

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

Dr. Bill Mounce

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12. Judges

This morning we're going to look at the book of Judges. Let's pray: Father, there are passages in Scripture that are joyous and exciting and there are other passages that are dark and scary. And this certainly is one of those passages because in the book of Judges we see your disgust of sin and what happens when the next generation doesn't renew their commitment to you. Father, we pray that as we go out from here this morning that we'll not go out guilt-ridden and heavy hearted but that we'll go out with a full awareness of what you have called us to do with excitement and joy in our hearts that we get to be part of preparing the next generation of believers. We pray, Father, that as we look at the negative example in Judges we will also see the positive example that can happen here. In your name we pray, Amen.

I. Covenant Renewal Ceremony

The book of Joshua, the one right before Judges, ends with something called a covenant renewal ceremony. In Joshua Chapter 24, Joshua gathers all the tribes of Israel together at a place called Shechem and starting in 24:1, Joshua starts to recount all the wonderful and amazing and awesome things that God did starting with Abraham to create the nation of Israel, to preserve it, to bring it out of Egypt, to fight for it, and to give it a land. And in Joshua 24, starting with verse 12, Joshua's summarizing what he's been saying and he writes, "It was not by your sword or by your bow, I (meaning God) gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built and you dwelt in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and all of orchards that you did not plant." God truly was the warrior, who fought the battle and gave the Promised Land to the descendants of Abraham, did he not? But then look how it continues, and this is the covenant renewal part, "Now therefore, (in other words, in light of what God has done for you), fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and faithfulness, put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the river (meaning the Jordan River) and in Egypt and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the regions beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in the land in which you dwell, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Joshua is calling his generation to covenant renewal. He has recounted how God has kept his part of the covenant, that he has committed himself to this generation and Joshua in turn is calling his generation to renew the covenant to commit themselves to God as their covenantal God. Now there's nothing new in this covenant renewal business. It's been going on as far back as Isaac and Jacob and it seems that in just about every generation God renews his commitment to that generation. He promises to be their God if they will be his people. And so, from the people's side of things, their part of the renewal ceremony is to commit themselves to God as their covenantal God in faithful obedience. It's not enough for parents to commit themselves to God whether that parent be Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or Bill and Robin. It's not just enough for the parents, but rather each generation, our sons and our daughters, must make the commitment for themselves. That's covenant renewal. And so, as Joshua 24 continues, Joshua calls them to commit themselves and they promise that God will be their God, that Yahweh will be their God and that they will be his people and the covenant is renewed.

You know, there are many things that we pass onto our children genetically, don't we? We can pass on our personalities, both the good parts and the quirky parts. We can pass on our pronated ankles and our tendency to sleepwalk as I did to my children. There are things that we can pass on to the next generation, but there is one thing that we cannot and will not pass on to the next generation and that is our faith. Faith is not genetic. I cannot pass my faith on to my children or to your children. I can teach them, I can nurture, I can encourage, but I can't automatically transfer my faith to my children. Faith isn't genetic. There's no family plan when it comes to salvation. And Hayden will not go to heaven because his dad is going to heaven. But each one of our sons and each one of our daughters, each generation, must make their own commitment, must renew their parents' covenantal relationship with Yahweh, their God. Faith isn't genetic. Among other things this certainly explains the emphasis on teaching children. It's been all the way through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. If you've been reading passages, especially ones that we've not been looking at, you will have seen time and time again the injunctions to teach your children. Set up a pile of stones and when your sons ask, "What do those stones stand for?" Say, "That was when God did this. They are stones of remembrance." This message has been all the way through the early part of the Old Testament, but just for example, one passage is the Shema back in Deuteronomy. Do you remember that? "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might." And then how did Moses continue? Deuteronomy 6 starting at verse 6, "And these words that I command you today shall be on your hearts. You shall teach them diligently to your children. You shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." The Jewish nation was being taught that it wasn't enough for them to be faithfully obedient, but it was of paramount importance that they teach their children day in and day out about the ways of the Lord. So, when it comes time for the children to renew the covenant, they will in fact do so.

This is why I encourage you so much of the time that when you get together and you have your crock pot and you invite a new guest over after Sunday or even when you're sitting around the dinner table, talk about sports talk about the weather if you really want to, but please, move on to something that's important, really important. And talk to your children about the covenant and talk to your children about God and what he has for us and what he expects from us. To train up our children (Deuteronomy 6), that's why I've been encouraging so much to do that. Now I know that some of the children here are from families where maybe only one parent is a Christian or maybe neither of them are Christians but almost all of us were. Let me get my words right here. When the Lord drew us to himself, he almost always did it through someone else, didn't he? There was a Sunday School teacher, or a V.B.S. teacher, or someone at camp, or a neighbor, or a parent that shared their faith with you and with me. And when you and I became disciples of Jesus Christ to some degree our faith in Jesus was tied up in the character of the person who shared, right? I mean, how much can a six or seven-year-old understand? And when my kids became Christian, a large part of it was because Mom and Dad were Christians. But there will come a time in everyone's life, and I watched this when I taught in university for ten years, there will come a time in which people will say, "You know this Jesus stuff was good for mom and dad, but is it

right for me?" And every one of us should go through that process of making the decision for ourselves. It usually happens in college, I discovered, when they will say, "Is this my faith?" See, that's covenant renewal. That's taking our parents' faith and making it our own. And that's what going on in the end of the book of Joshua: the call to covenant renewal.

II. Judges

So, the stage is now set for life in the Promised Land, the stage is now set for life after Joshua. And we move into the book of Judges and Charles Dickens first line in *The Tale of Two Cities* is probably the best title for the book of Judges. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

A. The Best of Times

It was the best of times, Judges Chapter 2, verse 7, "And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel." This was a great generation and in light of what I'm going to say in just a minute, it's really important that you hear this up front. This was a great generation. If you look at all the generations that came before and after, this generation I think more than any other generation understood what covenantal faithful obedience meant. They understood what it meant to love God and to love one another. This was a great generation in the history of the Israelite nation. And so, as you start reading in Judges, you'll see the tribes of Judah and Simeon get together to work together to finish the conquest of the land. You read about Jerusalem being captured by the tribe of Benjamin. You see this great start after Joshua of finishing the conquest of the land. It was a great time.

B. The Worst of Times

But you don't have to read very far to realize how quickly, and that's the amazing thing in the book of Judges I think, how quickly it became the worst of times. Look at Judges 2, verse 10, please, "And all that generation (the generation of Joshua) also were gathered to their fathers (so they all died) and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel." In one generation knowledge of God is lost. It only took one generation. It actually started a little bit earlier than that. Flip back, please, to Judges Chapter 1 verse 19. They're talking about Judah, a great generation, a good tribe, finishing the conquest of their land. Verse 19, "And the Lord was with Judah and he took possession of the hill country but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron." That is not an historical statement. That is a judgment on the lack of faith. The God who parted the waters of the Red Sea is defeated by chariots of iron? I don't think so. I don't think so. Something is already going on. The lack of faith is starting to come out already because God promised to fight and to give the land for them if they would be faithful. But already they're starting to fail in their task. Look down at verse 21, please. The people of Benjamin are talking about conquering Jerusalem, "For the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem. The Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day." And then in verse 27 to the end of the chapter, the author lays out all the other failures of the Israelite nation. How quickly this great generation failed to do what God had called them to do. They did not complete God's

punishments of the Amorites, they co-mingled with the people, and as we see very quickly they start worshipping the Amorites' gods. And you have this downward spiral that really kicks into gear in Chapter 2 and continues through almost the entire book of Judges until you get to the very last verse in the very last chapter where the author says that "everyone did right in his own eyes."

So, the knowledge of God, the knowledge of Yahweh has been lost. The commitment to be faithfully obedient to his ways has been lost. And instead of letting Yahweh, God, determine what is right and what is wrong, everyone's doing what they want to do. That's not an historical statement. This is not a discussion of political anarchy. It's the discussion of a lack of faith and the destruction that that leads to. They didn't train their children. They didn't listen to the verse following the Shema. And they didn't talk about it at the dinner table. They didn't write it on their hands, they didn't write it on their doorposts. They didn't train their children for covenant renewal. And in one generation, one, the knowledge of God is lost. And this downward spiral accelerates. But not only do the next generations fall quickly, they fall far. If you've read much on Amorite or Canaanite or Philistine religion you can see how absolutely, there isn't a word in the English language or any of the languages, of how bad their religion was. It was disgusting to the core. These people worshipped Baal who was the chief fertility God. He granted, they thought, fertility to the land and to people. And his chief consort was Asherah. And it was a horrible religion. You remember Deuteronomy 12:31 Moses tells them every abominable thing that the Lord hates they've done them. And that certainly is true. The Canaanites worshipped idols; they worshipped false gods, including the sacrifice of children. If you read Leviticus 18 you can see the depth of the sexual depravity that these people had gone to and the sexual depravity was not just everyday life, it was religious life. Religion and culture were all wrapped up and the perversions of Leviticus 18 were the religious perversions of the Amorite religions of homosexuality and incest and bestiality. But I think this got driven home to me harder than any other time a couple of years ago I was in New Orleans for some meetings and I went, and I wasn't on Bourbon Street, I wasn't in one of the bad areas of town. I was in a good area of town, went in to a regular store looking for some knickknacks or something, and I went in and I was absolutely amazed. I was looking at a bunch of carved figurines and the carved figurines I was looking at in New Orleans two years ago were identical to the pictures of the Canaanite idols that I had seen in archeology textbooks. Figurines with grossly exaggerated sexual organs because that's what their religion was. Now as I look at some of these things and I think about how bad the Amorites are, it's hard to imagine that we're not far behind them as a nation here. Sexual perversions of homosexuality, incest and bestiality, worshipping idols and worshipping sex, maybe we're not that far behind.

But the Israelites not only fell quickly, they fell hard from a marvelous monotheistic worship of a pure God separate from sin, into the sexual depravity of the Amorites worship. And what you have in Judges then, is a series of cycles. And almost all the cycles are the same. And there are four parts to it. The passage starts off with the author saying something like, "that the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." And in almost every case if not every case, the evil was worshipping Baal. Secondly, what God then does is that he sends an enemy nation to punish them. Sometimes he sends the Midianites, sometimes he sends the Philistines, and sometimes he sends other people. And the enemy people oppress the children of Israel. And then thirdly, the

Israelites finally call out in repentance, they call out for God to help them. And then fourthly, what God does is he sends a judge. He sends an individual who will lead them into battle, who will conquer the enemy and then that person, that judge will lead the Israelite nation for the rest of his or her life. And so, we have the judges of Othniel and Ehud, Deborah, Jephthah, Samson, Gideon and we don't have time to go into any of their detailed stories, but if you want to read one I'd encourage you to read the story of Gideon in Chapter 6, 7, and 8. The Midianites were oppressing Israel; they come in every year and raided the harvest. They cry out after seven years, God raises up Gideon and defeats the Midianites and gives the land rest. See, this is a cycle, and as soon as Gideon is dead, they start sinning again. They do what is evil in God's sight and they worship Baal.

But that's the cycle that goes all the way through the book of Judges. Of worshipping other gods, of God sending punishment, of people repenting and then God sending a judge to bring them out from foreign oppression. Judges is a dark, dark book literarily and theologically speaking. It's supposed to be a dark book because it shows what happens when you abandon God that no matter how strong one generation is, if the next generation has abandoned God as they fall into sin, what happened in Judges will happen to us as well. Now there are a few bright spots in Judges, not many, but a few. Perhaps one of the strongest images of a forgiving God can be found in Judges because no matter how repeatedly the Israelites sin, and no matter how heinous their sins are, God in his mercy and his grace is always there to forgive if the repentance is true. So, there are some bright lights in the book of Judges, but it's a dark book and a dark book intentionally.

III. Necessity of Covenant Renewal

Of the many lessons, though, that Judges teaches us, there's one that I really wanted to emphasize this morning. And that is the necessity of covenant renewal. Joshua calls the next generation to renew their commitment to Yahweh, the covenantal God, but they failed to teach the next generation and Judges describes what happens when no matter how good the first generation is, how quickly the next generation can fail. That's what the book of Judges is all about. Faith is not genetic, is it? It's not genetic. Every generation must make up its own mind. Each person, each son, each daughter, must make up their own mind as to whether they will renew the covenant of their parents. I remember as a kid the movie that was going around was called "For Pete's Sake." It's stuck in my mind because I can still remember the guy saying, 'Well, I'm going to get to heaven on the family plan.' There is no family plan. I cannot transfer my faith to you, to my sons or to my daughter. Each generation must renew the covenant for themselves, must make their own commitment to God. Judges is the picture of what happens when the covenant isn't renewed. Judges is here to show us that if the covenant is not renewed by our children, that if our children do what is right in their own eyes, then quickly our children will co-mingle worship with the Baals of this world and eventually will give themselves totally to Baal. Whatever Baal happens to look like in Spokane in 2003.

That's what the book of Judges is telling us. I mean, we all know of churches, not to pick on other churches, but we all know of churches, don't we, that started strong and ended weak. We all know of churches where the first generation were godly people, heavily

committed to their Lord, but they failed to train the next generation of believers. And when that set of leaders pass on, just as they do in Judges 2, when the next generation comes to leadership, surprise, surprise, surprise. They don't make the covenant renewal that they needed to. I love this generation. We're doing everything we can, but life is a cycle, and the book of Judges should scare the living daylights out of you of how quickly the children can leave the faith of their parents. As much as it depends on us, we must be committed to raising up the next generation of believers.

A. Responsibility of Older Generation

And for our part, what does that look like? Well, there's a long list but certainly we have to start by teaching our children. And teaching always starts at home, doesn't it? If we have your children for two hours a week, we can't combat this world. All that we can do is come alongside you and help what you are doing in your home around your dinner table. And we must commit to teaching our children at home. We must commit to talking to them about polytheism and what it looks like. We must commit to them to talk about monotheism and what that looks like, and what it looks like not to serve American Baals. We need to start the discussions and say, "Do you really believe in one God? What are the competing gods on the internet, and on television, and in the movies, and in your neighborhood, and in your schools? What does Baal look like today?" That's an easy one - he's the fertility god. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out what Baal looks like today. To not serve American Asherah poles, but to serve the one God and him only. That's where it has to start, doesn't it? That's what our commitment has to be if we are truly to raise up the next generation of believers. We have to continue to accept the responsibility of teaching our children at home around the dinner table constantly, having it on our lips, coming out of our mouths, written on the frontlets between our eyes (and I don't even know what a frontlet is), written on our doorposts (Deuteronomy 6).

You know the great commission is to teach someone to obey. How do you teach someone to obey? "Now you do this, and you do that..." That isn't going to work with me; I don't think it worked with you either. The only way to teach obedience is to model it, right? The only way to model it is to spend time. It takes our time. Sometimes I think the greatest sin is our busyness because if you're so busy you don't have any margin; you can't do anything. You can't model, you can't serve, you can't teach, you can't encourage because we're so stinking busy with life. There were three men that were absolutely critical in the development of me as a person. Mr. Cornforth was my third-grade teacher. Turns out he was Roger Maris's best friend as an ex-New York Yankee. I always wondered why Mr. Cornforth could hit the softball out of the playfield. Mr. Munson was my fifth-grade Sunday School teacher. Mr. Eberly was my seventh-grade school teacher. I went to a Christian school in seventh grade. And Mr. Cornforth and Mr. Eberly, while they were committed to me as my teachers, went way beyond I'm sure, what they were being paid. And they took an interest in me and they wanted to nurture me as a person. And especially Mr. Eberly nurtured me in my faith. Mr. Munson was there every Sunday prepared for Sunday School. We spent time at his house. Why? Because he was modeling godliness to the next generation. And Mr. Monson understood that that is the only way that you can really help children of the next generation prepare to renew their covenantal commitments to their God. It takes time. We have to be desperate in prayer for them. It's an ugly world they're growing up

in, isn't it? I mean, you all in college are facing things that I never dreamt of in college, even on a Christian campus. My kids are being faced with things whether it's the Internet or the man down on the corner. I'm not thinking of any particular man on the corner in my neighborhood, but the proverbial man on the corner. Man, they want to destroy my kids and they've got the drugs, and they've got the pornography to do it just like that. It's an ugly world and if we are not dedicated to praying for them, it's not going to work. We have to understand that this is difficult. I mean, this list can go on and on and I don't want to depress you, I want to encourage you. But it's difficult to do this. It's really easy to say, "Come and hear Bill preach these things and go home." But that's not the kind of church we've committed to be. We've committed to be a family church, and that's difficult. It's difficult because it's costly. This expansion program we're working on is because we don't have the facilities necessary to do what we feel we should be doing for the children in this church. So, it's costly. We're going to have to continue to be flexible. Truth is truth, it does not change, and in essence our praise will always stay the same. We will always declare who God is and what he has done, but the forms of that praise are going to change. Sorry! It's just inevitable. We will be a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks and that means our outward forms and expressions are going to have to change as we strive to teach the eternal truths of God. We will be stretched outside our comfort zones.

I went to a great church down in California when I was on vacation. It's called "Rock Harbor" and let me tell you, it was rockin'! It was moving and it was shaking, all four thousand of them, average age 25. Didn't see one observer in the entire church. Everyone was participating in worship. They have learned to communicate God's eternal truths with Costa Mesa. But the outward forms are going to change; they have to change if we are going to stand true to our commitment to prepare the next generation of believers. For our children's part, they have it a lot easier. Their time will come. But they have to be challenged, and they will be challenged with the understanding that they must renew their parents' covenant for themselves. That each one of them is going to be called to make a decision for himself or for herself at some point in time in his or her life. And our prayers that as individual parents and as members of this family of God, that we will have done what we could to encourage and to instruct and to challenge the next generation of believers.

I have an object lesson I'd like to close with this morning in. I trust that you will not think it's theatrical; it's not intended to be. But I wanted to put flesh and bones behind what we are talking about. Rick, are they down? Come on in. I want you to see the objects of your commitment. I want you to not see these as numbers, but as precious lives who will spend eternity in either heaven or hell. And God has put us in the position to have a hand in that whole process. They kind of know why they are here. They're not completely sure. We had 100 people first hour from kindergarten up through twelfth grade and in order to join this throng, if you are in first grade going up through college, and if you consider Shiloh Hills Fellowship your home church, I would like you to stand up please. These are the objects of the book of Judges in our lives, you all. To those of you who are standing, I want to tell you that there will come a time in your life, perhaps it already has come. There will come a time in your life in which you are going to have to decide for yourself whether Jesus is to be your Jesus or not. There will come a time in your life where you'll have to decide Yahweh is your God and whether you will follow him or not. There will come a time in which just because Mom and Dad are Christians doesn't mean that that's right for you. And you will have to

make that decision. And our prayer for each one of you standing is that the Shema will become your own statement of faith. I've been in churches where kids aren't welcome so they can talk all they want and I just love it. Our prayer for each one of you is that someday you will say, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and I will love the Lord My God with all my heart, and all my soul, and all my strength." That's our prayer for each one of you who are standing. We thank you so much that God has sent you to us to be a part of our family. Will everyone else please stand? Those who are standing are the current, for the most part, the current adult generation. This is Joshua's generation and the book of Joshua calls me to ask you: will you make the commitment necessary, so that as far as it depends upon you, that the book of Judges will not describe this next generation. Will you agree with the verses following the Shema that this is your commitment to this, the next generation? If it is your commitment, then I'd like to close this morning and have all of us read together Deuteronomy 6:6-9 as a commitment to the next generation. Will you please read with me, "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." My prayer is that that is our commitment to the next generation.

Let's pray: Father, we understand that in your mercy and your grace you hold out the offer of forgiveness and salvation to us that one by one you call us and you say, "I will be your God, will you be part of my people?" We understand, God, that while we are saved into the family of God, we walk through the door one person at a time. And my mom can't walk through with me, my dad can't walk through with me, Mr. Eberly can't walk through the door with me. That's my decision; it's Tyler's and Kiersten's, and Hayden's and Ryan's and Brent's. It's every one of these young adults and children's' decision. Father, we pray that you will encourage us to be a kind of church where Judges has absolutely no place in this description of sin. May everything we do be pleasing to you both in this generation and in the generations to come. Amen.