as we've worked through Judges know what happens next. Israel will cry out to the Lord.

And that's exactly what happens. Look at verse 10. The Israelites cried out to the Lord. But they do it profoundly. Look at the second half of verse 10. This is the only confession of sin in the whole of the book of Judges.

Israel uses the... And Israel does it by using the very language that is used of their actions in verse 6. They acknowledge to God that they have sinned against Him, the Lord.

They admit that they have forsaken Him, their God. They have served the Baals. So they acknowledge exactly what God had said in the text of Scripture.

And God replies in verse 11. And we who have read the cycle of the Judges again know what to expect. We expect God will raise up a deliverer. Well, look at what God does. First, in verse 11, He speaks and rehearses His history in relation to Israel.

[ 12 : 45 ] And basically, He's saying this. From Egypt on, you've had many oppressors. From Egypt on, you have cried out to the Lord for help and rescue. And characteristically, from Egypt on, He's rescued you from the hands of your oppressors.

And then comes the surprise. The language of forsaking and serving returns. And God promises the cycle is going to be broken. And He does so with extreme sarcasm.

Look at it. Verses 13 and 14. But you have forsaken and served other gods. So I will save you? No. I will no longer save you. Go and cry to these other gods whom you have chosen. Let them save you when you're in trouble. It's deeply ironical, isn't it?

You see, the normal context of the language of choosing is, I, God, have chosen you, Israel. And therefore, I will save you. Not here. No, God uses the language of choosing back at them.

[ 13 : 51 ] And He turns it on His head. He says, oh, you Israelites, you've done some choosing yourself. We'll see if you can live with the consequences. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you're in trouble.

But the Israelites won't let God go. And they push back. Look at verse 15. But the Israelites said to the Lord, we have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.

In other words, we've got nowhere else to go. And they match their confession with change. Because they do exactly what Joshua had instructed the Israelites to do back in Joshua 24. Look at the first half of verse 16. They then, then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. Did you notice the language again? It's a language we've noticed all the way through this passage.

Language of allegiance and service. Israel got rid of the foreign gods among them. And what once they had served the bars, will they now turn it into service of the Lord?

[14:54] Now, we have read the Bible. We who have read the Bible up until this point know what to expect next. Repentance will be met with grace and forgiveness. God will forgive.

He'll rescue. And in the second half of verse 16, the narrator tells us of God's response. Now, I need to tell you, the text is very difficult in the original language.

It can be translated a number of ways. The NIV translates it this way. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer. I'm going to, in my outline, I've given you a more literal translation.

It goes like this. And his soul was short with the pain slash trouble or work slash effort of Israel. Now, to have a soul that is short has a sense of frustration, impatience, exasperation or even anger. Those of you who have ever been parents may probably have experienced a short soul. And that is, it's that time when your children reach that point of exasperation and your soul becomes short.

[16:05] I think that's how God's soul is at the moment with his children. The trouble of Israel, though, if you look at my translation there, could mean the trouble that Israel was causing the Lord.

That is, he's exasperated at the trouble they're causing him. Or it could mean that he's exasperated that Israel is experiencing trouble. Or it could even mean that God was frustrated with the effort that Israel was putting in to try and gain rescue.

And he just wanted to leave it all alone. In other words, I think that he thinks their repentance is empty. Let me tell you what I think is going on in this passage.

As readers of the Bible, we know what to expect when these sorts of things happen in the Bible, don't we? Israel has sinned. Israel has repented.

We expect that God will relent from sending judgment, don't we? That he'll be the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. But this passage leaves the whole thing open ended.

[17:08] We're just told in ambiguous language that God's grieved and troubled and exasperated. The word relent is not used, which it normally is.

Although we expect it, it's not here. Although we expect that God's steadfast love will overwhelm sin, we're not told that it does. You see, the same passage that says that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love also says he doesn't leave sin unpunished.

So we're left hanging here. We don't know what God is going to do. All we know is that the story that follows is somehow going to be the answer. Because of the normal cycle of the judges, we expect he will raise up a deliverer and we expect that deliverer will rescue God's people.

But this verse just hangs ominously, ambiguously, uncertainly over Israel's future. And we're going to have to wait till next week to find out.

Unless you want to read ahead. However, what I want us to notice is the sense of exasperation that these verses contain in relation to God.

[18:18] A God who knows what we are made of. A God who knows our fickleness. A God who longs for something more solid in his people. Now, friends, in the light of this, I want to use this passage to speak about us as God's Christian people.

You see, I think we so easily look at the Israelites and we say, what a fickle lot they were. Not us. You see, I think we Christians, though, have a very similar tendency to what the Israelites, what we've seen in Israel.

You see, we know God's nature. We know through Jesus that his overwhelming disposition is to have mercy and to exercise love and forgiveness. We celebrate it every week with the confession and with a declaration of forgiveness.

Jesus, we know, is the means by which the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The trouble is that that can so easily breed an accompanying tendency in us.

And that tendency is for us to take God for granted. We know he's present in Jesus. Because of the extent that he, the God, the father has gone in allowing Jesus to die for us.

[ 19 : 33 ] We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is for us and with us to forgive. He's present with us to heal. We are his beloved children, redeemed through his son, received into his kingdom.

We are the children of his love. And yet I want you to hear something that is not often noted by us. I want you to hear something from various parts of the New Testament.

A note from God, as it were. If I might say, this note is a sense of exasperation and frustration from God about Christians as well.

You hear it on the lips of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus, as he speaks to his churches in the book of Revelation. And he talks about the good things he sees in those churches. But he also knows about their frailty and their failure.

Some of the things that he mentions to those churches are these. That his people have forsaken their first love. The love they had at first. That they've taken on false teaching. That they tolerate that false teaching.

[ 20 : 41 ] That they're spiritually dead or they're lukewarm. Or they're spiritually wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. And they're just quotations. From what the Lord Jesus says to his churches in Revelation 2.

And then we meet the Corinthians with whom the Apostle Paul is talking on God's behalf. And he expresses God's frustration. For their behaviour puts a question mark over their faith.

And what he sees in their actions causes the Apostle to urge them to examine themselves. To see if they are indeed in the faith. And then there's the writer of the Hebrews.

He has striking warnings about those who have fallen away. And effectively crucified the Son of God all over again. And subjected him to public disgrace. He warns the people he's writing to that God is a consuming fire.

And that they need to live in the light of not only his great forgiveness in Jesus. But also that Jesus is one day coming to judge the world. And them. He speaks about their need to persevere and not drift away.

[ 21 : 46 ] The implication is they are doing that. He talks of discipline that God exercised upon his children. Friends, these verses and many others in the New Testament.

Indicate that the fickleness of Israel is not just something seen in Israel. It is seen. Not just in Old Testament people.

But in New Testament Christians as well. Now friends, that means it's seen in us. Undoubtedly, it's seen with some of us present here today.

Friends, do not test God. Do not harden your hearts against him. Do not sell out. Do not persist in sin.

God can and does forgive. However, you cannot expect to live in disobedience with God just simply turning a blind eye to it. The fickleness of his people exasperates him.

[ 22 : 52 ] So flee it. Flee fickleness. And listen to God. Listen to these words from the writer of Hebrews. He says this. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with. Reverence and or. For our God is a consuming fire.

Let's pray. Father, we admit to you today that we often are tempted to treat you lightly.

That we don't expect you to rebuke us or discipline us. That we come running to you forgiveness for forgiveness.

But often run back to sin. And Father, we recognize that the fickleness of Israel. Is not just seen with them, but also with us. Please help us not to test you.

[ 24 : 02 ] Or to harden our hearts against you. Thank you that you do forgive us. But Father, please help us not to treat you tritely.