

The Book of Judges

Lesson 2: The Cycle of Sin and the First Judges -- Judges 2:6–3:31

Picture the funeral of a generation. Joshua is laid in the ground at Timnath-heres, and around his grave stand the elders who walked through the Jordan on dry ground, who watched the walls of Jericho fall, who saw with their own eyes what the LORD did for Israel. They serve God all their days. And then they die too. The text in Judges 2:10 says something that ought to make the hair on your arms stand up: there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel. One generation away from the miracles, the memory is gone. You can almost feel the chill of it. How does a people forget a God who split the sea?

The answer, it turns out, is not dramatic. There is no single great rebellion, no defiant fist shaken at heaven. It is a drift. A little compromise here, a tolerated altar there, a marriage that brings a foreign god into the home, a festival that looked harmless until everyone was bowing at it. By the time you reach Judges 2:11 the people are serving Baal and the Ashtarothe, and the LORD who loved them is provoked to anger. We tend to imagine apostasy as a cliff. Scripture shows us it is usually a slope, and the people sliding down it rarely feel themselves moving.

What follows in this passage is the saddest pattern in the Bible, and the most honest mirror of the human heart you will ever look into. The writer pauses the action and tells you, in advance, the whole machinery of the book. Israel sins. God hands them over to oppressors. They groan under the weight of it. God, moved by their groaning, raises up a judge to deliver them. There is peace while the judge lives. Then the judge dies, and the people turn back, more corrupt than their fathers. Around and around it goes, and you realize you are not just reading Israel's history. You are reading your own Mondays after a Sunday of resolve.

And yet here is the wonder hidden inside the wreckage: God keeps showing up. He does not have to. A people this faithless has forfeited every claim on Him. But again and again He hears their cry and sends a deliverer. He raises Othniel, the quiet first judge. He raises Ehud, the left-handed man with a hidden dagger and a daring plan. He raises Shamgar, who strikes down six hundred with an oxgoad. These are not polished heroes; they are the unlikely instruments of a patient God. As we walk through this passage, watch both things at once: the relentless pull of sin in us, and the relentless mercy of the God who will one day break the cycle for good in His Son.

Group Discussion: What does it look like, practically, for a generation to lose its grip on God not through open rebellion but through slow drift, and where do you see that pattern at work in our own time?

Personal Reflection: Where in your own walk with God have you noticed a slow cooling, a place where you once burned and now merely flicker, and what first compromise opened that door?

Read Judges 2:6–3:31

Study Questions

1. According to Judges 2:10–13, how did Israel come to forsake the LORD, and what does the phrase ‘knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel’ teach us about how faith is passed (or fails to be passed) from one generation to the next?
2. Joshua’s generation served God, but the next did not know Him. What are you actively doing to make sure the faith you hold does not die with you, and where might you be assuming the next generation will absorb what you have not deliberately taught?
3. Trace the cycle described in Judges 2:11–19: sin, oppression, crying out, deliverance, and relapse. What does this repeating pattern reveal about the nature of sin in the human heart, and how does it warn against the danger of treating repentance as a one-time event?
4. The text says the people ‘would not cease from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way’ (2:19). What is one stubborn way of your own that you keep returning to even after God has rescued you from it before?
5. In Judges 2:20–3:6 God deliberately leaves certain nations in the land to test Israel and to teach war to those who had not known it. What does it mean that God uses testing rather than removing every obstacle, and how does this fit with His character as both just and merciful?

6. Think of a difficulty God has left in your life that you have begged Him to simply remove. How might He be using it to test and strengthen a faith that would otherwise grow soft?
7. Othniel is the first judge (3:7–11), and the text emphasizes that ‘the Spirit of the LORD came upon him’ and that he prevailed. What does Othniel’s deliverance teach about the true source of any victory God’s people win, and how does it guard us against trusting in human strength or cleverness?
8. Othniel quietly did what God put in front of him and the land had rest forty years. Where is God calling you to faithful, unglamorous obedience that no one may ever celebrate, and are you willing to do it without applause?
9. The book repeatedly notes there was ‘no king in Israel,’ and the cycle of sin keeps spinning because the people have no true ruler over their hearts. Taking the whole sweep of 2:11–3:31, explain what the cycle teaches about God’s justice and His mercy together, why even God’s own people remain in real danger of drifting away and falling (Hebrews 3:12–14; Galatians 5:4), and how this longing for a faithful king is answered only in Christ, who reigns now over His church and over the surrendered heart.
10. Name one specific cycle in your own life, a recurring sin, a habit of drifting, an inherited family pattern, that you believe Jesus is working right now to break, and what is the next concrete step of obedience He is asking of you to let Him break it?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Deuteronomy 6:6–9, the command to teach God’s words diligently to the next generation so faith is not lost; 2 Peter 2:20–22, the sobering warning about returning to what one was delivered from, the dog to its vomit; Hebrews 3:12–14, the exhortation to take heed lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; Galatians 5:4, the warning that one can be severed from Christ and fallen from grace; Romans 15:4, that whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning and patience and hope.

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