

The Message of Judges

by G. Campbell Morgan

The book of Judges reveals the deterioration of the nation and the administration of God, highlighting the importance of righteousness and the sovereignty of God.

Scripture: Judges 17:6, Judges 18:1, Judges 19:1, Judges 21:25, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Proverbs 14:34, Isaiah 1:4, Romans 1:18-32, Galatians 6:7, 1 Peter 5:10

Topics: "National Deterioration", "God's Administration"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan delivers a powerful sermon on 'The Message of Judges,' emphasizing the deterioration of a nation through religious apostasy, political disorganization, and social chaos. He outlines how God's administration involves punishment, mercy, and deliverance, revealing that the cycles of sin and redemption are central to the narrative of the Hebrew people. Morgan warns that the same patterns of deterioration can be observed in contemporary society, urging a return to God as the path to restoration. He highlights the hope found in God's unwavering purpose and the providential raising of deliverers in times of need. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a recognition of God's sovereignty and a commitment to righteousness as the foundation for national strength.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Deterioration of a Nation

i. Its Manifestation.

a. Cause. Religious Apostasy.

b. Course. Political Disorganization.

c. Curse. Social Chaos.

ii. Its Characteristics.

a. Blindness. Religious.

b. Folly; Political.

c. Immorality. Social.

II. The Administration of God

i. Its Methods.

a. Punishment.

b. Mercy.

c. Deliverance.

ii. Its Purpose.

a. The last Statement.

21:25;

17:6;

18:1;

19:1

b. The next Book.

c. Its Ultimate.

David.

Jesus.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. As to the Nation

A Warning

i. The Process of Deterioration.

ii. The Process of Restoration.

II. As to the Administration of God.

A Message of Hope.

i. He forever moves towards Purpose.

ii. His Methods are still the same.

Punishment.

Mercy.

Deliverance.

The central division in the lecture on the content of this book gives the history of the Hebrew people from Joshua to Samson, in a series of seven cycles. Each one runs the same course-of sin, of punishment, of deliverance.

The permanent values must be deduced from this division. That is not to undervalue the introduction or the appendix. These are necessary for the complete picture, but for our present purpose we shall confine ourselves to these seven cycles.

The permanent values may be summarized under Two heads. The book reveals to us first, the deterioration of the nation; and secondly, the administration of God.

In considering the book of Joshua, we found that its first revelation was summarized in that ancient declaration "Jehovah' is a Man of war," and we saw God in perpetual conflict with sin; while its second value was expressed in the statement "the just shall live by faith," faith being the acceptance of God's standard of holiness, abandonment to the government of God's will, and achievement in the strength of God's might. In dealing with the first of these values, we saw that the hostility of God to sin was manifested not only to the sin of the people who were to be exterminated, but also to the sin of the people who were to be the instruments of that extermination. That fact is brought out into clear relief in this book. Here we see God in constant conflict with the sin of these people, and yet as constantly working for their deliverance.

The lessons of this book, then, may be summarized by the quotation of two Scriptures,

"Righteousness exalteth a nation:

But sin is a reproach to any people,"

and,

"Jehovah errecurteth righteous acts,

And judgments for all that are oppressed."

Take the first, "Righteousness exalteth a nation: But sin is a reproach to any people." The meaning of the first half of the verse is plain-" Righteousness exalteth," lifteth up, setteth on high. The meaning of the second part has been somewhat obscured by the use of the word "reproach." The Hebrew word is nowhere else so translated. Its usual translation seems to suggest no possible connection with reproach. In the refrain of Psalm cxxvi., "His mercy endureth forever," the word "mercy" is the same as that translated "reproach" in this text. I am not suggesting that we should read this text "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a mercy to any people." I have rather drawn attention to the peculiarity of the word in order to say that I believe there is the profoundest significance in its use. The word is derived from a root which means to bow or bend the neck. It is a pictorial word, and its meaning must always be interpreted by the setting in which it is found. The neck may be bent in condescension, the bending of superiority to inferiority. It may be done in courtesy, the bending of a friend to a friend. It may be done in submission, the bending of a slave to the yoke. I believe that when this word was written by Solomon, he employed it for its root value, rather than for its generally accepted value. The thought then would be, Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin bends the neck of any people. Thus the word stands in direct contrast to the word "exalteth." Righteousness makes erect; sin bows the neck. Some may object that one

word can have two opposite meanings. I will tell you a story. A boy said to his father, "Father, what does cleave mean?" "To cleave means to cut into two," replied the father. "Why, father," exclaimed the boy, "I thought that a man must cleave to his wife. Forgive the homely illustration of the fact that this word must be interpreted by the context. To cleave is either to make one of two, or to make two of one.

The other text reveals the truth that fills our heart with hope, "Jehovah executeth righteous acts, and judgments for all that are oppressed." I place the emphasis for my present purpose upon the word "executeth." God is an Administrator as well as a Lawgiver.

The seven cycles of this book show how sin bows the neck of a nation, as they reveal the cause, the course, and the curse of deterioration. The cause of deterioration was religious apostasy. Its course was political disorganization. Its curse was social chaos and crime.

The first movement of religious apostasy was toleration of things that were out of harmony with the holiness of God. In the earlier chapters the declaration is made five or six times, "they drave them not out." They tolerated the presence in the land of the corrupt peoples, whom they had been commanded to exterminate what was the first evidence of religious apostasy. It always is. Religious apostasy never begins with intellectual questioning. I have the profoundest respect for the man who is face to face with intellectual doubt and difficulty. Let him alone. If he be true, he will "beat his music out," and "find a stronger faith his own." Religious apostasy begins with toleration for the things that are out of harmony with the holiness of God. This was followed by admiration of the things tolerated, until admiration became conformity; and in that strip of land which ought to have been swept clean of corruption, altars to Baal, and idol places of worship were erected by the people raised up to end these very abominations.

Religious apostasy is always the first movement in national deterioration, and it is inevitably followed by political disorganization. This manifested itself in the case of Israel almost immediately. After the passing of Joshua they ceased to act as one people. They began to live in their own small territory and to fight for their own selfish ends. Civil war almost exterminated the tribe of Benjamin. The nation was broken up into factions, and so was no longer able to act in perfect unity of thought and purpose; and consequently was weak in the presence of enemies, and suffered defeat.

The curse was experienced in internal lawlessness. One graphic touch tells how the highways were deserted, and men walked along the byways, which means that lawlessness was so rampant that men had to find their way by stealth to evade the highway robbers who filled the land. Crimes were committed everywhere, while stubbornness of heart characterized the people.

Mark their strange blindness. One of the most startling things in the book of Judges is the speed with which they forgot. They seem to have forgotten the taking of Jericho, and the victory on the other side of the Jordan. They seem, moreover, to have forgotten their earlier history, the deliverance from Egypt, and the wonderful years in the wilderness in which they were taught that the throne of God must be recognized as the centre of their life. They were blind, moreover: to the present activity of God hardly recognizing the hand of His judgments. This blindness and their religious apostasy were related to each other, as effect to cause.

Mark the folly of these people. This was evidenced by their limited survey, and by their selfishness. Religious apostasy is always limited survey. To have a home policy and a foreign policy which leave God out of the reckoning is to be blind indeed. The outcome of such blindness is selfishness. These people sought their own personal aggrandizement when they forgot God.

Finally mark the immorality, which was the inevitable outcome of their blindness and folly, and to which we have referred in speaking of the curse of social chaos

Thank God, however, there is something more in the book of Judges than all this, or it would be a heartbreaking picture. The administration of God is revealed throughout, and concerning it there are three matters to be specially noted; punishment, mercy, and deliverance.

This is one of the books of the Bible which we must bum and fling away if we deny that God does directly, immediately, and definitely punish sin. It nevertheless reveals matters of supreme importance, in order to a correct appreciation of the method and purpose of punishment. The punishment of God is poetic. That which fell upon these people was the necessary result of their own sin. They bent the neck to low ideals of religion, and were compelled to bend the neck to the rule of the people to whose immorality they had stooped. The people they ought to have driven out, but whom they tolerated and admired, and to whom they conformed themselves, became their tyrants. God visited them by bringing upon them the scourge of an idolatrous people, because they had stooped to idolatry.

The punishment of God is severe. During the years before Gideon was raised up, these people with so great a birthright were compelled to take refuge in caves, not daring to show themselves, being hunted upon the mountains of their own land, and having to hide their heads for very fear. That is an illustration of the severity of God's punishment.

Yes, but there is another word to be uttered. Not only was the punishment poetic and severe, it was remedial. It always aimed at bringing the people back to a consciousness of sin and of God.

Through all these processes Jehovah is seen watching and waiting in mercy for His people, hearing them the moment they cry to Him, and answering them immediately with deliverance.

That brings us to the final matter in the administration of God-His deliverance. Deliverance was wrought at the right moment, by the right instrument, to the right issue. I do not pause to dwell upon the fact that it was wrought at the right moment, for we have already seen that He acted, directly the people turned to Him in penitence. It is intensely interesting, however., to notice how the deliverance was wrought by the right instrument. To look at the conditions in the midst of which the judges were raised up is ever to see how the right man was found for the accomplishment of the work.

The story of Shamgar is told in one verse. He was a rough, rugged hero, fitted to his times, accomplishing revolution, and so correcting the people.

Then there was the wonderful alliance between Deborah and Barak in an age which lacked enthusiasm and enterprise. Deborah was a woman of poetry and flame, and with a fine scorn laid a whip of scorpions round the men who skulked, when they ought to have been fighting. Barak was a strategist and adviser. Deborah without Barak would have kindled enthusiasm, but would have accomplished nothing. Barak would have done absolutely nothing without Deborah.

Then came Gideon in the most strenuous hour of all the period, and proved his heroism first by his fear. Never criticize Gideon for demanding proof on proof. He was a man so afraid of himself, that he must have proof on proof; but so sure of God, that he was content with three hundred men, and lamps and pitchers and trumpets, to lead an attack upon a great host.

The story of Jephthah is full of power. I am always sorry for Jephthah. He was a man with the iron in his soul, born into the world not in the proper way, and therefore despised by his legitimate brethren, he had become a freebooter and an outlaw. Yet he was a man of remarkable, honest, rugged strength. When God wanted a leader in those days of lawlessness, He took this man, whom his brothers had despised, and made him the instrument of deliverance.

The story of Samson is full of sadness, as it reveals a nation utterly deteriorated, and a man unable to deliver. A most significant word is written concerning him, "He shall begin to save Israel." He never succeeded. One of the most tragic things in the Bible is written of him, a statement that makes the soul blanch with fear as nothing else does, "He wist not that the Lord as departed from him." Oh, the tragedy of it. It may come to you, it may come to me, if we play with evil things, when we ought to be fighting the Lord's battles.

We should not have looked for any one of these men where God looked for them. They who wear soft raiment are in kings' palaces. When God wants a prophet, He takes a herdman; when a leader, He finds a shepherd; when apostles, He calls fishermen.

In order to see the purpose of the administration of God, look at the last verse in the book of Judges, "Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The same thing is written four times in the appendix. It is said that this reveals nothing more than that the book of Judges was written in the time of the kings ; and that the writer, looking back, accounted for the chaos by the fact that there was no king. That is truly the human side of it; but there is the Divine side of it.

"Every man did that which was right in his2 own eyes" ; that is, religious apostasy, political disorganization, social chaos. The book of Ruth follows that of Judges, and may be described as the idyll of the king. How does it end? With David the king. What is its issue? Jesus, far off down the centuries. So at last there came a King, and no man is any longer to do that which is right in his own eyes, but is to crown Him and obey Him. That is the ending of religious apostasy, of political disorganization, and of social chaos. So the lines run out from this book of Judges, through the idyll of the king, to the coming of the King.

Again, the permanent values constitute the living message. The book of Judges is full of teaching for this day, and for this nation. It first of all utters a warning, revealing to us, if we have eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hearts to understand, the process of deterioration. It is as true of our own nation as of Israel, that if there is religious apostasy, there must be political disorganization, and this issues in social chaos. In other words, social failure is rooted in religious apostasy. Therefore the process of restoration must begin with the cause. and so change the course, and remove the curse, When I am told that I am to leave my pulpit, and give myself to social propapanda, I say, No, I have no time and no right, however much my heart may break in the presence of social conditions, to waste time and energy fooling with the fringe of things. It is for the Christian preacher and the Christian Church to cry aloud, Back to God, and so back to political emancipation, and to social order.

Then there is in this book a message full of hope as to the administration of God. He is forever moving towards the ultimate goal, and never loses sight thereof. His methods are still the same. He still punishes by war, catastrophe, reaction. Take up the newspaper to-day, and read the sad and awful story of suicide after suicide on the other side of the sea. What does it mean? The nemesis of impure commercial methods. God is surely abroad in the world, making men their own executioners, when there is no other way of checking the floods of vice, Yet He is forevermore a God ready to pardon. If this nation could but be

turned back to Him, He would visit us again with His own salvation and uplifting.

Finally, let us remember that God always finds the providential man at the right moment. When the punishment has done its work, and the discipline has wrought a sense of wrong in the heart of the people, He finds the deliverer. We cannot produce him. Let us be careful lest we stone him when he comes, for he will not appear where we are looking, but from some unexpected quarter.

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