

Othniel and a Pattern to Watch

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[0:00] Our friends while you remain standing I'll pray. Father we do pray that you'd help us to understand your word this morning and please help us to live rightly in response to it.

We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Well friends I must tell you that in preparing this Bible talk I got a little distracted along the way and I was wondering how to introduce our passage today and as I did I wandered off into thinking about contracts.

Now you may well wonder how I got from the book of Judges to contracts but I hope in time you will see how. Anyway in the process of thinking about contracts I stumbled across this rather dated website devoted to humorous legal stuff and there inside I found a contract. It had been written for closest friends who were considering having a holiday together. The author proposed that such an activity should only be engaged in if the couples sign up openly and not under duress.

And now the clauses are too numerous to go through in their entirety but I thought I'd read a few to you just to give you a feel for what a contract might look like should any of you ever think you might do this. They say the trip should be determined after consulting couples, children, couples, children, employers, babysitters. It shall not involve backpacks or tents.

When it comes to meal selection shall be made with the following factors in mind. One. Couple A prefers hotly seasoned food. Two. Salt is couple B's favourite spice.

[1:45] Three. Wife A vigilantly avoids red meat. Four. Husband B is a beef and potatoes guy. Five. Couple A favours fancy gourmet fare.

And any time the couples want to eat they have to take an appetite survey. If two or more individuals are hungry they shall dine.

However if only one person is hungry he or she must munch on a candy bar selected at his or her sole discretion. Thirty minutes per meal shall be allotted for restaurant selection.

And if couples cannot agree within a said period then couple A can pick any restaurant without any consideration of the likes or dislikes of couple B. And next time they have a problem couple B gets the right to.

Anyway. Let me go on with just a few more. Martyr-like dining activity must not be engaged in. For example no one shall frown at the menu for 15 minutes and then say oh that's okay I wasn't really hungry anyway.

[2:51] Additionally eating off someone's plate is banned without the plate owner's expressed written permission. And couples acknowledge that they have differing vacation activity preferences and in choosing what activities they will do couples shall avoid comments such as the following.

Is this supposed to be fun? You want to do what? And if either couple really detests one activity or just can't stand the sight of the other couple at all then the following shall be deemed to be proper getaway etiquette.

One claiming you're desperate for a nap. Two developing an allergy to whatever happened whatever you happen to be doing. Three suddenly recalling that you forgot to check on the kids. And all such excuses shall be followed by feigned disappointment, a hasty retreat, a deep sigh of relief before all.

Now the last thing and I think this is the best bit of the whole lot. Before leaving for their trip couples shall write out and list all the reasons why they are friends.

Couples must read the said lists as soon as they get home and promptly phone and beg for forgiveness.

[4 : 11] Now I must acknowledge friends that it's unusual for me to begin a sermon with a touch of humour. However despite the humour there's a great truth here. What is it? The truth is isn't it that relationships matter and that relationships are the stuff of life and that they are at the core of our being.

And relationships can be incredibly fragile. Even relationships with the closest of people. And that is why relationships often need boundaries.

They often need boundaries to set the standards. They often need formality about them. They need rules and they need understandings. Relationships are like that.

So how did I get from the passage set for today and the talk of contracts and relationships and the setting of boundaries? Let me show you. Pick up your Bibles and have a look at Judges chapter 3 with me.

And I want you to show, I want to show you the very first thing I noticed about the passage when I sat down to prepare it. I noticed relationships.

[5 : 15] And I wonder if you can see it. Look and listen to verse 7. Take particular note of the persons that are there and look at the relationships.

Let's read it. Friends, let me just give you the context for this.

Israel was once a non-entity. That is, it consisted of a single man and a barren wife without an heir and God chose them.

And he promised them great things. He entered into covenant with them. He made them into a great nation. He rescued them from Egypt and he made them his special possession.

And in other words, he ended into relationship with them and they willingly, wholeheartedly signed up to the deal. And they did so with a contract or a covenant.

[6 : 14] And it was open. It was above board. It had rules of engagement and disengagement. And now, according to Judges chapter 3, they have gone a-whoring.

That is, they've forgotten their husband and they've taken another. Now, as I said last week, the covenant that the Lord and Israel entered into is outlined in Exodus 20 to 24.

And the rewards and the punishment for breaking that covenant are outlined in two particularly strong places. Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. And Leviticus 26 is particularly striking.

Four times it says that God will punish or afflict Israel seven times over. And Judges contains seven stories about those judges.

Seven stories of oppression and deliverance. Seven stories. Seven times God punishes and restores.

[7 : 18] The one here is the first. And God is clear. Israel is in covenant relationship with him. And Israel breaks relationship. And God acts to punish.

However, as a loving and compassionate God, he also delivers. So there's the larger background of this passage. God and Israel are in covenant. And Israel is constantly breaking that covenant.

Therefore, constantly breaking relationship. And God is constantly acting in mercy and supplying judges who will deliver Israel. So there's the broad background.

And here we are presented with the story of the very first judge in the book of Judges. And this judge presents us with a pattern. And that pattern will be broken and disrupted by the judges that follow.

Nevertheless, with this, the very first recorded judge in the book of Judges, we have this pattern. And there are six elements to that pattern. And you might like to follow them.

[8 : 20] I'll put them down there in the outline that you have. There's a diagram on the back of the page. Element one occurs in verse seven. So have the diagram. Have the passage open. Element one is in verse seven.

Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord. Element two is that the Lord sells his people into the hands of a foreign aggressor.

You can see that in verse eight. Here, the aggressor is a certain. Now, I've got to take a run up at this. Kushan Rishan Thayam. The king of Aram Naharim.

Now, you notice there's some rhyming at the end of each of those words. One writer has probably tinkered a little bit with the king's name. So that it literally means something like. And he's having a real go at this fellow.

Kushan of double wickedness. Okay. So he's probably no, no mother would give a child that name, would they? So he's tinkered with it probably a little to make it all rhyme together.

[9 : 16] Okay. That's element two. In response to their doing evil, the Lord sells the people into the hands of this foreign aggressor. And element three is that God's covenant people cry out to the Lord.

And you can see that in verse nine. And in verse nine, you can also see the fourth element in this typical cycle. When Israel cries out to the Lord, he raises up for them a deliverer.

And in this case, the deliverer is not even an Israelite. Now, that's not plain for us, but it is true. You see, we know from Judges 1 in here that he is the son of Kenaz.

In other words, he's a Kenite in origin who has been incorporated into Israel. He's still an Israelite in the sense that he's an incorporated Israelite, but he's not true blood as it is.

Anyway, this man, Othniel, is God's chosen deliverer. And in verse 10, we hear that the spirit of the Lord comes upon him and he becomes Israel's judge and he goes to war.

[10 : 15] And in verse 10, we have element five, where the Lord had previously given Israel into the hands of a foreign aggressor. Now, the Lord reverses things. The Lord acts again and gives the foreign aggressor into the hands of the judge.

And that brings us to verse 11 and the sixth element. The land has peace for a set number of years, in this case, 40. And it's marked by the death of the judge here, Othniel.

So let's see if we can understand these elements as a whole. They are, people have talked about them as a cycle of incidents. And so I've done that on your diagram. I showed you a cycle. It's missing an arrow.

That means it keeps on going. But we could represent it just like that diagram. So Israel does evil. The Lord gives them into the hand of X. Israel cries out to the Lord.

The Lord raises up a deliverer. The Lord gives X into the hands of the deliverer. And then the land has rest for X, Y number of years.

[11 : 14] Now, I think actually you can do a better job than that diagram, that general sort of cyclical diagram, because the previous chapter has given us a more theological perspective on the same pattern.

It's led us into the behind the scenes view. And so I want to use the language of the previous chapter and this language, put them together and get a complete cycle. Put it this way.

Now, Israel does evil or becomes even more corrupt, as chapter two said. The Lord's anger is aroused. And so he gives them into the hand of. So notice the note about the Lord's anger.

Israel cries out to the Lord. And then the next one, the Lord relents and raises up a judge. Relent comes from the previous chapter. The Lord gives them into the hands of the gives the nation into the hands of the deliverer.

And the Lord, the land has rest for Y number of years. However, I still don't reckon that's right. So I've devised my own little diagram now. And it's all about relationships, because I think relationships is the core of this.

[12:16] And in this relationship, there are two sides, aren't there? And there are two actions of each side. So Israel is the first person in relationship.

And Israel is characterized by what? By sin, isn't it? And in my diagram, that's represented by a downward arrow. Okay, because Israel is sinning.

And the other side is God. And what is God characterized by? By relenting and compassion. So perhaps we could portray that with an upward arrow for the Lord's intervention.

So what we've got in this cycle is two interventions that change their nature. One intervention is by Israel, who sins and causes things to really drop. And then the other intervention is by God, who relents and has compassion and causes things to pick up again.

One destroys relationship. The other restores relationship. So we have a cycle after a pattern, but it's interrupted by two typical interventions.

[13:20] Israel breaking, God relenting. In amazing grace, he raises up a deliverer who rescues Israel and gives them rest that they don't deserve. And you can capture that in that diagram.

So there's what we might call our pattern predictable. However, what happens is that as the book progresses, the pattern changes. It's not always like it is here.

Elements drop out. Stories lengthen. They become more complicated. With some of our judges, we're not told any of these elements, such as a shamgar who's going to occur next week. With others, one or more of these elements are stressed.

But by the time we come to Solomon, the last judge, these elements are barely visible at all. And that captures, I think, the overall theme of this book.

As time goes on, things are no longer stable. They get worse and they get worse. And as this pattern deteriorates and disintegrates, so does the condition of the nation.

[14:24] And the end result, well, the end result has been given to us in the preceding chapter. The Canaanites remain in the land. They are a test for Israel to see if they'll keep the way of the Lord and walk in his ways.

And they spectacularly fail. And it gets worse and worse and worse. Their moral evil spoken about here is later described in far more specific and gross terms.

Read on. Some of it is shocking. When we get to the Bible readings toward the end, you will grimace at them. The success, the God's response of relenting and grace goes from becoming very immediate here to almost being entirely absent at the end.

The description of the oppression of the enemies becomes longer and more severe as time goes on. The success of individual judges goes from being positive and fruitful to being very mixed and limited.

The focus goes from God and his intervention to the judge and their foibles. So you hear lots about God at the beginning and not much at the end. The years of oppression gradually increase in length.

[15:33] And the years of rest or peace gradually cram up and decrease. And the summary is clear. It is largely downhill from here.

Israel morally and religiously declines. Judgeship is not a huge success. Something else is needed if Israel is to survive. At the same time, there's another very subtle message that occurs here.

And it sits under the surface even here in chapters 1 and 2. It sits under the cycle that we can observe. And the subtle message is that God can and does relent.

He is compassionate. And he is the dominant person in this relationship, even if the rest of the book will often give the impression that it's individual humans that are dominant.

It is not the case. God is dominant. Now let's try and tie it all together. The book of Judges as a whole, I think, ends with this massive question mark posed by Israel's sin.

[16:38] The book ends with a clear question mark over the whole notion of judges itself. You see, Israel needs a saviour. However, judges are not it.

Judges just do not work, really. Oh, you might have the occasional one that works like an Othniel. But they are not a good system for government and rule.

And so it is that after the book of Judges, we enter the book of Ruth and of Samuel. And with the books of Samuel, we meet the last great judge, Samuel himself. And he looks fine.

However, just like many of the judges in the book of Judges, his sons are corrupt. And so Israel cries out after these years and years of such rule for a king.

And the first king, Saul, is somewhat of a disaster. Second king, David. Well, he's a winner. But to Samuel, even in 2 Samuel, we hear that he too is far from perfect.

[17:37] And his sons and his grandsons and his line are marked by failure. They too are like the whole nation. And like the judges before them, the kings take Israel into ever downwardly spiralling sin.

And the end result is that God appears no longer willing to relent. The prophet Amos captures this before the end where he has these various visions.

And in the first two of them, God relents. And in the last three, God doesn't. You see, God's patience finally reaches an end. And God ejects his people out of the land promised to Abraham.

He throws them off into exile. And he, as it were, leaves the promised land. Kingship fails as well. And then we find, though, that God's promise to Abraham still remains.

Why? Because it was undertaken by God. And so God, the promise to David also remains. And finally, when they finally get back after 70 years into the land under oppression, many years later, a woman receives a word from God.

[18:58] And she conceives. And in the face of massive, ongoing sin and unfaithfulness, God has remained faithful. And a child is born of the line of David.

And Jesus becomes a man. And like the judges, he is filled with the spirit. And he wages war just like judges did, but this time on the ultimate enemy, the devil.

And he dies in the place of sinful humanity. And he deals with the problem that has plagued humanity and Israel from their conception. He deals with the problem of sin by living as no human has ever lived and dying in the place of sinful humanity.

And finally, a solution has been arrived at. A true king, a true judge has arrived. Friends, Jesus is the answer for what we see unfold in the book of Judges.

However, there's more that arises out of this passage. You see, this passage has even more to say to us than this. And so let me return to where we started. Do you remember, we started talking about relationships.

[20:02] Well, the book of Judges has made things clear to us. In covenant relationships, failure to fulfill obligations breaks covenant. And a breach of covenant means what?

What happens when you break a covenant? That all obligations are off as far as the other party is concerned. And where the other loyal party is God, there are significant ramifications, let me tell you.

You see, God is bound to judge by covenant. The book of Hebrews raises this point. And it tells us that if people who knew Jesus and are related to him by covenant turn away from him, then what happens?

Well, they expose themselves to God's anger and judgment. Now, friends, I don't know about you, but I sometimes feel overwhelmed by all of this. You see, left on my own, I am in deep trouble.

And you, left on your own, are in deep trouble. And we corporately, as God's people, left on our own, are in deep trouble.

[21:17] But we are not left on our own. Because remember that thread from Judges. Remember the cycle from Judges. Remember the intervention by God, the upward arrow.

Remember that relenting of God. Remember his compassion for his people. Remember this fully expressed in the gift of his son. If God did not spare his own son, but freely gave him for us, will he not give us all things?

In the words of Paul in Romans 8. Friends, the ultimate hope for us as individuals, and the hope for us as the people of God, is not us.

It is not our willpower. Not our goodness. Not our ability. Not our godliness even. It is God. And his grace.

Victory will not come through us. It will come through God. Through the victory won in his son. And through the power of his spirit. And if there is to be a personal and spiritual revival and renewal, it will not come from us.

[22:27] It can only come as a work of God. Friends, I wonder, will you give yourself to prayer for this? If the day of the judges was a grim and grave day filled with evil men and women, then let me tell you, so it is for our day.

Will you pray for God to act according to his nature in our day? Will you pray for him to work in the hearts of men and women, to turn them to his son?

And will you ask him to raise up godly leaders for his church? And will you ask him to sanctify your own hearts through the work of his spirit? Friends, in a few weeks, we are going to elect another government.

And let me let you into a little secret. They will be no better, probably, than the last one. They will be much the same. They will not save our country.

They may be able to do some things. But they cannot affect the heart of human beings. None of them can. The only hope for us as individuals, as a church and even as a nation, is that God does something.

[23:45] So will you turn to him? Will you pray to him? We've been talking about prayer this year a lot. And we want to talk about it more. Will you pray to him? And will you ask God to act? Will you ask God to turn, to relent from judgment, and to overwhelm in mercy?

Both in your own life, in the life of the church, and even in the life of our country and world. Will you ask God to be gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love?

Ask him, like I said, for yourself. Will you plead with him for our country and for his church? See, our only hope is God.

And the good news about God, remember the upward arrow? The good news about God is that he is the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

So plead with him to be this, for God knows we need it. Let's pray. Father God, we bring ourselves before you, acknowledging our sinfulness, acknowledging our own inability.

[25 : 07] We bring our church before you, acknowledging its imperfections. We bring our leaders before you, acknowledging their frailty and imperfection.

And we bring our country to you, and your world to you. And Father, we pray that you would intervene in it, as the God of all grace and mercy. We thank you that you have intervened in Christ.

And we pray, Father, that you would intervene by your Holy Spirit to draw people to your Son, and to form your people into the likeness of your Son.

We thank you that the good news is that you are the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Father, you know we need this.

So please be with us in all these areas we have prayed for. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[26 : 37] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.