

Our Failures and God's Rescue

DAVE BAST

The book of Judges features some of the most famous characters and stories in the whole Bible, and some of the most infamous. There is Gideon and his fleece; there is Samson, the strong man, his bad news girlfriend, Delilah, and the story of his unfortunate haircut; but then there are also stories that are violent or gross or violent *and* gross...the sort of thing that makes you ask: What is *that* doing in the Bible? Well, let's find out together 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, with this program, we are beginning a new series that will survey the book of Judges. We will try to get as much of it in as we can. Some of the very famous stories that we all learned in Sunday school; some other stories that maybe we didn't learn when we were little, and we don't want our kids to learn.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, we will be spending five programs on this; and of course, you could look at the book of Judges and study anytime. As we will see, this book is just dark enough and just focused enough on human sinfulness that it could be a Lenten reflection...a reflection for the season of Lent. I mean, you could look at it any time, but it is a little bit of that character because, indeed, as you said at the beginning, Dave, there are some stories here that we are more familiar with, but a lot of the details of even those have been cleaned up in the Sunday school versions; and then, there are other stories that do not get into Sunday school ever...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for very good reason; but it is certainly a difficult book, and it is a puzzling book, right? So, we are going to be looking at Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and some others; but, what is the purpose of this book? I mean, there is that author named Lemony Snicket, who's got this series of books for kids called *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. That is kind of what Judges feels like.

DAVE BAST

You could put that as a title over the book of Judges. It is interesting, too, Scott, that you mentioned the season of Lent, when Christians tend to increasingly focus on the cross and the necessity of the cross, and our own sort of complicity in the sin of the world that made Jesus' death necessary; and if there is one big lesson to take from the book of Judges, it is that the world needs saving...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

God's people need saving, because it is a story...the book shows a kind of cycle that gets repeated over and over and over of the people of God, now Israel, sinking into kind of idolatry, turning away from God, and then being oppressed by their enemies until they finally cry out and God raises up a hero or a champion; and that brings us, really, to the word *judges* and what it means.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is a translation of the Hebrew, where the judges were called *shaphatim*, and that has a particular meaning in Hebrew, but when the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek—and that is called the Septuagint—the Greek translators chose *kritai*, which means judges, and *kritai* in Greek can mean a judge like we think of it today: somebody who wears a black robe, sits at a bench and delivers verdicts, but that is not the meaning of the judges in Israel or in this book. These were not...oh, they did adjudicate cases sometimes, that is true; but mostly what they did was they sort of sallied forth into Israel to bring justice. In an active sense, they were judges in the sense of being champions for justice, and champions against a whole array of enemies. As we go through this series, each story cycle has somebody else oppressing Israel, threatening Israel, attacking Israel; and God raises up these *shaphatim*—these champions—these judges to lead Israel.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well actually, some of them were leaders in the sense of commanders. They were military leaders; so, Gideon is the premier example of that. A later judge named Jephthah, whose story is sort of in the middle, as to how well known it is. He was certainly a military leader. There were others whose story is told maybe more briefly, who seemed almost like secret agents, you know, operating as partisans or resistance fighters behind enemy lines; and then there were judges more in the conventional sense, as you said. Deborah would be a good example. She is almost a second Moses, who is kind of dispensing wisdom and encouragement, and giving direction; and then, you know, there is Samson, who is like something out of a comic book superhero series...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Or maybe the Terminator...a real loner.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Let's also remind ourselves, Dave, where we are in the history of Israel. So, in Judges Chapter 2, we get the setting, and Judges 2 goes like this: ⁶After Joshua...(who of course, succeeded Moses and led the conquest of the Promised Land)...after Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to their own inheritance. ⁷The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua, and of the elders who outlived him, and had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel. ⁸Now Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred ten, ^{9a}and they buried him in the land of his inheritance... ¹⁰And after that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. So, that is a bit of an ominous note.

DAVE BAST

That is a very ominous note, and we will pick up on that in just a few moments; but note where we are in the context of the whole Old Testament. Joshua has just passed off the scene...he has died in a good old age; and his colleagues have died—his whole generation have died. We are not yet in the era that is coming, of the kings...of Saul and David and Solomon, but we are in between, and it is a period of several hundred years when, between the death of Joshua and the coming of Samuel on the scene—the last of the judges and the first of the prophets—he is the transitional figure—we are in this kind of turbulent, mixed-up time. The land...they have started to conquer it. They have settled in different parts of the land, these twelve tribes, but

the conquest is incomplete, and they are surrounded by idolatrous nations and neighbors.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is also this note that sounds here, Dave, in what we just read from Judges Chapter 2, which was kind of sad because we are told that eventually, after Joshua and everybody who knew Joshua died, the Israelites didn't know the Lord...they didn't know that their God was named Yahweh, and they didn't know what he had ever done for them; and you know what that tells me is, they had stopped celebrating Passover, among other things. Passover was supposed to be the one night of the year when you remembered that the Lord brought you out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. So, here is a preview of the faithlessness of this period of time. They had spiritual and literally historical amnesia because they were not doing what God had told them to do; and there are a lot of consequences to that, and that sets up, really, the whole drama of the book of Judges; and we will continue to explore some of 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 Dave, we were just looking at Judges Chapter 2, but we want to now go to the rest of Judges 2. It is a fairly long passage, but let's get right to it.

DAVE BAST

So, we pick up the reading here at Judges 2:11: Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals; ¹²They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them. ¹⁴In his anger against Israel, the Lord sold them into the hand of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. They were in great distress.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁶Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ¹⁸Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was the judge, and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as that judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them; ¹⁹but when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and their stubborn ways.

DAVE BAST

So, here we see, as you pointed out briefly, Scott, the pattern of the whole book of Judges. This generation that had accompanied Joshua and had gone in and begun to conquer the land, they have all died and the new generation has grown up, and we pointed out the ominous phrase: They knew neither the Lord nor the things that he had done for Israel. So, you think about that older generation and what they had experienced. I mean, when they were little ones, they went through the Red Sea, if they were young enough; then they crossed the Jordan River, you know, dry shod; and they went up with Joshua. They saw the walls of Jericho come tumbling down. It was pretty hard for them not to know that God was real, and that they belonged to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, eventually time moves on and if the stories aren't retold; if, as we mentioned in the last segment...if maybe they stopped observing Passover as a great remembrance of what God had done for them in delivering them out of Egypt and in giving them this new land now, it just becomes easy to forget; and one generation, if it doesn't tell the next, then the next generation just moves farther away and farther away, and then you've just got a series of what you could call bad momentum.

What we just saw there in Judges 2, Dave, is kind of a terrible syncretism, which is, you kind of worship any god and every god, right? It is not that they didn't just actively worship Yahweh; they worshipped anybody else who came along.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the Baals, Judges says; the gods of their neighbors, in other words; the Canaanite gods were basically fertility deities; and these were the kinds of gods who promised that they could produce for you. They could give you fertility. They could make your crops grow. They could make your flocks and herds increase. They could give you children; and it was a tit-for-tat kind of thing. I mean, religion—human religion very often is that sort of transactional affair. If I do something for my god, whatever that is or whoever that is, then they need to do something for me. I mean, Christians can fall into this same trap. So, I think it was G. K. Chesterton who said: Those who don't believe in God don't believe in nothing; they believe in anything...

SCOTT HOEZEE

In anything, yes...

DAVE BAST

And the same thing could be true of worship. Those who won't worship the true God...the living God...they will worship anything, and especially, they will worship the gods of their culture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, when God gave instructions to Joshua about conquering the Promised Land, one of the things that God made crystal clear and said over and over is: Plow under all the false gods and their temples, and the high places, because in Canaan the high places were often where the Asherah poles were, where fertility rites were done, and the Baal altars were on the high places. Remove all those high places, God said, because if you keep them there, they are going to tempt you...they are going to ensnare you. Well, guess what? They didn't remove all those high places, and guess what happened? Exactly what God said. They said: Well, here is a god who sounds good. He is going to give us what we want, and so we will follow him; but of course, the real threat of all of this, which doesn't come out super clearly in Judges, to tell you the truth...but the real threat of all of this is that God is supposed to dwell on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle; and what God said to Israel all along is: If you are not holy, as I am holy...or if you don't at least try, I cannot stay; I cannot let my reputation...my holiness...get besmirched; and so, there is this threat that God would have to leave Israel altogether; and as we just read, Dave, God does get sick of it. He punishes them. He kind of sells them into the hands of, well, as we will see, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Midianites; it is one after the next; and yet, that compassion of God is always there; and then, they groan, and his compassion is stirred up. He does still live in their midst; and so, he raises up a judge and gives them another chance. They never capitalize on their new chances, but here you see revealed that more tender side of God, that when his people groan, he says: Ah, I've got to help them.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; as he did initially in Egypt when they were crying out. There is this wonderful phrase in the book of Exodus that says: God heard his people's cries; and we see this repeated over and over in Judges. So, a cycle has been set up. The commentator, Michael Wilcock, in his commentary on Judges...on the book of Judges, calls it the rebellion, retribution, repentance, rescue cycle. So, there are four steps to it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The four Rs.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they turn away from God, they begin to worship idols; God gives them over into the hand of their enemies, he let's them experience the consequences of their rebellion; things get so bad that they cry out to him...they repent...they turn back to him; and then he sends a judge...he raises up a judge...a rescuer, who

will deliver them, at least for awhile...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And this is not just the pattern of Judges, we can see this pattern continuing throughout the Old Testament and beyond.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, this will keep happening with Israel even after David and Solomon. This will continue on through the decimation of the northern kingdom eventually, and then the exile to Babylon of the southern kingdom of Judah. This will go on and on; in some ways, it goes on and on even in the Church, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, even in the Church history.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Church history is a checkered thing with great triumphs and wonderful periods of great spirituality and holiness, and then also periods of historical failure and travesty and tragedy and corruption; and yet, God, and now in the era of the Church, God in Christ, stays with us and keeps going with us; but I think maybe, Dave, as we close out this segment, we can just note that that other thing that we already talked about, that is what we could kind of call the *next gen faith*, what is the next generation going to do? I think the failure to celebrate Passover, the failure to tell their children and grandchildren the stories of the exodus from Egypt and the mighty works of God, that sets up the next generation for failure. If we don't tell our children and do our best to let them know who God is, and what he has done for me, what he has done for the Church, then how will they know?

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and there is a kind of law almost at work here, it seems like. Maybe we could call it the law of spiritual entropy. I mean, if you just sort of go along and go along, eventually spiritual life is going to decay; real faith is going to trickle away because of the threat of worldliness—the pressures that are around us to conform to our culture. So, we need to continually turn back; we need to use very means at our disposal: the Bible and worship, as you pointed out, and Christian community, and to pass these things on to our children, or we are going to be caught up in this same kind of vicious cycle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, you know, it seems like Judges is all about bad news. That you can never keep going; you are always going to slide away from God; but that is not an inevitable result, and there is a way of counteracting that. We want to look at that before we wrap up this program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this, the first of five programs that we are dedicating to the book of Judges; and Dave, we have just been saying that Judges certainly contains a lot of bad news; a lot of doom and gloom; a lot of sad stories of this repeated cycle of Israel sinning—moving away from God, and then getting into trouble because of it; God lets them get into trouble; and then they cry to God and God raises up a judge and rescues them after all; and that is a pattern all through Judges. We just noted, it will become Israel's pattern throughout history, and it is, in some ways, the pattern of even the Church. That can seem kind of depressing, but there is actually some good news

tucked into and weaving through these stories even in as dark a book as Judges.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and I think it is especially good news for us today because I am guessing that many of the people, maybe, who listen to *Groundwork*...I often feel this way myself...feel like we are in a bit of a downward spiral in spiritual terms. I mean, we look around at our own societies in Canada and the United States, or in Europe...western Europe...and it seems like we have moved farther and farther away from faith in God...fewer and fewer people...there is much attention paid to the so-called *nones*, the n-o-n-e-s, the people who say: No, I have no religion...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That number has swollen in just the last few years; and we see signs in our culture at large that even traditional morality doesn't seem to be having as much a hold on people's lives as it once did.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, and church attendance is down in the US and in Canada, and it has been declining for a really long time in Europe. Lots of the grand old cathedrals in the Netherlands and England and Germany are now like museums essentially, more than active worship centers...

DAVE BAST

Or they are turning them into nightclubs or apartments, or whatever.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; all kinds of...and of course, sometimes we look around at our own church; we notice that the attendance patterns of some of the millennials aren't as robust as of their parents. I mean, a number of pastor friends tell me that for younger people today in their 20s and 30s, coming to church once every three weeks is considered regular attendance now; and I think the older generation looks at that and kind of despairs. In places that still have had vesper services or evening services on Sunday night, those are more and more sparsely attended; so much so that many churches have just stopped having them. We can look at that and hang our heads and say: Ah, that is a bad sign, you know; things are going the wrong way; and yet, Judges says to us that, you know, if we lean into God, I mean, God always steps in; and certainly, the history of Israel got to the point where, you know, God said...and we had a program on *Groundwork* a while back about the concept of the covenant...and God had made a covenant. It is a contract, there are two parties, but God eventually said: You know what? I am going to have to keep both ends of the bargain if this is going to work. I am going to have to become human and keep the human side of Israel as well as my side—the divine side—and that is, of course, what he did in Jesus; and that is what God is always doing.

DAVE BAST

You know, this has been going on for a long time, this apparent downward trend in spiritual terms; and there was a famous intellectual in the 19th Century named Matthew Arnold who a poem called *Dover Beach*, in which he described the sea of faith as like the tide going out, and it is going out all through his circles of intellectuals, but the tide can come back in, too—the tide of faith that went out can come back in; and God has a way of, when things seem to be pretty bleak and pretty dark, of bringing revival, of bringing renewal. Enough people get so tired of the way things are that they begin, like ancient Israel, to cry out to God, and he raises up a champion; and so, we will see some new movement that breaks out, maybe in a different part of the world, but for some reason...well, for a very good reason that we know, God will not allow his Church to die.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you see this once in a while. I have been hearing reports even out of England; and of course, the Church of England has been in decline for a long time; attendance is not what it once was and used to be, and so forth, and it is easy to despair of that; and yet, you know, this person, I think, named Nicky Gumbel, comes along and comes up with this Alpha program, and it kind of takes England, and then the world, by storm. There is a seminary in London that representatives of my seminary visited recently, where enrollment is booming because there is a revival going on inside the British church, and they need more pastors all of a sudden; and so, you never know.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, years ago I ran across...I was reading an article by Philip Yancey, a fairly well-known Christian writer...a great Christian writer, really...but he said this. It so struck me, I copied it down and I have kept it ever since. Yancey wrote: As I travel, I have observed a pattern, a strange historical phenomenon, of God moving geographically from the Middle East, to Europe, to North America...that is almost like the trend of Church history there that he is talking about...to the developing world. My theory is this, (said Yancey) God goes where he is wanted. I love that idea, because it is true corporately, but it also true in personal terms. If we really want God...if we have been feeling maybe a little bit dry spiritually, he will come to us if that is what we want.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so it is easy to listen to some of the voices of doom and gloom, and sometimes they seem like the loudest voice; sometimes maybe they do have the biggest megaphone, that everything is going the wrong direction; but again, right; when we cry out to God, instead of just hanging our heads about that...and maybe...there are legitimate things to be concerned about in the Church right now, but rather than hanging our heads about that, we can cry out to God, because as we saw, even in the book of Judges...and hopefully none of our churches are anywhere near as bad as Israel was at that time, but when...even then, when God heard their groaning, we read in Judges 2, he said: Oh, my; I have to help them. Well, if God did that and relented and sent rescue and renewal even for Israel, surely the same will be true for the Church today. God is faithful. When his people cry out, he always responds with revival.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we consider what we learn about God through the leadership of Deborah in Judges 4 and 5.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, and share what *Groundwork* means to you, and tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/our-failures-and-gods-rescue>

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