

The Story of the Judges
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November 15, 2009

Sometimes the point of a story is what is *not* in the story. Sometimes the main thing about the story is what is missing in the story. Some of your lives are that way—the main point of your story to this stage of life is what's not in the story, and the main thing about your story right now is what's missing. Sometimes the main point of a story is what is not in the story.

Give you an example, and this is what we're gonna focus on today...a story within a story. We've been looking at the great story of God's redemption from the beginning to the end in scripture. And within that story you come upon the story of the judges. Right after Israel entered into the promised land there is a space of about four hundred years where they existed in the land, the Promised Land, the place that God had called them to, and they existed there as a loose confederation of tribes. There was no central point of government, there was no central place of capital, there was no central leader. They existed as this confederation of tribes with tribal leaders in each one of 'em. And they would respond to situations and deal with situations as they gathered together as a confederation, as a group of tribes. They had the law of God on one hand; they had the priests of God to guide them in the ways of God; and they existed as His confederation of tribes—God's people in the Promised Land.

As you go into that story there's something you will find missing. There is something that is not in the story. And we're going to get to that in a bit, but what you will find is very definite. You will find a consistent pattern in the story, something that is repeated over and over. The pattern is introduced to us in Judges chapter 2, verses 11 through 17. And I will encourage you to turn in your Bibles there, because I'm gonna read these six verses out loud in a moment. It'll give you a sense of the pattern that is there. When you're in the book of Judges it's a little bit of an odd book to get started in. It reminds me of launching kayaks in a contrary surf, and you're out there and it's bouncin' around and it's hard to jump in. Once you're out on the water you can get into a paddling rhythm and you can go forward on your journey, but launching is difficult. And the book of Judges is like that. The opening two-and-a-half chapters are kind of choppy, and they're awkwardly put together. And so getting into that book is a little bit awkward, but once you're in it the pattern is there and you get into the rhythm of the stories. So what I'm gonna do is just pull six verses out of that initial beginning that will give you a sense of what the pattern is going to be as you get into the story. Remember, this is after Joshua, the great leader who had brought them into the Promised Land, has died. In fact, the whole generation that had been with Joshua coming out of the Promised Land and had conquered it and had established their role in Palestine, in Canaan, had passed away. And we're told at verse 11 that this next generation, we're told in verse 11, that the sons of Israel...this is that next generation after Joshua...

The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and they served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. So they forsook the LORD and they served Baal and the Ashtaroth. And the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them [as He had warned them generations before], so that they were severely distressed.

And then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers.

The rest of the chapter goes on to explain that pattern a little more, and then describes how God eventually just let them be. He says, 'I am not gonna take you out of this; I'm not gonna solve the problem here. You, each generation, are gonna have to deal with this until you get it.' It's a pattern established, and it follows all the way through the book of Judges as you go on. Go a little further in this chapter...actually you drop down to chapter 3...and I'll read you the shortest kind of following of that description of it. It says in verse 6...and this is describing a specific instance of what the writer has just talked about...it says

...they took their daughters for themselves...

Excuse me, verse 5...

The sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and they gave their own daughters to their sons, and they served their gods.

So the Israelites went after these other gods.

They did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and they forgot the LORD God and they served the Baals and the Asheroth.

And then, we're told,

The anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served (I can't pronounce it twice [Cushan-rishathaim]) eight years. And when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

And then verse 12, first line...

Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD.

That's the pattern, first described and then an example, and it's repeated over and over in the book. We have them...first of all, they forsake the LORD. They serve Baal and the Ashtaroath. Those are the names of two of the favorite gods that the Israelites found when they came into Canaan. There was some seventy gods in Canaan that were being worshipped at that time. These were the two that stood out to the Israelites. They are used in different terminology—Baal or Baals. It can be referred to in singular or plural. The Ashtaroath is a plural term for the goddess Astarte. Out of the seventy gods, these were the two gods that the people of Israel responded to. There was a reason for that. The god Baal was a god of the storm. He was a god that had control over the water and the rain. And in a semi-arid land like that you wanted to be in right relationship with the god who controlled the faucet. The goddess Astarte—she was the goddess of war and love. She was a god that, if you pleased her, there would be fertility in your family and your flocks. And when you went to battle you wanted her on your side. They were husband and wife in the theology of Canaan, and they were worshipped. And the worship of these two was marked by pleasure. No sitting around listening to preaching. No long prayers. No uncomfortable chairs. At the heart of the worship of these two deities was sex. They actually turned the sexual act into an act of worship in their centers of worship. So, these were the gods you wanted for family, for flocks, for field, and for fighting. And it was pure joy to serve them. And so the Israelites slipped into idolatry. They began to worship false gods.

We need to be careful here, because this is the worst of sins. We need to make sure we understand it and what goes on in this sin. You see, in the religion of Canaan Baal was represented by large pillars; and they would be posted in different places. And you would put it on one mountain or one city and you would call it Baal of that particular city, or the Baal of that particular mountain. But you would have that pillar and you would worship Baal there. Astarte was represented by figurines, female figurines of exaggerated proportions. And we tend to think well that's what idolatry is...pillars of stone on mountains and figurines of women on the mantle. That is idolatry, but it's only one form of it. See, the Bible warns us that idolatry can come up when we just begin to worship a false idea of God. It's not a figurine, it's not a pillar—we just have our own idea of what God really is and that's the God we worship. Not the God of scripture; the God we've kind of put together in our own mind.

And then the Bible indicates it doesn't even have to be focused on a god to be idolatry. The Bible tells us we can become so attached to possessions and to money that they become our false god. There's a definition for a false god that I like. Ashley's the one who kinda introduced me to it. He came across it with another pastor. And the term is this; the phrasing is this—it's to have another 'functional savior'. It's to have something or someone else that you rely on. And I wanna indicate, I wanna underscore, that we're talking about a 'functional savior', one that you really rely on. You see, the Canaanites really never...I mean, excuse me...the Israelites really never totally denied Yahweh, the God of Israel. 'He's there, yeah! He rescued our parents. And you know what? If we ever

have to cross the Red Sea again with the Pharaoh after us we may call on him. But right now today, with the flocks in mating season, we're gonna go worship Astarte. With the crops needing rain we're gonna go to Baal. They worked for our neighbors; they'll probably work for us.' A 'functional savior'—anyone or anything that we rely on other than God...and I alliterate the next part just so it's easier to stay with you...for our security, our sense of confidence that we're ok and we're safe; anything other than God that we rely on, our soul rests upon for our success; what we look to to define success and help us achieve it; anything other than God or anyone other than God that we look to for satisfaction, that will give us joy; and lastly, anyone or anything we look to for significance, that makes us feel like we matter, that makes us feel like in this great universe somebody notices us, that makes us understand that we have some worth. Anything other than God that we rely on, our soul relies on, for that sense of security, success, satisfaction, or significance is a functional savior, is an idol.

This is so important that I'm gonna stop for a moment and we're gonna be diagnostic. This is such a serious, prevalent sin! You know, they teach men and women how to self-diagnose for early signs of cancer. I wanna teach you how to self-diagnose for early signs of idolatry. So walk through this with me. Is your sense of security and well-being and confidence, your peace going into the next week, built upon your relationship with God? And I don't mean in a general, abstract way. 'Yeah, I asked Jesus into my heart and I'm goin' to heaven.' No. I mean is your sense of security and peace right here and now in the life you're facing built on your recognition and your response to the reality of God's presence in your life right now? Or is it resting on the fact that you live in Alaska and our economy is not as bad as the other places? Or you just got a check-up at the doctor's and you're cancer-free. What about your sense of success? Is your sense of success right now defined by and ensured by your relationship with God? In other words, it's in your responding and recognizing the reality of God's presence in your life right now that is defining for you what success is and ensuring that you reach it. Are you countin' on that new computer you got, with upgraded software? Or the fitness program you're in? Or the new technique you just discovered for your business? Or the fact that your kids are doin' well at school, and they're happy?

What about satisfaction? Is your contentment right now, if you have it, is your ability to say 'enough, I have all that I need', is your contentment, your peace, your satisfaction right now found in, rooted in, your relationship to God? That the greatest joy you have right now in your life is what is happening in the life-pattern of recognizing, responding to the reality of God's presence in your life? Is that where you are finding your joy? If you are finding joy somewhere else that is more exciting, more pleasurable, that you praise more loudly, that you talk about more frequently, then you're slippin' into idolatry.

And what about significance? There's a thing that makes you feel important, significant, like you matter, that you have value—is that rooted in the reality of this amazing relationship with God where you are able to recognize and respond and experience the reality of His presence in your life—is that what is giving you significance right now? Or is it the latest record you set in the state track meet? Or the fact that you just won an election?

Boy, this is takin' way longer than I thought it would. *I'm passionate about this.* Idolatry is when something or someone else other than our God, other than the wonder of recognizing, responding to His presence and reality in our life, when something other than that becomes our security, becomes our sense of success, becomes our sense of significance, it is where we find our joy...we have slipped into idolatry.

I've gone way too long on this. There's finished as a diagnostic. Let's get on with the story and I'm gonna set a record for speed from here on, ok? Hopefully you're ready to listen well. Alright?

LORD's reaction to that? His reaction to idolatry? His reaction to a people that would say, 'Guess what, God? We'll need you if we face the Red Sea again, but right now we got crops in the field. We're gonna go to Baal.' The anger of the LORD turned against Israel and He gave them into the hands of plunderers and enemies. He let 'em go. Interesting thing is they didn't always recognize that as the anger of the LORD. In fact, some of 'em got bitter about it and said 'the LORD's not livin' up to His deal'. In fact, they would go on and say, 'You know what? The LORD's kinda weak. These other gods these other kings serve—they must be the ones with the power.' What they didn't recognize, what they didn't realize, is the failures in their life, like many of us don't realize is the failures in our life, because we've identified with false gods and God has said, 'Go. I'll let you go.' And He would allow them to fall under the grip and under the power of these gods, whether it was, in our day, technology or the world of finance, or whatever it is begins to control us and oppress us and takes away our joy. And then the LORD, we're told...this is the next, third part of the pattern, the LORD would raise up judges who delivered them.

And that's the exciting part when you go through this story of Judges is these men that God raises up to deliver 'em. They're flawed men, but they are men of faith, and they make a difference. And you have everything from Gideon, who just astounds you, to Barak that has to be chased out to the war zone by Deborah. And then you've

got Samson the mighty warrior. They're all in there, and they're exciting stories. And you read em and it's just great, and you say, 'Wow! What a work of grace!' And it is a work of grace because the LORD does it simply out of His pity. If you notice in the pattern we just read it doesn't say they repented. See, they didn't always repent. But God would still intervene. And out of His great compassion, His great grace, He would send up and raise up a deliverer.

But the discouraging thing when you see that is we keep finding the repeated pattern. It came about when the judge died that they would turn back and they would act more corruptly than their fathers. Verse 19 goes on and describes how that went on, and builds on it and makes us see it clearly. In fact, what happens instead of these cycles, six cycles that are described in judges repeating over and over again, and things being at the same level at the end as they were at the start, we find when we go through the book of judges that it goes downhill. It goes downhill. And things don't get better in this story. And that's what leads very quickly to what we started with at the beginning. Sometimes the point of the story is not what is in the story, and what is not in the story of Judges is an answer. What is not in the story of Judges is a solution. What is not in the story of Judges is a happy ending. The last three or four chapters of the book of Judges are the darkest chapters, almost the darkest chapters in the Bible. I can think of one other section. They are grim. And you read through there and there is nothing good to see. It's not a happy ending.

You see, what's missing in this story, what is not there, is a deliverer who will not die. See, they would do well when these deliverers came. And they would have these individuals that would come along and they would inspire their faith. They would call them to obedience. And in that obedience they would experience and know God in a new way, and their hearts would be changed, and they would respond with a love and allegiance to God. But as soon as that deliverer would pass away and die they would begin to slip away. Their faith would fade, their obedience would stop, their knowledge of God would be completely gone, and their hearts would go cold and go after something else. There was no deliverer who could carry them decade after decade after decade after decade, generation after generation after generation after generation; and there was no deliverer of the heart. Sometimes the most important part about a story is what's not in the story. And in the story of Judges there's not a deliverer of the heart who will not die.

And now I'm gonna get very serious, as if I haven't been yet. For some of you, the point of your story so far in life is what's missing—a deliverer of your heart who will not die, a deliverer who can inspire you to faith, call you into a life of obedience; where you come to know and experience the wonder and the mystery of God's reality here and now. It engages your heart to love the LORD your God with all your heart, your mind, and your soul. You may have had a grandma, grandpa, a mom or a dad, an aunt or an uncle, a friend, a coworker that inspired you for fits and spurts of time. And they seem to really know God, and they loved Him. But there is in your life a deadness. And truth be told, your security, your success, and your significance, and your satisfaction has absolutely nothing to do with the richness and the wonder and the mystery of your response and your relationship to God in your everyday life. The thing that's missing is a deliverer who will not die.

And now I get to give you the good news. There is such a deliverer, a deliverer of the heart, who was brought into the world with the name Jesus because He is the One who will save His people from their sins, not their enemies but from their sins, their heart. And One who will not die. They tried, but He would not die. And that deliverer can enter into your story. You need only call out in faith. Now I'm gonna be specific here. A faith that's personal; a faith that says 'It isn't about my mom, my grandpa, my friends; I need You, Jesus, because I am an idolater without You.' It's personal. It is public. You openly acknowledge Him as your deliverer. That's what baptism's about. 'We wanna live our Christian life without ever tellin' anybody. We're really serious about Jesus.' You know what that's like? That's like getting married and not wanting to tell anybody you're married. And third, it's following with a faith that's not only personal, not only public, but is practical. You will actually do what He says to do. When Gideon said, 'Pick up the trumpets and blow 'em', they did. When Ehud said, 'Pick up the swords and go after the enemy', they did. When Jesus says...when Jesus says, 'Follow Me', you do.

For some of you, your story, the point of your story is what is not in the story—a deliverer named Jesus. Invite Him into your story and He will come.

I ask you to stand with me.

We feel very committed to this person named Jesus, as the One who really is the deliverer who can make the difference in our lives. He's the answer to us of an idolatrous heart. So as we go out this week into all the different places we are, and all the different people we see, let's go out with this prayer.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth; enjoy and extend that grace. Amen.