

The Story: Herding Cats
By Jason Huff
Psalm 81:8-16, Matthew 2:1-12,16, Judges 2:7-19

Our final Scripture reading comes from Judges 2:7-19. Listen now to God's Word. "The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways."

I'm a cat person. I know, guys are supposed to like dogs. But in eight years delivering newspapers, I never once had a cat chase me down the street or nearly bite my leg off. I like that cats are easy to care for. I love the sound of a cat's purr. But even as someone who loves cats, I can tell you this...they are stubborn and obnoxious. A cat comes to you when it wants to, usually when your lap is already full. It pushes everything else out of the way and sits on you. If a cat does tricks at all, it's on its own time. Miss a feeding, though, and you'll hear about it instantly. They'll buddy up to you until they're full, and then they're off to do their own thing until they feel like being around you again.

The book of Judges, summarized in chapter 8 of *The Story*, is a tale of trying to herd cats. It was bad enough out in the wilderness when the Israelites complained about wanting to go back to Egypt and created a golden calf to worship. But their descendents just a few generations removed made them look like saints. They aren't just grumblers. They do evil in the site of the LORD. They worship other gods and forget the commands of the Law, turning instead to the vile practices of the Canaanites. The twelve tribes each go their own way with no cohesion, no centralized worship, and no direction. Only when they get into trouble do they start calling on God to save them.

For almost 300 years, there is a continuous cycle in Israel. The people start following foreign gods and practicing other religions. God never abandons them entirely, but He hands them over to their enemies until they finally call upon Him for deliverance. Every time they turn, God raises up a judge for Israel, and through the judge God rescues His people. Until the judge dies, they have peace. Once the judge is gone, though, the people turn back to their old ways. And so it goes over and over again. There are twelve cycles in the book of Judges – twelve rebellions against God, twelve oppressions, twelve judges, twelve deliverings. You’d think they’d finally get the picture.

At the end of the book of Judges comes a situation *The Story* omits. Some men of the tribe of Benjamin are so corrupt that their words and actions parallel that of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was destroyed early on in the Bible for its wickedness. The fellow Israelite tribes wage war on Benjamin for their actions and decimate them. It’s the first time in centuries the Israelites did anything about the sin in their own ranks, but at huge cost.

Occasionally, you’d hear a Sunday school lesson about a judge because, for one, they were short, simple, and exciting. Gideon takes three hundred warriors and conquers God’s enemies. If Samson lived today, he would have had his own action figure. There were good morals for kids too, like Samson losing his strength because he values Delilah more than God.

But this is not a book for children. The violence is brutal. The immorality of the Israelites is on full display. The judges themselves are no bastions of faith and purity either. Gideon saw a sign from heaven but was so scared that he tested God twice more just to be sure. Jephthah makes a rash vow to God – one God did not ask him to make – and winds up sacrificing his own daughter. Samson not only had an attitude problem, he slept with prostitutes and lived his life for revenge on his enemies. You’re going to have a hard time finding a book in the Bible that’s more disturbing. It’s the first book that chronicles the rebellion of God’s people over not just a generation but centuries.

We could get into the details of each one of the judges; there is a lot we can learn from each one. Some of them were genuinely faithful to the LORD. But this morning, I want us to look at the big picture. What is God showing us through the insanity of this book? We’re going to look at three takeaway points from this chapter in Israel’s history. One is this: sin is a downward spiral that will rule us if we do not master it. The second is this: God desires to redeem and renew and restore us when we cry out to Him. Here’s the third: the cycle of sin is broken through Jesus Christ and His gift of the Holy Spirit.

Let’s look at the downward spiral of sin. When Israel slips into depravity, it’s a surprise. Joshua and the following generation were right on target with God. What happened? There’s a repeated phrase in Judges that’s the key: “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” That saying in a nutshell shows why Israel went from being the feared conquerer of Canaan to being oppressed by all of its neighbors.

Now that phrase is revealing. One study online noted the fact that the Israelites didn't do what was *wrong* in their own eyes. No, they did what they thought was *right*. They aren't poking God in the eye and saying, "I hate you." They aren't atheists. But they *are* forgetful. They haven't remained vigilant. The first generation to serve other gods didn't know the LORD or what He did for Israel. We don't know who is at fault – if their parents didn't faithfully teach them about God or if they just ignored the message. But either way, it's not an immediate or intentional turning away from God. There is a slow slide into immorality as the people gradually intermix with the local cultures and worship their gods and engage in their religious practices.

While the slide begins subtly, over the course of three centuries Israel goes from a faithful nation to one even worse than those they destroyed when they took over the land. Scripture pulls no punches. When there is no judge over them, the Israelites' rabid desire to follow other gods is likened to prostitution. The Hebrews, who belong to God, sell their souls to whatever god offers good crops or the promise of uninhibited sexuality or whatever their folly may be. By the end of the book, Israel is no better than Sodom and Gomorrah. Samson, the final judge, is himself wild, reckless, and immoral. God uses him despite of himself. All of this comes from the Israelites doing what was right in their own eyes.

We don't like to talk about sin. We prefer not to think about it, or we think we won't be punished because our sins aren't as bad as the sins of those around us. And yet Jesus and the New Testament authors warn us numerous times about the effects of sin. In John 8:34, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." James 1 says, "Each person is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." And 1 Peter 5:8 says, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

That last passage is the key – be self-controlled and alert. Are we disciplining ourselves to avoid every last possibility of sin? We ask God every week not to lead us into temptation but to deliver us from evil. Are we vigilant in this, or do we lead ourselves into temptation thinking it's no big deal? I once had someone tell me they believed that *if* the devil existed – a big *if* for them – he only tempted people with big stuff. But I've never known a temptation to do a big sin that wasn't preceded by a hundred little temptations. Very few people chat online with the opposite sex expecting to wind up committing adultery. Very few men look at pornography expecting to become addicted. Very few women gossip expecting to become compulsive liars. But it happens.

In Ephesians 4:27, Paul says, "Do not give the devil a foothold." Judges illustrates the importance of this principle. We must be diligent in guarding our hearts. This means that we may look foolish in the world when we don't go see some movies or buy some books or participate in some conversations or attend some events. That's OK. Purity is a far more difficult thing to regain than it is to keep. It is worth being rejected by the world if we can honor our Lord and Savior by rejecting the temptation to inch towards sin.

But what do we do if we're already on the downward spiral – is it too late? Here's the good news of today's lesson: God desires to redeem and renew and restore us when we cry out to Him. God sent the judges to rescue His people and to bring them peace. He turned nobodies like Gideon into His heroes. When the Israelites turned from sin and cried out to Him, God gave them rest from their enemies. He loves His people enough to forgive them their unfaithfulness.

The biggest problem was that they didn't cry out often. They got the picture when things were at their worst; then they would turn. That is still our biggest problem today. When was the last time you were so grieved over your sin that you cried out to God about it? The last time when you did something you know you shouldn't have done and prayed to God in anguish, "God, I don't want to be like this"? When was the last time you had any emotional reaction to what God was doing – whether to laugh or cry or sing or shout or clap?

In our culture, we see deeply emotional worship as being on the fringe. Our particular church comes out of the Presbyterian tradition, where we pride ourselves on being intellectual. We love God in this tradition with our whole minds. Yet God calls us to love Him with our whole heart and soul and strength too. God doesn't want just your heart or your head – He wants your whole being to be dedicated to Him.

We need to practice crying out to God a lot more. Last week, we discussed God's desire for audacious prayer – how we should pray for things that can only be done in God's strength and not our own. This week, I want us to think about God's desire for desperate prayer. This is the kind of prayer where we lay it on the line before God – that our only hope is His intervention. There's a praise song called "Breathe" that, to my knowledge, hasn't been sung in this church. The lyrics go like this: "This is the air I breathe... Your holy presence living in me. This is my daily bread... Your very word spoken to me. I'm desperate for You... I'm lost without You."

This is the kind of cry God wants to hear from His people. He wants to be our breath and bread. He wants to speak His Word into us and give us life. He wants to empower us through the Holy Spirit to live lives of holiness and purity. He wants us to cry out with all of life's pain and joy. He wants us to cry out for deliverance from our sin. He wants us to cry out, "LORD God, help me... without You, I am ruined." He wants us to acknowledge the truth – without Him, we are helpless, hopeless, broken people. We cannot save ourselves, try as hard as we might. We cannot break the power of sin, but we desire to be free of it so we can serve Him. When He heard this cry from the Israelites, He intervened with His mighty hand. He will do it today if you cry out to Him. The question is not whether He will answer your plea. The question is whether you and I will humble ourselves and come to Him earnestly seeking to be set free from our bondage to sin.

That leads us to the third and greatest point we learn today: the cycle of sin is broken through Jesus Christ and His gift of the Holy Spirit. Throughout Judges and even much of Israel's history, we see the pattern of sin, oppression, repentance, and deliverance happening over and over again. The cycle would finish, but then... the judge would die, and immediately the people would go back to their immorality. It seemed hopeless. No judge, no hope of breaking the sequence.

But that's the beauty of Jesus. He is still alive! Because of His resurrection, we always have our judge, our king, our savior, with us! He is always there, ready to defend us, ready to go to battle for us, ready to lead us in the ways of righteousness. We have a wonderful gift in that God via the Holy Spirit lives inside the Christian and never leaves – that's something the Israelites could only dream about. The New Testament tells us that freedom from sin is the very point of Jesus' death and resurrection...He lived and died and lives again in order that we might be made holy and thus acceptable in the sight of God.

Peace and joy and holiness can be ours; they aren't just pipe dreams for the next life. They can be ours now when we know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and fully rely on Him. Sin no longer needs to be a downward spiral in our lives. Jesus can stop that spiral wherever it may be. Whatever sin holds you in bondage, whatever crime against God you commit that seems to be unbreakable, God has claimed the victory for you already. He is waiting to show you the freedom from your chains which He has already paid for with the Son's precious blood.

It may come in fits and spurts. You may not succeed in overcoming temptation the first time you try. But by God's grace, we have victory, not just temporarily but for all time over sin. In Jesus' triumph, we all triumph. The downward spiral is broken; the chains of sin are in a heap on the floor. And if we do sin, we have an advocate in Jesus. We may stumble, we may fall, but He is determined to get us across that finish line, complete and whole and holy, made perfect by the Spirit's work in us. As Dr. Timothy Tennant, the president of Asbury Seminary, describes it, when God works His holiness in us, "Sin is encamped around us on every side, but it is no longer our ally. We burn the secret agreements we have – to nod and wink and to dance with sin in the night while we confess Christ in the day. We leave behind [our] agonizingly torn hearts, where we always live under condemnation because sin is always creeping back into our lives...it is a new orientation which no longer looks back on the old life, but is always looking forward to the New Creation [of God.]"

As we began, we talked about God's care for the Israelites being like herding cats. Well, here's my call today...take a cue from the dogs instead. But instead of being man's best friend, be God's best friend. Be loyal to Him and determine to give sin no quarter in your life. When you find yourself lost and alone or trapped in your transgressions, cry out to Him with all you've got. And you will find that through our savior Jesus, you will be freed from sin, able to follow in His footsteps wherever He leads. As we celebrate this season of waiting and remembering His birth, I can think of no greater gift you could give Him than to turn to Him in simple faith.