

Judges 2 Notes

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A SUMMARY OF ISRAEL'S FAITHLESSNESS AND GOD'S PATIENCE

By Alexander Maclaren

Judges 2:1-10

THE Book of Judges begins a new era, the development of the nation in its land. Chapters 1. to 3:6 contain two summaries: first, of the progress of the conquest; and second, of the history about to be unfolded in the book. The first part of this passage (verses 1-5) belongs to the former, and closes it; the second (verses 6-10) introduces the latter, and contrasts it with the state of things prevailing as long as the soldiers of Joshua lived.

I. 'The Angel of the Lord' had appeared to Joshua in Gilgal at the beginning of the war, and issued his orders as 'Captain of the Lord's host.'

Now He reappears to ask why his orders had not been carried out, and to announce that victory was no longer to attend Israel's arms. Nothing can be plainer than that the Angel speaks as one in whom the divine name dwells. His reiterated 'I's' are incomprehensible on any other hypothesis than that He is that mysterious person, distinct from and yet one with Jehovah, whom we know as the 'Word made flesh.' His words here are stern. He enumerates the favours which He had showed to Israel, and which should have inspired them to glad obedience. He recalls the conditions on which they had received the land; namely, that they were to enter into no entangling alliances with the remnant of the inhabitants, and especially to have no tolerance for their idolatry. Here we may observe that, according to Joshua's last charge, the extermination of the native peoples was not contemplated, but that there should be no such alliances as would peril Israel's observance of the covenant (Joshua 23:7, 12). He charges them with disobedience, and asks the same question as had been asked of Eve, 'What is this ye have done?' And He declares the punishment about to follow, in the paralysing of Israel's conquering arm by the withdrawal of His conquering might, and in the seductions from the native inhabitants to which they would fall victims.

Note, then, how God's benefits aggravate our disobedience, and how He bases His right to command on them. Further, note how His promises are contingent on our fulfilment of their conditions, and how a covenant which He has sworn that He will never break He does count as non-existent when men break it. Again, observe the sharp arraignment of the faithless, and the forcing of them to bethink themselves of the true character of their deeds, or, if we adopt the Revised Version's rendering, of the unreasonableness of departing from God. No man dare answer when God asks, 'What hast thou done?' No man can answer reasonably when He asks, 'Why hast thou done it?' Once more, note that His servants sin when they allow themselves to be so mixed up with the world that they are in peril of learning its ways and getting a snare to their souls. We have all unconquered 'Canaanites' in our hearts, and amity with them is supreme folly and crying wickedness. 'Thorough' must be our motto. Many times have the conquered overcome their conquerors, as in Rome's conquest of Greece, the Goths' conquest of Rome, the Normans' conquest of England. Israel was in some respects conquered by Canaanites and other conquered tribes. Let us take care that we are not overcome by our inward foes, whom we fancy we have subdued and can afford to treat leniently.

Again, God punishes our making truce with our spiritual foes by letting the effects of the truce work themselves out. He said to Israel, in effect: 'If you make alliances with the people of the land, you shall no longer have power to cast them out. The swift rush of the stream of victory shall be stayed. You have chosen to make them your friends, and their friendship shall produce its natural effects, of tempting you to imitation.' The increased power of our unsubdued evils is the punishment, as it is the result, of tolerance of them. We wanted to keep them, and dreamed that we could

control them. Keep them we shall, control them we cannot. They will master us if we do not expel them. No wonder that the place was named Bochim ('Weepers'), when such stern words were thundered forth. Tears flow easily; and many a sin is wept for once, and afterwards repeated often. So it was with Israel, as the narrative goes on to tell. Let us take the warning, and give heed to make repentance deep and lasting.

II. Verses 6-10 go back to an earlier period than the appearance of the Angel.

We do not know how long the survivors of the conquering army lived in sufficient numbers to leaven opinion and practice. We may, however, roughly calculate that the youngest of these would be about twenty when the war began, and that about fifty years would see the end of the host that had crossed Jordan and stormed Jericho. If Joshua was of about the same age as Caleb, he would be about eighty at the beginning of the conquest, and lived thirty years afterwards, so that about twenty years after his death would be the limit of 'the elders that outlived Joshua.'

Verses 6-9 substantially repeat Joshua 24:28-31, and are here inserted to mark not only the connection with the former book, but to indicate the beginning of a new epoch. The facts narrated in this paragraph are but too sadly in accord with the uniform tendencies of our poor weak nature. As long as some strong personality leads a nation or a church, it keeps true to its early fervour. The first generation which has lived through some great epoch, when God's arm has been made bare, retains the impression of His power. But when the leader falls, it is like withdrawing a magnet, and the heap of iron filings tumbles back to the ground inert. Think of the post-Apostolic age of the Church, of Germany in the generation after Luther, not to come nearer home, and we must see that Israel's experience was an all but universal one. It is hard to keep a community even of professing Christians or the high level No great cause is ever launched which does not lose 'way' as it continues. 'Having begun in the Spirit,' all such are too apt to continue 'in the flesh.' The original impulses wane, friction begins to tell Custom clogs the wheels. The fiery lava-stream cools and slackens. So it always has been. Therefore God has to change His instruments, and churches need to be shaken up, and sometimes broken up, 'lest one good,' when it has degenerated into 'custom,' should 'corrupt the world.'

But we shall miss the lesson here taught if we do not apply it to tendencies in ourselves, and humbly recognise that we are in danger of being 'hindered,' however 'well' we may have begun to 'run,' and that our only remedy is to renew continually our first-hand vision of 'the great works of the Lord,' and our consecration to His service. It is a poor affair if, like Israel, our devotion to God depends on Joshua's life, or, like King Joash, we do that which is 'right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.'

ISRAEL'S OBSTINACY AND GOD'S PATIENCE

By Alexander Maclaren

Judges 2:11-23

THIS passage sums up the Book of Judges, and also the history of Israel for over four hundred years. Like the overture of an oratorio, it sounds the main themes of the story which follows. That story has four chapters, repeated with dreary monotony over and over again. They are: Relapse into idolatry, retribution, respite and deliverance, and brief return to God. The last of these phases soon passes into fresh relapse, and then the old round is gone all over again, as regularly as the white and red lights and the darkness reappear in a revolving lighthouse lantern, or the figures recur in a circulating decimal fraction. That sad phrase which begins this lesson, 'The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord,' is repeated at the

beginning of each new record of apostacy, on which duly follow, as outlined here, the oppression by the enemy, the raising up of a deliverer, the gleam of brightness which dies with him, and then, da capo, 'the children of Israel did evil,' and all the rest as before. The names change, but the incidents are the same. There is something extremely impressive in this uniformity of the plan of the book, which thus sets in so strong light the persistence through generations of the same bad strain in the nation's blood, and the unwearying patience of God. The story of these successive recurrences of the same sequence of events occupies the book to the end of chapter 16., and the remainder of it is taken up with two wild stories deeply stained with the lawlessness and moral laxity of these anarchic times. We may best bring out the force of this seminary by considering in their order the four stages signalised.

I. The first is the continual tendency to relapse into idolatry.

The fact itself, and the frank prominence given to it in the Old Testament, are both remarkable. As to the latter, certainly, if the Old Testament histories have the same origin as the chronicles of other nations, they present most anomalous features. Where do we find any other people whose annals contain nothing that can minister to national vanity, and have for one of their chief themes the sins of the nation? The history of Israel, as told in Scripture, is one long indictment of Israel. The peculiarity is explicable, if we believe that, whoever or how numerous soever its authors, God was its true Author, as He is its true theme, and that the object of its histories is not to tell the deeds of Israel, but those of God for Israel.

As to the fact of the continual relapses into idolatry, nothing could be more natural than that the recently received and but imperfectly assimilated revelation of the one God, with its stringent requirements of purity, and its severe prohibition of idols, should easily slip off from these rude and merely outward worshippers. Joshua's death without a successor, the dispersion of the tribes, the difficulty of communication when much of the country was still in the hands of its former possessors, would all weaken the sense of unity, which was too recent to be firm, and would expose the isolated Israelites to the full force of the temptation to idolatry. It is difficult for us fairly to judge the immense strain required for resistance to it. The conception of one sole God was too high to be easily retained. A shrine without a deity seemed bare and empty. The Law stringently bridled passions which the hideous worship

of the Canaanites stimulated. No wonder that, when the first generation of the conquerors had passed away,

their successors lapsed into the universal polytheism, with its attendant idolatry and immorality. Instead of thinking of the Israelites as monsters of ingratitude and backsliding, we come nearer the truth, and make a better use of the history, when we see in it a mirror which shows us our own image. The strong earthward pull is ever acting on us, and, unless God hold us up, we too shall slide downwards. 'Hath a nation changed their gods, which yet are no gods? but My people hath changed their glory for that which doth not profit.' Idolatry and worldliness are persistent; for they are natural. Firm adherence to God is less common, because it goes against the strong forces, within and without, which bind us to earth.

Apparently the relapses into idolatry did not imply the entire abandonment of the worship of Jehovah, but the worship of Baalim and Ashtaroth along with it. Such illegitimate mixing up of deities was accordant with the very essence of polytheism, and repugnant to that of the true worship of God. The one may be tolerant, the other cannot be. To unite Baal with Jehovah was to forsake Jehovah.

These continual relapses have an important bearing on the question of the origin of the 'Jewish conception of God.' They are intelligible only if we take the old-fashioned explanation, that its origin was a divine revelation, given to a rude people. They are unintelligible if we take the new-fashioned explanation that the monotheism of Israel was the product of natural evolution, or was anything but a treasure put by God into their hands, which they did not appreciate, and would willingly have thrown away. The foul Canaanitish worship was the kind of thing in which, if left to themselves, they would have wallowed. How came such people by such thoughts as these? The history of Israel's idolatry is not the least conclusive proof of the supernatural revelation which made Israel's religion.

II. Note the swift-following retribution.

We have two sections in the context dealing with this, each introduced by that terrible phrase, which recurs so often in the subsequent parts of the book, 'The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.' That phrase is no sign of a lower conception of God than that which the gospel brings. Wrath is an integral part of love, when the lover is perfectly righteous and the loved are sinful. The most terrible anger is the anger of perfect gentleness, as expressed in that solemn paradox of the Apostle of love, when he speaks of 'the wrath of the Lamb.' God was angry with Israel because He loved them, and desired their love

for their own good. The fact of His choice of the nation for His own and the intensity of His love were shown no less by the swift certainty with which suffering dogged sin, than by the blessings which crowned obedience. The first section, referring to the punishment, is in verses 14 and 15, which seems to describe mainly the defeats and plunderings which outside surrounding nations inflicted. The brief description is extraordinarily energetic. It ascribes all their miseries to God's direct act. He 'delivered' them over, or, as the next clause says still more strongly, 'sold' them, to plunderers, who stripped them bare. Their defeats were the result of His having thus ceased to regard them as His. But though He had 'sold' them, He had not done with them; for it was not only the foeman's hand that struck them, but God's 'hand was against them,' and its grip crushed them. His judgments were not occasional, but continuous, and went with them 'whithersoever they went out.' Everything went wrong with them; there were no gleams breaking the black thunder-cloud. God's anger darkened the whole sky, and blasted the whole earth. And the misery was the more miserable and awful because it had all been foretold, and in it God was but doing 'as He had said' and sworn. It is a dreadful picture of the all-withering effect of God's anger, — a picture which is repeated in inmost verity in many an outwardly prosperous life today.

The second section is in verses 20-23, and describes the consequence of Israel's relapse in reference to the surviving Canaanite and other tribes in the land itself. Note that 'nation' in verse 20 is the term usually applied, not to Israel, but to the Gentile peoples; and that its use here seems equivalent to cancelling the choice of Israel as God's special possession, and reducing them to the level of the other nations in Canaan, to whom the same term is applied in verse 21. The stern words which are here put into the mouth of God may possibly refer to the actual message recorded in the first verses of the chapter; but, more probably, 'the Lord said' does not here mean any divine communication, but only the divine resolve, conceived as spoken to himself. It embodies the divine *lex talionis*. The punishment is analogous to the crime. Israel had broken the covenant; God would not keep His promise. That involves a great principle as to all God's promises, — that they are all conditional, and voidable by men's failure to fulfil their conditions. Observe, too, that the punishment is the retention of the occasions of the sin. Is not that, too, a law of the 'divine procedure to-day? Whips to scourge us are made of our pleasant vices. Sin is the punishment of sin. If we yield to some temptation, part of the avenging retribution is

that the temptation abides by us, and has power over us. The 'Canaanites' whom we have allowed to lead us astray will stay beside us when their power to seduce us is done, and will pull off their masks and show themselves for what they are, our spoilers and foes.

The rate of Israel's conquest was determined by Israel's faithful adherence to God. That is a standing law. Victory for us in all the good fight of life depends on our cleaving to Him, and forsaking all other.

The divine motive, if we may so say, in leaving the unsubdued nations in the land, was to provide the means of proving Israel.

Would it not have been better, since Israel was so weak, to secure for it an un-tempted period? Surely, it is a strange way of helping a man who has stumbled, to make provision that future occasions of stumbling shall be in his path. But so the perfect wisdom which is perfect love ever ordains. There shall be no unnatural greenhouse shelter provided for weak plants. The liability to fall imposes the necessity of trial, but the trial does not impose the necessity of falling! The Devil tempts, because he hopes that we shall fall. God tries, in order that we may stand, and that our feet may be strengthened by the trial. 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, — not without dust and heat.'

III. Respite and deliverance are described in verses 16 and 18.

The Revised Version has wisely substituted a simple 'and' for 'nevertheless' at the beginning of verse 16. The latter word implies that the raising up of the judges was a reversal of what had gone before; 'and' implies that it was a continuation. And its use here is not merely an instance of inartificial Hebrew style, but carries the lesson that God's judgment and deliverance come from the same source, and are harmonious parts of one educational process. Nor is this thought negated by the statement in verse 18 that 'it repented the Lord.' That strong metaphorical ascription to Him of human emotion simply implies that His action, which of necessity is the expression of His will, was changed. The will of the moment before had been to punish; the will of the next moment was to deliver, because their 'groaning' showed that the punishment had done its work. But the two wills were one in ultimate purpose, and the two sets of acts were equally and harmoniously parts of one design. The surgeon is carrying out one plan when he cuts deep into the quivering flesh, and when he sews up the wounds which he himself has made. God's deliverances are linked to His chastisements by 'and,' not by 'nevertheless.' We need not discuss that remarkable series of judges, who were champions rather than the peaceful functionaries whom we understand by the name. The vivid and stirring stories associated with their names make the bulk of this book, and move the most peace-loving among us like the sound of a trumpet. These wild warriors, with many a roughness and flaw in their characters, of whom no saintly traits are recorded, are yet treated in this section as directly inspired, and as continually upheld by God. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews claims some of them as heroes of 'faith.' And one chief lesson for us to learn, as we look on the strange garb in which in them faith has arrayed itself, and the strange work which it does in nerving hands to strike with sharp swords, is the oneness of the principle amid the most diverse manifestations, and the nobleness and strength which the sense of belonging to God and reliance on His help breathe into the rudest life and shed over the wildest scenes.

These judges were raised up indiscriminately from different tribes. They belonged to different ranks, and were of different occupations. One of them was a woman. The when and the where and the how of their appearance were incalculable. They authenticated their commission by no miracles except victory. For a time they started to the front, and then passed, leaving no successors, and founding no dynasty. They were an entirely unique order, plainly raised up by God, and drawing all their power from Him. Let us be thankful for the weaknesses, and even sins, recorded of some of them, and for the boldness with which the book traces the physical strength of a Samson, in spite of his wild animalism, and the bravery of a Jephthah, notwithstanding his savage vow and subsequent lapse into idolatry, to God's inspiration. Their faith was limited, and acted but imperfectly on their moral nature; but it was true faith, in the judgment of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Their work was rough and bloody, and they were rough tools, as such work needed; but it was God's work, and He had made them for His instruments, in the judgment of the Book of Judges. If we try to understand the reasons for such judgments, we may learn some useful lessons.

IV. A word only can be given to the last stage in the dreary round. It comes back to the first. The religion of the delivered people lasted as long as the judge's life. When he died, it died. There is intense bitterness in the remark to that effect in verse 19. Did God then die with the judge? Was it

Samson, or Jehovah, that had delivered? Why should the death of the instrument affect gratitude to the hand that gave it its edge? What a lurid light is thrown back on the unreality of the people's return to God by their swift relapse! If it needed a human hand to keep them from departing, had they ever come near? We may press the questions on ourselves; for none of us knows how much of our religion is owing to the influence of men upon us, or how much of it would drop away if we were left to ourselves.

This miserable repetition of the same weary round of sin, punishment, respite, and renewed sin, sets in a strong light the two great wonders of man's obstinate persistency in unfaithfulness and sin, and of God's unwearied persistency in discipline and patient forgiveness. His charity 'suffers long and is kind, is not easily provoked.' We can weary out all forbearance but His, which is endless. We weary Him indeed, but we do not weary Him out, with our iniquities. Man's sin stretches far; but God's patient love overlaps it. It lasts long; but God's love is eternal. It resists miracles of chastisement and love; but He does not cease His use of the rod and the staff. We can tire out all other forbearance, but not His. And however old and obstinate our rebellion, He waits to pardon, and smites but to heal.