

A Grim Reality and a Reason to Hope

DAVE BAST

What do these things have in common: A team's loss in the championship game; a surprise political upset; and a divorce? Answer: They are all instances of disappointed expectations. You went in with such high hopes, but things just didn't turn out the way you expected them to. In a sense, that is also the story of the book of Judges in the Bible; and we will think about this today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we have come now to the end of our five-part series on the book of Judges. We have kind of followed some of these very interesting stories; some of them difficult; some of them disturbing. We have seen an overall pattern to the book, where Israel is oppressed by its enemies, and the reason they are oppressed is that God lets them be oppressed because they have turned away from him; they have slid away from obedience into idolatry. Things get bad enough that they cry out again, and then God in his grace hears, answers, and he raises up a judge or a champion...a deliverer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, Dave, eventually in the Old Testament we will come to the book of Hosea, and God begins in that chapter of Hosea 11, where God says: When Israel was a child, I...and here, I think, we see Israel as very childlike; actually childish. Israel is like a petulant child who keeps disobeying what you tell them, and then they get into a jam, and like a lot of children, you know: Hey, Jimmy; don't swim out beyond the boundaries. Jimmy swims out beyond the boundaries: Daddy, help; I'm drowning; and you have to rescue him. That is Israel. They are very childish and immature at this stage in salvation history; and so, they keep getting in trouble, crying out for help; and God is that faithful parent depicted in Hosea 11. He just keeps coming back. So, we have looked at stories about Deborah and Gideon and Samson; and they all come in to save the day, sometimes through great heroism, like Gideon and Deborah; sometimes despite themselves, like Samson, but God does deliver them.

DAVE BAST

Right; and yet, as you read the stories, and you can kind of cheer when the champion shows up and things go well again for Israel. It is sort of like a seesaw game, you know, where your team falls behind, but then they catch up and go ahead; but it is difficult not to see, too, that things are not right in the overall picture. I mean, this is the Promised Land...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

We talked about disappointed expectations. Imagine what it must have been like. Israel going through the wilderness, and those forty years of wandering, and then they come in under Joshua and they conquer the land, for the most part; and all through Joshua's generation, and those who accompanied him, they are

faithful, they walk with God, things go well; but then, things just start to fall apart; and you know, this is the Promised Land, full of bloodshed and warfare and enemies coming in one after another from every different direction? Philistines from the East and Midianites from the West and other people from the North; and you just think: Wow, this looks more like Afghanistan or Syria than paradise. What is going on here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, the Israelites made it harder on themselves, too, yet. So, yes, you had all of that stuff going on. It wasn't quite as wonderful as the travel brochures had promised: A land flowing with milk and honey, and all that. It was a good land, but it had problems; and Israel was told: Don't make life hard on yourself; root out all the other religions; don't let any of the religions of the Canaanites linger. Knock down all their temples—all the Baal temples—all the poles to the goddess Asherah; but they didn't do it. They left the high places intact in many ways, and they ended up worshipping Baal. We read that earlier in this series, in the first program in Judges 2. They did evil in the sight of the Lord; they served the Baals; they mixed in their religion—at best, they mixed in their religion with Canaanite religion—at worst, they swapped out their faith in Yahweh; and so, the Lord was angry with them, but again, that refrain all through the book: There wasn't a king, and they did what was right in their own eyes. In other words, they did what a lot of people today do. They made it up as they go along: I am a self-made individual. I will make up my own rules, thank you very much.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, we looked at the stories of the more famous judges: Gideon and Deborah and Samson; but there are a lot more of these characters in the story that God raises up. Some of them are really just names...strange names: Othniel, Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon... Some of them have their stories told, but they are not very encouraging or edifying stories. So, you've got a judge, for example, whose name is Jephthah, who is a really able soldier. He is from Gilead, which is to the east of the Jordan, where the two-and-one-half tribes settled who didn't want to go up into Canaan. So, he is a little bit of an outsider; and he is the guy who vowed he would give the very first thing to God...he would sacrifice it to God, if God gave him a victory; and it turns out to be his teenaged daughter, who then, the implication is, he actually sacrifices.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, yes; so, he was brave and all, but he was a bit of a fool; and violent...terribly, terribly violent, as was another judge that doesn't get much air time, although he takes up a lot of verses...about 57: Abimelech. He is really not technically a judge, but his story gets told, and he is terrible, too. He murders like 70 of his half-brothers, and attacks this thing called Shechem and just butchers the inhabitants there...

DAVE BAST

Which is an Israelite city, by the way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, he is kind of at cross purposes to boot. He gets dispatched by a woman who drops a rock on his head; and actually, even though this is in the Bible, you are not that sorry to see Abimelech go...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we had that other woman that we looked at: Jael; we looked at that story earlier, where she, you know, slams a tent peg through General Sisera's temple...the enemy general. So, that was kind of gross; but for sheer shock value, there is this little thing in Judges 3 about a guy named Ehud.

DAVE BAST

Yes; for off-puttingness, there is no story to match the story of Ehud. He is one of the early judges, and in this case, it is the Moabites...Israel's near neighbor...who are kind of oppressing them, and they actually pay

tribute to their king, Eglon. So, Ehud comes to deliver the tribute, and we pick up the story in Judges 3:20: Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his palace, and said, “I have a message from God; and the king rose from his seat,²¹ and Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly.²² Even the handle sank in after the blade, and his bowels discharged. Ehud did not put the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.²³ Then Ehud went out to the porch, he shut the doors of the upper room behind him, and locked them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yuck!

DAVE BAST

TMI, as they say: Too much information.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the whole story of Ehud; and there is actually just a little somewhat humorous coda. One of the reasons he escapes is that the servants of the king smell something and they say: He is using the bathroom, so we don’t want to interrupt him, and that gives Ehud cover to get away.

DAVE BAST

And I am sure the writer thought it was funny. He told it for laughs, probably, that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Perhaps, but again, there is just a lot of tawdriness. So, God does use people to help his people. Surprising, these judges...they are very surprising characters, but the book actually gets worse as it goes along; and in the very last couple chapters of Judges, we get some of the darkest, grimmest, and grossest stories in all of the Bible. So, we will look at that next; and ultimately, we are going to wonder: What is this doing in the Bible? We will think about that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we have been retelling, Dave, some of the not-so-nice stories in the book of Judges. Several members of my family, in their church, have been recently doing that program of reading through the Bible in a year, and they have lately been in the Old Testament, and they lately have been in Judges, and they have all said to me: We had kind of forgotten that some of that stuff was even in the Bible, and we are not so sure we like the reminder that it is in there; because, indeed, as we just saw, there is some vividness in some bad, gross ways; but it really gets bad at the end, where we don’t even get stories about champions so much anymore. We get just a couple stories of things that are happening within Israel. There is a story, you know, near the end, which is essentially a story about gang rape and murder, and then corpse dismemberment; and this leads to genocide and kidnappings and more rape on a large scale. I mean, this is like reading some of the worst news that you hear from the wider world even today; and it is happening inside Israel. In fact, we are not even going to look at that story, because it is really very upsetting.

DAVE BAST

It is disturbing. We will pick up sort of the ending of it, or the consequence that flowed from it. So, it is told in Judges 19 through 21. This is the very end of the book, and you are right; it seems like things have just hit rock bottom. It is about as bad as it can get; and the consequence of all that is that the tribe of Benjamin—one of the twelve tribes of Israel—has just about been wiped out. There are only six hundred men left, because the rest of the tribes have decided that their guilt is so terrible for what they have done...and again, it was just one town in Benjamin, but in the Bible, they had this sense of collective guilt and collective responsibility.

You were not just an individual; you were a member of your clan or your community or your tribe. So, if one person in the tribe was guilty, you were all guilty.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, one of the things that the rest of Israel does is they say: You cannot marry any of our girls. We are not going to give you any women to marry from the other tribes, because we are so angry with the tribe of Benjamin. So, the tribe is going to go extinct. If they cannot get married and have babies, there will be no more Benjamites; and so, they kind of take this matter in hand.

DAVE BAST

So, the people come together, and they are all grieving. Not so much because they have just about slaughtered every person from Benjamin, but because now there is going to be a tribe missing; and they need all twelve. That is kind of part of the covenant community; so, what are we going to do? We say we won't allow them to have...well, they decide, in the first place, to go to this other town, where nobody showed up for the war against Benjamin; so, they are guilty now, and the penalty for that is death. They go there and they wipe out that community, except for the young girls, whom they will save as wives, but there are not enough of them—there are only four hundred. So, they are still kind of stuck: What do we do next? Let's read a few verses from Judges 21, beginning at verse 16.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Then the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin?" ¹⁷And they said, "Well, there must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel. ¹⁸Yet, we cannot get them wives from our daughters," for the people of Israel had sworn, "Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin." ¹⁹So, they said, "Behold, there is a yearly feast of the Lord at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah." ²⁰And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, "Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards and watch."

DAVE BAST

²¹If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. ²²When their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, "Grant them graciously to us because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle; neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty." ²³And the people of Benjamin did so, and took their wives according to their number from the dancers, whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the towns and lived in them; ²⁴And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family; and they went out from there, every man to his inheritance. And thus endeth the book of Judges...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Just about. There is one more sentence that we will come to; but, I mean, really?! If you ever wondered whether or not the world of the Bible was strange to us, the answer is yes; this is very strange, and yet, it seems to be quite a happy ending, as far as the writer is concerned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But a really awful story of kidnapping and... Just think of the sorrow and the tears and the wrenching sorrow of a lot of those women and their families. You know, in 2 Timothy 3:16, we have that very famous passage about how all scripture is God-breathed, and it is profitable for teaching, Paul wrote to Timothy; and you read a story like this and you say: Really, Paul? What part is profitable here? What is inspirational here? Really? How did this get in the Bible?

DAVE BAST

So, there is murder, and there is bloodshed, and there is the slaughter of the innocents within Israel, not just outside; and then there is this kind of wholesale kidnapping of young girls and women in order to provide wives for the Benjamites; and they kind of get around their vow in sort of a tricky way, don't they? I mean, I don't know if I would actually count this, because they are saying to the people of Shiloh: You didn't actually *give* them those daughters of yours, which would make you guilty; the Benjamites stole them...and never mind, we will make it right to you somehow. We will paper it all over; and we just look at that, read it, and say: Really?! Is that the way God wants things done? Probably not, but this is the story that we are told. It is the time of the Judges. It is a lawless era. It is a violent period in Bible history. It is not nice, and bad things are happening; and yet, God is still at work, even then.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is at work, although it is interesting how God recedes from the scene at the end of Judges. So, actually, you know, at the beginning of Judges 21, we are told that the people lifted up their voices to the Lord and they say: Lord, why has this happened? But there is no answer from God. We don't read: And so, God said to them... And there is no judge here, right? God is not raising up a leader to help solve the Benjamites' problems. It is almost as though God has...after doing what he could over and over and over in this book, in raising up judges and leaders...it is as though it has finally gotten to the point where God has temporarily withdrawn...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And is kind of leaving the people to their own devices; and, you know, you read this and you say: These are the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? This is God's beachhead in the world? This is a link in the chain, as we said earlier, that leads to Jesus? I mean, how in the world can this be part of God's working? And yet, of course, we know that as bad as the period of the Judges is, we are very soon going to slide to a different part of Israel's story, which is going to start to look a whole lot better, as we get people like Samuel and then King Saul and then King David, and the Davidic line. Things go south a little bit after that, too; but taken in isolation, it sort of looks like God has almost given up...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because God just disappears. He doesn't speak; he doesn't raise anybody up at the end of Judges...

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a good point, yes; the last judge that he raises up is Samson. After that, no more judges...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is gone...

DAVE BAST

And yet, the chapters go on...the story goes on, so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the Bible...you know, we have said this before in other series we did...the Bible is brave. The Holy Spirit, in putting scripture together, is brave. It is like reading the book of Genesis. You have only read twenty-one chapters and you come to Genesis 22, when God tells Abraham to kill Isaac. What an awful story; it doesn't happen, but the point being, that could be an off-putting story after only twenty-one chapters;

and so with Judges. The whole book is off-putting; and yet, the Spirit is honest to say: This is the world God had to save. This is a bad chapter, but ultimately, God is not going to be derailed; and I think as we close out this series, Dave, let's wonder a little bit more about that. What do we finally make of this? How do we frame this up? And we will ponder that as we close this series in a minute.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where right now we are coming to the end—the very end—of this program, and the end of our series on the book of Judges, which we pointed out over and over, is a difficult book. It gets even more difficult and dark in the closing chapters, and the question that we raised repeatedly is: What is this doing in the Bible? What does it have to say to us? What can it teach us? Maybe we should back off a little bit and point out, right after Judges in our Bibles, in the order of the books that we have, comes the little book of Ruth; and it takes place right in the middle of the time of the Judges; so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

A nice little reminder that not everybody was messed up, because you have that beautiful story of the faithfulness of Boaz, the faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi, and they become, of course...Ruth and Boaz become great great grandparents of King David, finally. In the midst of even the worst times, there are vignettes of faithfulness; and Ruth taking place in the period of Judges reminds us of that; so, that is encouraging, but we still want to make sense of the larger book of Judges; and one temptation, Dave, is always to kind of take a moralizing approach.

DAVE BAST

You know, I don't want to knock Sunday school because we all went to Sunday school, I hope, and learned great things there, but it is a little bit simplistic sometimes when we take a Sunday school approach to Judges, and just sort of lift out little themes or messages. So, for example, what is the theme of the story of Samson? Well, don't date an unbeliever. Look what happens when you go and...let alone, marry an unbeliever; or with Gideon, the point is for us as Christians, if you have a decision to make, throw out a fleece...ask God for a sign. That is kind of a moralizing approach, and that is not really what Judges is there for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But I think maybe we look at the larger book, Dave, and then do what we have kind of hinted at even in the previous segment of this program. Where does this fit in salvation history? How does this move us along? Of course, we know the very, very, very last verse in Judges is also one of the first verses you get in Judges: In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. There was no king in Israel, in those days; so, this book was written in retrospect, of course, and it is pointing forward to a day when there will be a king in Israel.

DAVE BAST

In fact, that phrase is repeated four times in the concluding chapters of Judges: There was no king in Israel...there was no king in Israel...there was no king in Israel...get it? Do you get it? That was the problem; it was an absence of leadership. That is why they were so disjointed. That is why it was one tribe at a time. That is why there was this, at times, civil war among them. From a human perspective, they lacked leadership, and that was a tremendous problem, but they also lacked a moral compass. Everyone doing what they think is right. We said in the earlier program on Samson, that is exactly what his approach was: Give that woman to me; she is the right one for me. Literally the same phrase in Hebrew: Doing what you think is right—what you decide is right, rather than what God says is right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even though we know that when Israel eventually asks for a king, God and Samuel kind of initially resist and say: Oh, no, no...God is your king, you don't need an earthly king. So, there is this little bit of resistance, but

it doesn't last long. God says: Go ahead, give them a king. Ultimately though, an earthly king is going to be needed; and ultimately the iconic king for Israel will be King David; and then, of course, that sets up a whole line of David that is going to lead to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and that will be Jesus himself; because if there is one thing the book of Judges proves, is that salvation and rescue and redemption from our human sinfulness is not going to come from our side. This is going to be something only God can pull off. Our sinfulness is so bad, it is as bad as the book of Judges; it is as bad as Israel's later idolatry, even when they do have kings...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they are trampling on the poor. That is how intractable our sin is; and you know, sometimes the Reformed tradition and the Calvinist wing of the Reformed tradition are accused of being a little dark and dour and hung up on total depravity. Well, it is not quite true. It is a little bit of a caricature, but scripture is pretty unstinting in saying sin is a big, big problem, and it needs a big, big solution; and that is only going to come from God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and if you want to ask why is Judges in the Bible, reason number one, most basic is, this is what happens when you turn away from God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And when, as a society, you turn away from God. Godlessness in a society leads to lawlessness and chaos and anarchy and every kind of depravity. That is what happens; and especially if God seems to withdraw his protection—his care—his presence. I don't know if I have used this quote before on a *Groundwork* program, but there is a famous line from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian writer, as he sums up what happened in the 20th Century in the Soviet Union with all the horror and bloodshed and violence: Men have forgotten God. That is why all this has happened (he said); and that is the message of Judges as well; but it is also pointing forward, as you have said, Scott, to the coming of the king; and that is when things will be made right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; because, left to our own devices, even the best turn away from God; even Samson, in the book of Judges, as we saw in the previous program, repeatedly turned away from God. The Israelites repeatedly turned away from God. So, finally God turns toward us, and God comes to us in person, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the final king; and finally...because God never gave up on us, even despite all of that...finally the king comes and we are saved. Thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

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