

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, come to our rescue. When everything appears to be lost, when we have been badly let down by friends, when we think we have failed in something important, Lord Jesus Christ, be our very real Saviour. Bring gladness out of despair and joy out of trouble; and through our witness, show the world that failure and defeat is never the end because God is a God of love. We praise You, Lord Jesus Christ; AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Are you a pessimist or an optimist? There is nothing essentially wrong with either characteristic, it is a matter of what you do with your own characteristics. Think about the kind of person people see in you, and ask the Lord to use your characteristics for His purposes.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian who live under oppression:** *Pray for those who live in the Arab world, especially where there is strife just now. Pray for their safety, especially for those who may be caught up in the conflicts*
- *Give thanks to God for the fellowship of Christians of which you are a part, and all other Christians who live near to you*
- *Pray for those who will this day be caught up in court cases that force them to relive extremely difficult past experiences. Pray for any trials on the news in your country*

Meditation

Lord Jesus, You are special:

You came as the King of all the earth;
Teaching people the truth about God,
Demonstrating Your authority over evil,
And performing great signs and wonders.

You came as the Servant of all people;
Doing all the work the Father gave You,
Showing commitment to the path of love,
And submitting to God's will on the Cross.

You came as a Man, yet still being God;
Living side by side with friends and sinners,
Healing, liberating, caring, listening,
And giving up everything to share our life.

You came as God, the Eternal Word;
Showing Your people the way to the Father,
Debating with Jew and with Gentile,
And proving Your glory in victorious power!

Lord Jesus, You are special!

Bible passage - Judges 2:11-23

Israel does evil, and God withdraws His favour

¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the LORD's eyes and worshipped the Ba'als; ¹² they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers who led them out of Egypt, and they followed other gods belonging to the peoples all around them. They worshipped them and made the LORD angry; ¹³ they deserted the LORD, and worshipped Baal and the Ashtoreth.

¹⁴ The LORD'S anger boiled over against Israel; He allowed raiders to plunder them and sold them to their enemies all around, so they could no longer stand against their enemies. ¹⁵ Whenever they went out to fight, the LORD'S hand was against them and brought calamity, just as the LORD had warned them and had sworn to them. They were greatly distressed.

But God raises up Judges to save Israel and bring them back to Him

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them from the power of those who raided them.

¹⁷ But they did not listen to their judges; they longed for other gods and worshipped them. Their forefathers had walked in obedience to the commandments of the LORD, but they quickly turned away from their example and did not follow it.

¹⁸ Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, He was with the judge and delivered them from their enemies as long as the judge lived. Then because of their plight caused by persecution and oppression, the LORD had pity on them. ¹⁹ But when the judge died, the people relapsed and behaved worse than their fathers, following other gods, serving and worshipping them. They would not give up any of their evil practices or their stubborn ways.

²⁰ So LORD'S anger boiled over against Israel; and He said,

'Because this people have discarded the covenant I gave to their forefathers and have been disobedient, ²¹ I will no longer dispossess the nations remaining after the death of Joshua.'

²² This was a test for Israel to see whether or not they would keep to the ways of the LORD as their forefathers did. ²³ The LORD let those nations remain; He did not drive them out immediately by handing them over to Joshua.

Bible Study

Review

We have not yet begun to read the stories of the Judges of Israel, who saved the nation and brought them back to the Lord. Just before they begin in Judges 3, the author gives us further background to these great tales, to explain the role of the Judges. Verse 18 tells us that they were people raised up by the Lord to deliver Israel from the consequences of her sin. The judges were highly effective, but like many a leader with personal charisma, the people were quickly led astray after they died.

Israel's sins are set out in this passage in detail, but interestingly, they were not the sins people are interested in today. Whilst we agonise about sins of character such as 'anger', or sins of behaviour such as 'lying', God was far more concerned about whether His people kept His Covenant, or as we might say today, the 'faith we have received'. Other Bible texts suggest that Israelites thought that they could worship the ancient gods of Canaan in order to get good crops, forgetting that this would break their Covenant with God, especially the second commandment; *'you shall have no other gods before me ...'* (Exodus 20:3). It is difficult for us to imagine why the Israelites might think this, but it is rather like Christians today living as if they can do what they want without compromising their faith!

The first four verses of our passage go on to explain the consequences of Israel's sin. Their worship of other gods meant that the Lord had to withdraw His support, and Israel became prey to the aggression of the nations around them. The people of Canaan were undoubtedly keen to retake the land Israel had captured in Joshua's day. They had not been completely evicted, so they now became a threat to Israel's life and existence (2:15).

Sadly, the people should have known better. Deuteronomy contains a 'speech of Moses', in which he warned Israel that this would happen (Deut. 29:18-28). They should have known that if they worshipped other gods they put their national life and identity into jeopardy. Throughout Old Testament times faithful Israelites like Moses warned Israel that when the nation faced trouble, it was not because God had abandoned them, but because they had abandoned God and so faced His judgement. We find this theme in the stories of faithful priests and prophets, from Samuel and Elijah, to Isaiah and Ezra.

The author of Judges knew that Israel's sins were her downfall. He was self critical of Israel, but perceived that God was always faithful to His people, and this was shown in how He raised up the great leaders of Israel's clans, the Judges. Within this passage, we can find a fascinating analysis of what happened just after the taking of the Promised Land. It is a repeating cycle of events, which goes like this:

1. Israel was tempted and began to worship other gods (2:11)
2. God became angry with His people, and withdrew His support (2:14)
3. Israel was then oppressed by the other nations (2:15)
4. Seeing Israel's distress, the Lord 'raised up Judges' to help them (2:16)
5. Things went well as long as the Judge lived (2:18)
6. But they returned to the worship of other gods, thus re-starting the cycle! (2:19f.)

This list enables us to understand the book of Judges and its stories, but it does not offer Israel much hope! Today, Christians can look back on the stories of the Judges and find in them some fascinating examples of great leadership (e.g. Deborah, ch.4, Gideon, ch.6-8). However, Judges also speak to us of the fact that despite Israel's sin, and no evidence of her even calling out for help (at least in this passage), God watches His people and looks after them. Ultimately, Judges is the story of the fickle nature of humanity and the inconsistencies of even great human leadership. But perhaps more than this, it is about the faithfulness of God who loves His people and will not let them go.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Canaanite religion, and why it was supposed to have been destroyed (2:11-13)
- The Lord's anger and His judgement through 'enemies' (2:14-15)
- The work of the Judges, and the example of the forefathers (2:16-19)

Notes on the text and translation

V12 *'they followed other gods belonging to the peoples all around them. They worshipped them and made the Lord angry;'*

Other translations:

'They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger.' (NIV)

'They followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger' (NRSV)

The NRSV follows the Hebrew closely, and the NIV attempts to present the sentence in a more succinct way that is easily readable. The NIV is successful in that it is easy to read, but it has lost the emphasis the writer of Judges places on the last phrase *'They worshipped them'*. When read in the Hebrew, it flows better to add this phrase to the next one about making the Lord angry. In this way, the last sentence of verse 12 is mirrored (inversely) by verse 13:

*... They worshipped them and made the Lord angry;
They deserted the Lord and worshipped Ba'al and the Ashtoreth*

V13 *'Ashtoreth'*

The name Ashtoreth deserves our attention. This word is plural, and singular is 'Astarte'. Some scholars think that this might refer to a place around twenty miles east of Lake Galilee (see Genesis 14:5). Most accept that Ashtoreth refers to a god prominent in the ancient world and debatably the 'consort' of Ba'al. Studies of ancient history show that the worship of the Ashtoreth was highly sexual in nature and included a wide range of sex acts designed to foster the fertility of the land. It is hard to convey the disgust of the Old Testament writers for such practices when entered into as an alternative to worshipping the Lord. This is why the writer of Judges shows disgust for Israel at this point in the book, and elsewhere.

V18 *'as long as the judge lived'*

Other translations:

'all the days of the judge' (NAB, NRSV et.c)

Most Bible versions say *'all the days of the judge'*, but this could lead us astray. It does not mean 'as long as the judge ruled, it is a Hebrew way of saying 'as long as he lived'. When we read the book of Judges, we find that this is indeed what is reported, so it is best to translate here *'as long as the judge lived'*.

V18 *'Then because of their plight caused by persecution and oppression, the LORD had pity on them'*

Other translations:

'for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.' (NIV)

'for the LORD would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them.' (NRSV)

This is a difficult sentence to translate not because the Hebrew is difficult, but because of the manner of speech. I have taken the liberty changing the order of the words more radically than other translators, in order to make the meaning clearer; the translation is correct, but perhaps more relaxed than my usual practice.

V21 'I will no longer dispossess the nations remaining after the death of Joshua'

Other translations:

'I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died' (NIV)

'I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died.' (NRSV)

The Hebrew word translated by most other Bible versions 'drive them out', is more complex than this implies. It specifically suggests the dispossession of the land of these people. I have therefore translated the sentence to reflect this, and this helps us get to the heart of what is being said here. It is not just that God will not drive out the nations before Israel in battle; He will halt the dispossession of the nations. The covenant itself that promised the occupation of the land has been compromised, not by God but by Israel.

Going Deeper

Canaanite religion, and why it was supposed to have been destroyed (2:11-13)

When Moses warned Israel about their obedience to the Covenant (Deuteronomy 29), he did so knowing that she had been led astray in Egypt (Deut 29:16), and in the hope that Israel would eventually be obedient and trust in God exclusively. He looked forward to a 'Promised Land' that would be a place where Israel lived in unity with her God and give an example of godliness to the whole world. However, Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy show that he feared this might not be the case, and he repeatedly warned about the dangers of turning away from God (see Deut. 28 and 29).

Throughout the book of Joshua, the same warnings may be found. The Lord makes it clear, especially after the capture of Jericho and the failed attempt to capture Ai (Joshua 7), that He requires the complete destruction of anything that might tempt Israel to sin. Every evidence of Canaanite culture was to be destroyed, principally, altars, places of worship, and cities, and the fact that they were not came back to haunt Israel for centuries.

The problem did not just affect Israel during the days of the Judges. In the days of Elijah, King Ahab married a wife who was devoted to the Baal's and the Ashtoreth (see 1 Kings 16:31-34). Centuries later, Josiah had to remove all evidence of the worship of other gods from the Temple, after finding a copy of Deuteronomy in the Temple; it had not been read for many years (2 Kings 22). Eventually, the exiles in Babylon, some eight hundred years after the time of the Judges, realised that Israel's downfall and the destruction of Jerusalem had come about because of her historic inability to shake off the temptation to worship other gods. This is the single conclusion that connects the work of nearly all the major prophets, and it can escape no one who reads the through the Bible.

It is possible to study further details of Canaanite worship by looking at archaeology, but the picture is sketchy. The Bible remains one of the primary sources for our understanding of it (see comments above in notes for verse 13). To take this further would be to miss the point however. The conclusion of Judges is that Israel's sin was unresolved, as later prophets came to realise. They prophesied that God would send a Messiah to do for Israel (and through Him the rest of the world), what she could not do for herself (Isaiah 7:14, 53 etc), and enable her to escape the ultimate consequences of her sin and find peace.

The Lord's anger and His judgement through 'enemies' (2:14-15)

When the Bible speaks about God's 'anger' (often called 'wrath'), it refers to God's righteous and just response to human rejection. So when His own people do evil, God does not just wait for them to return, He punishes them both as a warning and as an invitation to repentance. Nothing has changed even now, and the only difference for us today is the intervention of Jesus Christ. Through Him, we can call on God for mercy and forgiveness and trust Him for salvation. Nevertheless, wherever there is sin and rebellion against God and His will, His anger or 'wrath' remains, even though it is to rebuke His people, not destroy them.

For this reason, it is worth our while looking carefully at how God's anger works here in Judges, because we can expect that God will be consistent in this, and we can expect Him to work in similar ways today. In verse 14 to 15, we are told that God left Israel open to her enemies, and she was plundered. Shortly, we will read stories that illustrate this, for example, the Midianites plundering Israel before the time of Gideon (ch.6).

The idea that foreign nations were the vehicle of God's judgement does not stop there. The Bible also tells us that Isaiah saw the coming of the Assyrians as God's judgement on the people of northern Israel in the late eight century BC (Isaiah 10), and Jeremiah saw the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem as God's judgement on Judah prior to the Exile (Jeremiah 29).

This theme is consistent throughout the Bible, and should not be ignored; God deals with His people in the same way today. We may speak of 'enemies' or 'Satan' afflicting Christians and the church, but God's people need to discern the difference between this and God's punishment of His people when they sin. To put it bluntly, if the church today is in difficulty, how much of this is because it is fighting a hard battle and is oppressed by Satan, and how much is it because of sin or rebellion against Christ? It would be unwise to assume one or the other without seeking to exercise some discernment.

The work of the Judges, and the example of the forefathers (2:16-19)

The pattern of work expected of the Judges is made clear by the author of Judges. He does not expect that this will give a long term solution to Israel's problems, but it will provide respite. At this point in Judges, we may wonder whether the author is pessimistic and expects no more, or is optimistic that the Judges will show Israel something of her God that will make a difference. We would like to think the latter, but there is no hint of this yet.

One feature of these verses nevertheless remains of interest. The author of Judges makes it clear that one of the tasks of the Judges is to show Israel the way back to their 'Covenant' with God (2:20). This is the Covenant entered into by their 'forefathers', some of whom were a fine example (2:17), and others were not (2:19). As we read through the Bible, the word 'Covenant' does not always appear where we might expect it, given that it describes the basic agreement and relationship between God and His people (see Exodus 20:1f. and 24:7f.). The fact that it appears here should make us realise that the writer was aware of far more than the history of the Judges when he wrote.

Judges does not simply record the story of the Judges, it tells these stories in order to remind Israel of her duty to keep to the Covenant and remain pure in devotion to God. We do not know exactly when this book was written, but it seems that it was many years after the time of the Judges. The author took the ancient stories and compiled them in such a way as to explain to Israel the significance of her past. If we know the history of Israel, we could point to a number of later times at which such a book might therefore have been written, even if we do not know for sure.

Application

Despite the undoubted help this passage gives us in analysing the book of Judges, it begs the Christian reader to think very carefully about how God responds to those who rebel against Him and reject His ways. This whole book is not about people who do not know God but about people who do, and when it speaks of people rebelling against God, it is describing God's people, not pagans. At the very least, therefore, it tells us that God knows His people and watches them, and He also knows what is good and bad about their faith, rewarding good and punishing bad. He longs for their obedience, and their punishment is designed to tell them that they have sinned.

For many reasons, people today are coy about the idea that God punishes His people. However, the simplest analogy must surely be that of pain. We do not like it, but we need it because it tells us that there is something wrong. In the same way, we need to accept the idea that God may sometimes have to punish His people, so that they come to understand the consequences of turning away from Him.

It is important that we recognise this, because we must discern the difference between evil in the world and the consequences of human sin, from which Christians are not yet completely free. Like the writer of the book of Judges, we are able to look back on the 'greats' of the past and see whether they can help us; we can learn not just from their great achievements, but from their faults. Their stories may help us discern the pattern of God's work within our world today, and whether it differs from that in ancient times. God's people are always being 'tested' (2:22), and just as the people of Israel were called to keep close to the Covenant, the church must keep close to Christ. God's love is there for His people to receive, and he asks them to willingly turn away from sin to receive both the blessing of salvation and also the blessing of His presence in this life.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How do people today turn aside from God to worship idols?
2. Discuss in your group what you think is meant by the anger of God, especially as it is described here in this passage.
3. Discuss whether the life of your church is mirrored by the success or otherwise of its leaders. Can a church do well without a good leader?

Personal comments by author

I have taught this passage of Scripture for many years, and almost invariably, students pick up the fascinating analysis of the life and times of the Judges found within it. Not all will pick up the fact that this passage does not really offer the Israelites any long term hope. The whole of Judges seems to me to cry out in longing for God to do something more than just send leaders. Indeed, we will see this theme emerge in a fascinating way towards the end of the book. The message we must learn from this today is simple. The Church will not 'come good' by getting its leadership right. It will come good by following Christ.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How much importance do people today place on leadership, and is this warranted? Try to find someone else within the church with whom you can discuss this question; does the church need good leaders because it is failing, or because good leaders are essential for the church? Judges 1*
- *Read through the stories of some of the Judges in chapter 3 (before we study them in detail in the coming days). To what extent do you think that they show the same pattern we have studied here in Judges 2?*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, bless our leaders and anoint them for the tasks they must perform. Help them to demonstrate true godliness, so that the world may see Your love through their work. May we who listen to their sermons and support their work, pray for them and bless them in our words and our deeds, so that together, Your people may reflect Your glory on earth. AMEN
