

Friends in Christ,

Life is pretty messy at times. As a pastor I get to see God's people at their best sometimes. And sometimes I see them at their worst. There are events in life that come through no fault of our own. But there are many things that we have a hand in that end up making our lives messier than we ever imagined.

One time driving drunk and you crash into someone and injure or kill them. You'll be doing time in jail, leaving family and friends behind, potentially being saddled with debt or even bankruptcy. Sometimes addictions lead to divorce for those who are married. That can be followed by custody battles over children. It gets very messy.

Many a family has succumbed to the messiness of greed. One member of the family hits it big and the rest get jealous and want a piece of the pie. A parent dies and the family fights over small or bigger items in the estate. Things get so bad, no one talks to each other anymore. All correspondence goes through a lawyer. It's messy.

Unforgiveness makes life messy. Angry outbursts can make a mess of relationships. Adultery brings huge messes. But so does idolatry, turning our backs on the Lord our God. That's the heart of the book of Judges. The messes we get ourselves into when we forsake the Lord.

The book of Judges starts with a tone that reminds us of the book of Joshua. Israel did what God told them to do and God gave them victory over and over again. Before we get to chapter 2, though, we see that the book of Judges is the story of Israel getting soft on God's command when it came to taking Canaan for themselves. The zeal for God and his perfect ways that characterized God's people in the book of Joshua disappears in the book of Judges.

Now stop and think about your own life. Have you dropped your standards? Have you compromised your faith more often than you used to? Have you changed your commitment level to doing God's will wholeheartedly? That is certainly the story of the book of Judges. Maybe it's our story too. Let's look.

### **The Power of God's Covenant**

The right perspective on our story begins with remembering the power of God's covenant. The first thing our Bible reading calls us to do is to remember where we come from. That involves remembering God's covenant with his people. The covenant of God with his people is powerful!

If you have your Bible open, look at how chapter 2 begins with the words of the angel of the Lord—God's word to Israel.

The locations mentioned here in v.1 add to the importance of what's happening. *The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal....* Gilgal was used by God through Joshua to serve as a reminder to Israel of their deliverance from Egypt. It's the place where all the men were circumcised in one day. That was a rough day! There had to have been a lot of groaning in the camp for more than just a few days. Hard to forget Gilgal, I would think!!

But why was that circumcision event important? Because circumcision is a sign of God's covenant. It's God saying to his people before they take possession of the land, "I'm marking you as mine! You belong to me!" At Gilgal God gave these words to Israel, according to Joshua 5:9: "*This day I have rolled away* ("gilgal-ed" in Hebrew) *the reproach of Egypt from you.*" Note in the middle of Judges 2:1 the Lord is saying, "This is what I bring to our relationship:"

*Jud 2:1b I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you,...*

God's relationship with his people is based on covenant. Covenant is another word for "deal" or "terms of our relationship." God is all in. That's what he's saying then. And he still says that to us too. Every time we have a baptism, it's a covenant renewal ceremony. God says, "I'll be a God to you and to your descendants after you! I'm in this for the long haul. I'm totally committed to you!"

That's a powerful covenant promise! We need to remember this. God comes to us in our lost, broken and messy conditions, like Israel in Egypt. And he gives us a promise—already when we are helpless infants and feeling helplessly messy as adults. God says to us, "I'm your God. You have a special place in my heart! Remember that."

So, first of all friends, every time you wander from him, look back at the cross. Remember what Christ has done for you. Remember that God's covenant-promise to never forsake you rests entirely on the work of Jesus for us. He guarantees that God will never forsake us. What a God! Hallelujah, what a Saviour! What a great covenant keeper. Remember the power of God's covenant—his promise, his word, including his Word made flesh.

## **The Power of Forgetting**

Secondly, consider the power of forgetting! Israel didn't remember her covenant God. We read in Judges 2:10,

*Jud 2:10 After that whole generation (of Joshua) had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.*

This is the power of forgetting.

These are the generations whose stories we find in the book of Judges. Israel compromised her faith over and over. She got lazy. She did not want to obey God's call to cleanse the Promised Land. Instead, she was seduced by the lively (perhaps crazy) nature of dysfunctional family life among the Canaanite gods and goddesses. She was curious about their fighting and sex and drinking and

procreating. Of course, she professed to be appalled at all of the idolatry and immorality, just as we so often say about things in our world. But it also intrigued and attracted her like any good temptation will. So, yes, the people of Israel forgot they were loved by God and chosen to bear witness to God by how they worshiped and lived among the Canaanites. But the more they forgot that and the less they depended on their covenant God, the messier their lives became.

It's important to get the hint right at verse 1 already which tells us the people moved from Gilgal to Bokim. God's covenant promises at Gilgal are forgotten. Now the Lord meets the people in *Bokim* which means *weepers*. And that's a sign of what will happen over and over in this book. The angel of the Lord announces judgement on God's people for their waywardness, their idolatry that has made a mess of them and nearly snuffed out the light God intends for his people to bear in Canaan. In Judges 2:2, God describes what Israel did wrong.

*Jud 2:2 and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?*

Can you hear the pain in God's voice? "Why have you done this?" Why have you disobeyed? *You have made covenants with the people of the land and not broken down their idol altars.* The basis of this disobedience is forgetfulness.

There is a repeating cycle of forgetfulness in this book where the Bokim-weepers cry out to the Lord. Listen for that refrain as you read through this book in the coming weeks. When the people's lives have gotten messy because of their disobedience, they cry out. Over and over we find something like, "Then the people cried out to the Lord."

One of the signs of forgetfulness we find in the book of Judges is Israel worshiping idols—false gods summarized as *the Baals and the Ashtoreths*. A clear example of how this looked on a practical level is found in the last verses we read from chapter 3. Look at vs. 5 & 6 and I'll read it from a slightly different translation:

*Jud 3:5 ...the Israelites settled among the Canaanites,...<sup>6</sup> they took their daughters for themselves as wives and gave their daughters to their sons, and served their gods.<sup>7</sup> Thus the Israelites did what was unacceptable in Yahweh's eyes. They put Yahweh their God out of mind and served the Baals and the Asherahs.*

Israel gave into idolatry little by little as she lived among the Canaanites. She watered down her relationship with God and intermarried with the Canaanites.

Think about ourselves now for a moment. If you grew up in a Christian home or if have been walking with the Lord for some time, you know about the importance of keeping your relationship with God growing and healthy. So, would you say that you are as devoted to the Lord as your parents were? Or are you more devoted now than you were 5 years ago? Are you keeping covenant with our covenant-keeping God? Or are you forgetting? Are we slowly bowing more and more to the gods of the culture we are surrounded by?

Have we gotten soft on sin and intermarried with our culture? Baal was the fertility god of the Canaanites. They prayed to him for good crops and prosperity. The Canaanites had a god for just about everything. But like our society, their primary concerns were economic and security. They had fertility gods because they wanted good crops so they could eat and trade. They wanted to live a life free from war, even though that was a pretty faint hope in those days. So, they at least wanted to appease the gods who might give them prosperity and peace. And, quite honestly, intermarriage was one strategy used to promote peace between nations.

It's challenging as Christians to live in a secular society like we do. Everyone around us is focused on their own prosperity, while God calls us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. However, the push in our society is to move farther and farther away from biblical morality. We increasingly face hostility from people who hold that we have "old fashioned" ethics or moral standards. The push is for "intermarriage", you might say, of all beliefs so that biblical authority and morality gets watered down.

I was watching a movie with Patsy recently. It struck me how mainstream it is in our world for a man and woman to have sex after just one or two dates. That's today's morality. In this movie, a Jewish mother discovers that her son is not only having sex while dating, which, of course, Jewish moral law forbids, she also discovers that he's having it with a Gentile, which is probably even worse in her mind. As the movie goes on, however, the mother drops her standards, doesn't make a big deal of premarital sex and even gives up on the need for her son to marry within his own religion. Her son has forgotten his faith but so has she. This is all painted as perfectly good and right compromise. We all must water down our religion and morality to the lowest common denominator.

That was the compromise in the book of Judges as well. The real issue then is that God's people are not merely committing adultery or dropping moral standards. It's that they are committing idolatry, worshiping at the altars of the Canaanites gods, forsaking the Lord God who saved them. Their lives become messier and messier as they give in to Canaanite religions and practices. They move themselves from the security of life under God's covenant into a place where they end up in tears—Bokim-weepers, who finally cry to God for help as their lives fall apart.

Israel forgot what the Lord had done for them in earlier generations. And we are prone to forgetting as well. We forget what Jesus has rescued us from, we take God's grace for granted and we begin to live without regard for what our Lord and Saviour tells us in his word. We bow slowly but surely to the gods of our day and live like the people of our culture. This is the power of forgetting. It leads to messiness and Bokim—weeping and tears.

How have we moved from Gilgal-devotion to Bokim-messiness and tears? Think of yourself. Where have you compromised on God's standards once or all the time?

The Bible talks about God as the Potter and people as the clay. We are formed like pots in the service of the master. But as we wander from God, bow to

the idols of our culture, we are making a mess of our lives. We become like broken clay pots. Our lives are shattered by sin. SMASH. How often don't you hear broken people talk about picking up the pieces? We all know that sin results in messiness. God wants to spare us from such messes, so he makes a covenant with us and says, "don't get mixed up with or married to the ways of the Canaanites—our culture. Stick close to me and live by my word to you." When we forget, life gets messy.

## The Power of God's Mercy

As much as Judges shows us the power of our forgetting, it especially teaches us about the power of God's mercy. That's why it's so important for us to remember what the Lord Jesus has done for us. Yes, he did it already many generations ago, but he did it for us.

Therefore, it's vital that we keep teaching this from generation to generation. We need our Lord Jesus as much as any other generation in history. The power of our forgetting can only be overcome by the power of God's mercy.

The book of Judges is the story of God not giving up on his rebellious and messy people. He turned to them in mercy, to call them back to himself by sending judges. These judges were the rulers of the various tribes within Israel. Rather than leaving the Israelites in their sinfulness and moral mess, the Lord God gets his hands dirty to help us. I have three very quick points here about God's mercy. Well, two quick ones, anyway 😊.

First of all, we see in our reading that the Lord saw Israel's disobedience and the messes they made of their lives by going their own way. So in his mercy, *he disciplined them*. V.14 explains that the Lord handed them over to their enemies. Another way of saying that is that he left them to reap the results of their idolatry and immorality—messy, broken lives—until they came to their senses and cried out to him.

Secondly, in his mercy, he used their choices to test them. We read this in 2:22, 3:1 and 3:4. God allows Israel's enemies to test them. God amazingly uses the very things that draw us away from him to test us. Tests aren't designed for God to see how we are doing. He knows that. Rather, they draw us back to God, move us toward repentance and make us stronger for the next time we face temptation. Tests are a wake-up call! You can't serve other gods because they only produce messiness—brokenness—in your life. But you can trust God to make you strong and help you overcome the enemies. God is merciful in these tests.

Then, thirdly and most importantly, we read that each time Israel cried out, the Lord sent a judge. Chapter 2:15 speaks of Israel's coming to terms with her sinfulness and says,

*Jud 2:15 ... They were in great distress.*

*<sup>16</sup> Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them....*

God gives mercy when his people cry out and sends a judge. Judge means deliverer. The judges came with a message from God and they often fought back the enemy. Othneil killed the king of Aram. Ehud killed Eglon king of Moab. In Deborah's time, Jabin—another Canaanite enemy—was killed. And most of us know the stories of Samson killing thousands of Philistines. These judges themselves had pretty messy lives at times. But the Lord used what was available to accomplish his purposes in redeeming his messy people and bringing them closer to himself. His covenant love keeps mercifully pursuing his broken people.

In the fullness of time, however, God did not have to use broken judges to deliver his messy people. He sent his Son to be the perfect Judge, a righteous and holy leader. Jesus stepped into our messes, God in the flesh. He gets involved in the messiness of our world. He is a true man who lived a righteous life, fully dependent on the strength he received from walking in the Spirit—the same Spirit who empowered the ancient judges. However, Jesus does more than deliver us from a Canaanite enemy. He delivers us from the power of our Satan and sin. He saves us from condemnation. He restores us to right relationship with his Father, our covenant God. And he gives us the grace to live by God's word.

Friends, Jesus isn't just about saving us in the hereafter. He redeems us to live in covenant faithfulness with God already now. He helps us clean up the messes in our lives that bowing to sin and the gods of our day have created. He helps us kill off the sinful desires of our hearts and to stop the downward spirals we fall into. He fills us with the Holy Spirit and empowers us to live a new life. He turns the messes of our past to our good and the good of his kingdom.

Clearly, the book of Judges is calling us to rest in the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. But it's also calling us to seek his mercy and help to live by God's commands for us. That involves teaching the next generation about God's goodness and mercy. We must model covenant living.

To that end, we must help our children see the idols of our culture. We must be biblically informed so we see where we are bowing to the modern gods of consumerism, pluralism, hedonism and so many others. Only then can we help our children become discerning as well.

The Activities Director at Calvin University, Ken Heffner, explains, "Often when Christians attempt to engage with popular culture, they either baptize or wholesale condemn it. Neither option is helpful." An approach is needed where popular culture is taken seriously and explored with a biblical ear and eye.

I was reading articles from a young man who knows a lot more about this than I do. How many parents today know that your kids are apparently listening to Roddy Ricch's song, *The Box*? It is apparently one of the most popular songs Canadian and American young people are consuming on Spotify these days. If you're a parent of teens and don't know about Spotify, you're really out of the loop. And if you don't know about Roddy Ricch, you should probably find out. His song *The Box* is so profane I can't find one verse that I can quote here. It's just an example of how, as parents, you need to help your kids navigate this crazy culture

they live in. We can't take them out of the world. We need to help them discern our world so they can find God's mercy today and be a light in the world that points people to a greater reality where Christ is King of our lives. That means we have to live that out in our homes.

We must, for example, watch our children's online activity. Check their phones and let them know you'll be doing that from time to time. It might tick them off. But that's okay. I believe that's a form of being merciful as well as wise and loving. You need to be aware of what your children are doing and listening to so you can help them navigate the challenges and temptations of our world, of their culture. That's our job as parents. You need to talk with them about sex, sexual identity issues and so much more. Make sure you can give them biblical answers. Don't leave that to society at large. It's your job. Help them understand the perspectives of God's kingdom. And if you need help, you can ask people around you. We covenant to help one another in training our children in the fear of the Lord. We're in this together.

The people of Israel uncritically adopted the religions and the lifestyle of the Canaanites and they were sucked in—intermarried—and didn't even realize it until their lives got messy. Then they cried out to the Lord who came in mercy.

We serve this same mercifuln gratefulness and confidence, then, let us recommit ourselves to doing life in the way our Lord Jesus instructs and in the strength of his Holy Spirit. Let us live in the power of God's amazing covenant promises to us and our children. And let us always remember the power of God's mercy for us when we fail and especially as we strive to live for him in this messy world.