

Re-Cycling Judges
Intro
6.10.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“What has been your experience with the Old Testament book of Judges? What questions has it raised for you?”

“How have you typically handled difficult biblical passages? What extra-biblical resources have you found helpful?”

“Why do you think understanding the historical context of such a book as Judges is so vital? What are some of the challenges we face without context?”

Perhaps you could dialogue about each of the aspects of the cycle of dysfunction mentioned in the teaching. Although such responses are not inevitable, why do you think them so predictable?”

“Talk about a time when you have been disillusioned with God. Were you able to utilize it as opportunity for clarity in your faith, or did it simply make you resentful?”

“Would you say that your faith was ‘handed down to you’ or it was something that you had to discover on your own?”

Teaching Notes...

Judges is an oft-neglected book and, perhaps, for good reason. It’s unsettling. It’s disturbing. It’s not for the *‘faint-of-faith’*. It recounts troubling scenes of human atrocities (which we can easily relegate to our checkered history), but leaves us struggling to reconcile God’s involvement:

“How do we contrast the idea of judgment with love? If people participated in such activity, believing that ‘God told them to’, what kind of God is this? Can we trust the character of this God?”

I suppose this is not really an issue for those who don’t take the Bible seriously, nor for those who think that such intellectual challenges defy our claims of faith. Even less helpful, for me, was the *“God said, I believe it. That settles it”*, formation to which I was exposed.

Books like this force us to *‘sit up straight’*, look at God when he’s speaking to us, and come to healthy terms with our response. We prefer our faith to be more philosophical; more systematic. More answers and less questions. We would love a faith that allows us to edit out the really troubling stuff; to photo-shop the embarrassing members of the family.

We want the story to come to us in *“an inviting, entertaining environment”*. It’s not the way that faith comes to us. In order to be authentic, biblical faith, it has to happen in *“real time”*. It has to include the really complex and confusing parts.

The Jewish people intentionally included episodes of their own unfaithfulness and dysfunctionality to make the story, not more presentable, but more believable.

They kept the stories of complaining and disobedience and belligerence and self-indulgent leaders, almost daring you to believe.

The back-story seems to juxtapose ‘blessing’ and ‘cursing’ (Deuteronomy 28). The (2) experiences of our world.

Blessing, the tangible experience of the goodness and good intentions of God. Cursing, not as the angry retaliations of God, but as the inevitable consequence of refusing to live into the vision of God for your life.

Judges also reminds us that in the context of such spiritual and moral ambiguity, there have always been people who have lived and functioned in ways that distinguished both God and themselves. A *“remnant”* (Genesis 6; Zephaniah 3:11-13).

Writing such as these remind us of the faithfulness of God and the timelessness of the human condition. How such ancient writings can offer such relevant assessments of cultures which are not so dissimilar from our own.

Context...

~ Judges, set somewhere around the 13th century, B.C. *“After the death of Joshua...”*

~ Spans a period of about (350) years. It may be tempting to think that what Judges is just a temporary 'glitch' in an otherwise hopeful image, but historians tell us that Judges covers about one-fourth of the history offered to us in the OT.

~ Israel has been distinguished as the covenant partners of God, through whom he would establish and perpetuate the "blessing" of all creation. They have experienced the 3-D liberation from Egyptian bondage.

~ It describes this transitional period from the time of Joshua and entrance into the land, and the establishment of the monarchy. The tribes, each given an allotment of land, were a loose confederation with no central government. There was a great deal of 'civil unrest' and their lack of coherence made them even more vulnerable to their enemies.

~ "Judge", in the sense that they were like a tribal chieftain. They didn't sit behind a bench and hear arguments, all day, but were people that God "*raised up*" to rescue Israel.

There were (12) judges, with (6) being more prominent [Gideon, Samson, Deborah]. Shamgar: gets one verse in the whole book. That's his (15) minutes of fame, right?

Joshua (24) offers us the challenge as well as the passionate declarations of the people:

"But if you refuse to serve the Lord (seems undesirable to you, NIV), then choose today whom you will serve" (15).

On (4) separate occasions, they loudly and publicly declared their allegiance to God. No one kneeling during the anthem. *"We will serve the Lord!"*

Phrases that show up with some frequency but are easily overlooked:

"... they took possession of, but they failed to drive out..."

"After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel."

"The Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight..."

"... all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes".

"Then the Lord raised up a judge to rescue Israel..."

Unfortunately, we would like such a posture to be confined to some uncomfortable and unattractive period in our history, from which we have decidedly moved forward. "Wow, lesson learned."

There is an interesting pattern which seems to be reinforced biblically and historically. It's not that the pattern is inevitable or irreversible, but that it's predictable.

The cycle of dysfunction looks like this:

Crisis: which is, all-to-often, self-inflicted. Crisis is the word used to refer to the point in a disease or a fever where you will either get better or worse. It's a defining moment because of its potential to alter the course of your life. It's from a Greek word which literally means, "*decision*".

Concession: the crisis finally awakens us to our need of help and we "cry out" (I say "finally", because, as a general rule, we don't give up without a fight, even if it is God with whom we are struggling.)

Consolation. Grace-happens! God intervenes but not in some codependent way. He wants us to learn the lessons that sin was meant to teach us. He allows us to experience consequences in hopes that it will evoke repentance.

Déjà vu (Fr. meaning "*already seen*"): Not in the eerie and unexplainable sort of way, but in the frustrating and the predictable way. Relapse. Rinse and repeat!

Let me offer another observation without attempting to resolve it: "*The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of _____*".

At times, we run the risk of developing a faith in God that has little to do with our faith in God.

Trusting God is not to be equated with what you know about Abraham's trust in God. The purpose of the biblical record is not that we would live our lives vicariously through the great 'heroes of faith', but that, by faith, we would create our own stories. We are called to *imitate their faith* (Hebrews 13:7), not imitate them.

"Another generation grew up who neither knew God, nor what he had done..."

It doesn't mean that they had never heard of it or that the information was unavailable to them. It was that while they held to the 'traditions', faith became a keepsake. That unattractive piece of art or pottery that we keep on display out of respect for our grandparents, but when asked about it, we sigh and 'roll our eyes' and attempt to find some meaning in nostalgia.

With no experience of faith (other than what their parents offered them), it loses its relevance and credibility. The generations prove increasingly more inclined to break with tradition and become less willing to accommodate a faith that they believe encourages duplicity and insincerity.

It's a context in which faith has been handed-down, but not challenged. A faith that we attempted to refine and repackage, so as to eliminate the really challenging parts and smooth the exchange. I realized, at some point in my development, that I had a faith that had never been proven (not that I had not been taught to put up a good argument). Never been tested. A faith that had been handed-down, but never received.

Being disillusioned with life and with God is a valuable component in the journey of faith.

It means that we all have developed illusions about God, typically based on our own images of him, which are not in keeping with reality and they need to be exposed. Only then are we free to confront our misinterpretations and accept a more authentic representation. A more robust faith.

Judges is not just about the cycle of sin and epic failure, but about the relentless love of God which pursues humanity in order to break the cycle so that we might experience a larger-than-life-hope.