

Trouble in the Land

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 25th of August 2002 the preacher is Paul Barker his sermon is entitled Trouble in the Land and is based on Judges chapters 1 to 3 As I said at the beginning this is the beginning of a I think seven sermons on the book of Judges over the next few weeks in the morning services So let's pray this is not an easy book to work out what it's saying to us and how we should live in response so let's pray that God helps us in this Our Heavenly Father you have revealed yourself through the ages as recorded in these words of scripture and we pray that as we come to them now you may reveal yourself to us not only that we may understand you more but that our lives may be lived more in the likeness of your son Jesus Christ

Amen Well it reads a bit like the nightly news this book there are bad and ungodly leaders there is religious and tribal warfare there is oppression there are refugees political instability coups or threats of coups civil war glamorous women the latest military technology the murder of a daughter and immoral priests so whoever said that the book of Judges is outdated it also looks like a collection of rather intriguing and famous cameos Deborah the strong woman leader a sort of ancient version of Margaret Thatcher I guess Gideon the fearful leader the man who didn't feel safe unless he had his security blanket fleece with him Jephthah victorious in foreign affairs but hopeless at home and Samson the long haired heartthrob who fell for seductive women so whoever thought that the book of Judges would be boring it's relevant and it's exciting but for all its drama and excitement it is actually a very sobering book it is about the inadequacy of human leaders it is about the persistent and stubborn sin of the forgetful people of God it is about God a disciplining God yet also a merciful and gracious God and it is in the end about the need for a better rescuer and a complete rescue

I remember when I was a boy in scouts we would sing occasionally songs at campfires on camps and things like that and I remember one that had this line in it next verse same as the first a little bit louder and a little bit worse and in many respects that's the pattern of the book of Judges next judge same as the first in effect but I don't know about louder but certainly worse the pattern to the book of Judges at first sight looks to be a cyclical pattern so that one event happens which leads to a next which leads to a next and all the way around the circle back to where you started again and then you repeat the cycle over and over again for each judge but in fact the actual pattern is not just a cycle but a downward spiral because each time you get back to the starting point you're actually lower down the scale than when you started at that same point the previous cycle and whatever human leadership there is raised up by God in this book it is inadequate to arrest the slide now some books when you read them keep you guessing about what's happening who the key to the book is what the solution to the problem is murder mysteries are like that you don't solve it till the end of the book

Mark's Gospel is a bit like that keeps raising the questions who is this man and how do we respond but Judges is different from that it tells us right near the beginning what this book is about what to expect so it's not a surprise when we read the stories of Deborah and Gideon and Jephthah and Samson which we'll do in the next few weeks and so on it tells us in these opening two chapters what the book is about and what the pattern of the book is the cycle that I mentioned but a cycle that is actually a downward spiral one other introductory comment leadership is a big issue in the Bible in an Australian society and often in a church society we want to downplay leadership we try to feel more egalitarian I guess but the Bible actually gives a lot of attention to leaders there is a lot of description about the leaders of God's people in the scriptures so we read about often in great detail kings prophets priests apostles and judges amongst others and not only are we given lengthy descriptions of leaders but we're also given many instructions for leaders how they should behave under God and so in the book of Exodus there is instructions for leaders in the book of Leviticus instructions for priests in the book of Deuteronomy the instructions for prophets as well as kings amongst others in the book of Joshua a charge to a leader and so on throughout the Old and the New Testament in fact some of the epistles are really instructions to leaders from Paul to Timothy and Titus for example so leadership is very important in the scriptures and the leaders of God's people are very important people and often the failure of God's people in the scriptures is tied to the failure of the leaders of God's people so that while the average person of God is to blame for his or her own failure and sin the failure of God's people is also clearly directed to the failure of the leaders of God's people whether it's a king or a judge or a prophet or a false apostle or whatever and it's the same today one reason why

I think there are so many church buildings around the western world that are empty or derelict or now pancake parlours or whatever is because not so much because people don't come but because the ministers have actually emptied the churches so leaders bear a great responsibility in the scriptures for the people of God entrusted to their charge now that's important because this book is called Judges it's about Judges it's about leaders of God's people although they are leaders who often failed and this book of Judges begins with the death of a great leader Joshua called the servant of the Lord a revered title that had belonged to Moses and that death was applied also to Joshua Joshua was a leader who led the people of God into the promised land from the wilderness after 40 years in the wilderness

[7 : 50] Moses had died outside the promised land and Joshua as leader had taken the people of God into the land and had brought about the conquest of the land under the mighty hand of God and throughout his leadership basically though there were exceptions the people of God remained faithful to God and worshipped the Lord and so early on in Judges we see a contrast between this great leader Joshua who has died and the implicit contrast of the leaders who follow him so in chapter 2 verse 6 on page 190 when Joshua dismissed the people the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land the people worshipped 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 Joshua son of Nun the servant of the Lord died at the age of 110 years so they buried him within the bounds of his inheritance in Timnath-Heres in the hill country of Ephraim north of Mount Gaash but now this book sounds an ominous note when the previous great leader

Moses had died God raised up and appointed Joshua and charged him with the leadership of the people of God but now there is no equivalent raising up of a great leader to follow Joshua by God indeed the ominous note is also that when Joshua died and the elders who outlived him had died and that whole generation had passed away verse 10 tells us another generation grew up after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel now this book is sounding here deliberate warning signals for us we're meant to be reading it from this point on with alarm bells in our ears the expression that Israel did not know the Lord or the work that he'd done for Israel is probably meant to remind us of a similar expression back in the book of Exodus when a Pharaoh arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph or the Lord and what things had happened around at the end of the book of Genesis and the situation then was that that Pharaoh brought oppression and persecution to the people of God this is now worse for this is the people of God who do not know

God and what God has done for his people but also there's no record here of a leader being raised up as Joshua was when Moses died there is no replacement mentioned here for Joshua after his death and indeed that contrast is even more clear when we see the very opening verse of this book verse 1 of chapter 1 says after the death of Joshua the Israelites inquired of the Lord who shall go up for us against the Canaanites and you compare that to the very first verse of the book before it the book of Joshua which begins after the death of Moses God in effect appointed Joshua so the book is telling us from the very beginning there is no leader raised up like Joshua was to succeed Moses there is no successor to Joshua in the same capacity and the people's leadership is now under threat one of the saddest features it seems to me from the position of middle age as I am of old age is loss of memory and it's sad to see people who had sharp minds becoming forgetful and forgetting who people are and where they are or where they live and those sorts of things and I know many of you if not all of you have had family members who are facing that or have faced that in the past there is a sense in which

Israel's problem is the onset of memory loss it's actually short term memory loss because the events that they have forgotten as a nation are not long ago it's the events of the previous generation the conquest of the promised land and the miraculous victories that God had won for Israel under the leadership of Joshua and all too soon it is forgotten from the national memory so this generation has come up that did not know the Lord or the work that he'd done for Israel it's forgotten in the national history of Israel so soon but the loss of memory is not just an intellectual disability that is it's not just something in the mind that has gone awry here because in the scriptures to lose memory or to forget what God has done or to forget who God is is not just a sort of absent mindedness it is a moral failure so to forget

God is to disobey God and to turn away from him and that's exactly what we find here as we do all through the scriptures both Old and New Testaments when people forget God it means that they turn away from him and disobey him so here they did not know God or the work that he'd done for Israel at the end of verse 10 and verse 11 goes immediately to say then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord you see the moral connection if you forget what God has done for you if you ignore it or put it to the side then the outcome is moral failure doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord and that is what Israel is guilty of here they've forgotten God in their national memory and that means they do what is evil in the sight of the Lord and in particular that evil is the practice of idolatry the worship of false and other gods and this is step one in the cycle I mentioned before step one is Israel turns to other gods in the land so see how verse 11 continues they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshipped the Baals and they abandoned the Lord the God of their ancestors who had brought them out of the land of Egypt they abandoned God because they've forgotten what he's done for them and so in replacement of him they turn to find other gods they've forgotten the promises of God made to Abraham the way that God has brought about fulfilment of many of those promises the way God's brought them out of rescue from Egypt through the Red Sea and the plagues against Pharaoh they've forgotten the miraculous provisions in the wilderness they've forgotten the miraculous victories such as the walls of Jericho tumbling down at the sound of the trumpet and so on all of that's gone and as a result therefore they abandoned

[14 : 45] God and they put other gods in his place so they turned to the gods of the nations round about verse 12 continues they followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them and bowed down to them and they provoked the Lord to anger now we need to understand here something of the appeal of the Canaanite gods the gods of the nations around about them the nations that are still left in the promised land and are surrounding the promised land were fairly appealing let me say they were basically fertility gods that is they were gods who were on about producing crops rain animals children fertility gods and the means of getting those gods to produce those things for you was not through self-denial or fasting and lots of prayer and all those sorts of things basically the way that you got the Canaanite gods or the Baals as they're called literally a word for lord or master the way that you got them to produce fertility for you children crops rain animals was to engage in sexual activity with the temple prostitutes male or female it didn't seem to matter so you can see that other religions can be quite appealing the sad thing is that so many so quickly people abandon the living god for false ones here it is only one generation after the miraculous conquest and the people of God are going after the other gods of the nations round about so there's a warning here to us sometimes we think that the Christian tradition will just keep going and going and going but it's only ever safe for the current generation we have great responsibility as the people of God to ensure that the Christian faith is taught to the next generation so that they know and that they will not forget who the Lord is and what he the Lord their God has done for them it is also a warning to us about why biblical illiteracy is so dangerous when people know their bibles so little they know God so little and hence they're much more vulnerable to turning away that's certainly the case in the western church we Christians today are much more biblically illiterate than our predecessor

Christians were so we find I find say at theological college people in the first year course I teach know less and less as a generalisation about the old testament that I teach compared to 15, 20, 50, 100 years ago when people came to theological colleges I suspect we see it this is a trivial example but we see it in the hymns that we sing less and less are they full of resonating with biblical quotes and references in our modern hymn book that we use here the blue hymn books there's a hymn that we sing O God of Bethel O God of Jacob but the original hymn is actually O God of Bethel but I think the revisionists thought that people don't know their bibles so well they probably more know Jacob but they wouldn't have any idea what Bethel was about so they changed the word I think we've got to be careful that we're not like ancient Israel that is quick to give up knowing who the Lord is and what he's done for us and the next generation suffer the consequences it is also why there is another contrast here in Judges with the book of Joshua when Joshua was appointed the leader of God's people in chapter one we saw

I preached on this a couple of weeks ago in the evening the charge to Joshua was to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night not let it out of his mouth there is no charge here for the leaders in Judges and none of them ever seem to practice it so wherever the law of the Lord the word of God or the story of what God has done for God's people is held loosely to then people become less and less biblically literate less and less do they know who God is and what he's done and more and more vulnerable are they to forget the Lord to abandon him and to worship other gods well in response to step one Israel's idolatry and turning away from God step two is that God is angry in response so the end of verse 12 they provoke the Lord their God to anger verse 14 the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around so that they could no longer withstand their enemies whenever they marched out the hand of the Lord was against them to bring misfortune as the Lord had warned them and sworn to them so in response

God's anger is seen in his punishment of his people and he hands them over to the enemies about them and they are defeated we might well think well this is the Old Testament God isn't it the God of wrath and anger aren't we glad that we have the New Testament the God of love and mercy and compassion but it's the same God in both Testaments and the expression that's used here that God in his punishment and anger handed them over to the plunderers is exactly what God does in his anger and punishment against people in the New Testament who sin as well in Romans chapter 1 when people pursue the idolatry of sexual immorality God hands them over to the path they've chosen to go down and that's exactly what God is doing here they choose the gods of the other nations so God hands them over to the other nations as fodder for them in war and that's what he still does as the New

Testament as I said in Romans 1 makes clear the punishment fits the crime if you want to worship another God God will hand you over to the consequences of that God and all that that comes with and for ancient Israel worshipping the gods of the Canaanites would mean being conquered by those same Canaanites so that's step two the anger and punishment of God against Israel step three very briefly at the end of verse 15 is and they were in great distress as a result of being defeated by the enemies around about them the Israelites were in distress and the word exactly reminds us of Israel in Egypt enslaved to Pharaoh in distress crying out in their pain and bewilderment in the early parts of the book of Exodus they've forgotten God's rescue from Egypt and now they're back in the same sort of situation in effect step four God inexplicably really raised up judges leaders for the people we shouldn't think here of a white wigged fellow judge walking around in 18th century costume a judge here is a military leader somebody who will lead the people govern rule it and in particular fight battles as the leader of the people of God there's no reason for God to raise up the judges though at times in this book when they cry out in distress there seems to be a sense of repentance in their cry that is not always the case and certainly not at the end of the book their distress though provokes

[22:18] God's pity his mercy his compassion for them and even when he raises up a judge for them to bring them deliverance from their enemies verse 17 tells us yet they did not listen even to their judge for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them you see this is a people who doesn't deserve to have a judge raised up by God so what we find here is a God of mercy and compassion a God of grace saving a people who do not deserve to be saved and again we find that this is the same God as in the New Testament the God who can express anger and punishment against sin is the same God who has mercy and compassion on the very same sinners who do not deserve the mercy and the compassion that he gives them the judge brings them victory verse 18 says and God does this at the end of verse 18 it says he was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them and again it reminds us of Israel and oppressed by Pharaoh again it reminds us of what

Israel's forgotten God saving his people in Egypt and bringing them to the promised land so that was step one Israel's idolatry step two God's anger and punishment step three their distress and step four God raises up a judge who brings them victory and step five goes back to step one the judge dies and Israel returns to its sinful ways and the cycle begins all over again they go back to their idolatry God gets angry he punishes them after a while they're in distress they cry out God saves them by raising up a judge who brings the victory when the judge dies they all go back again and start the cycle over again so this passage you see in chapter two tells us what to expect in this book and when we get into chapter three there's Othniel and then Ehud and Shamgar and then next week we'll see Deborah and then after that there's Gideon and Jephthah and Samson each one is a cycle as described here in chapter two the book's telling us in advance what to expect in a sense and this lasted for 300 or more years but it's actually not quite just that it's more insidious and more pernicious than that because as I said at the beginning this is not just a cycle going round and round in circles this is a downward spiral and each time round the circle Israel is down a level from where it was at the beginning of the previous cycle each time round Israel gets worse its leaders get worse so verse 19 tells us whenever the judge died they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors following other gods worshipping them and bowing down to them they would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways and that's what we find in this book each sequence leads us to a judge who is more compromised than the one before the best judges the best leaders of the people are early in the book the worst is at the end

Samson and as you go through each of them gets it seems weaker or worse than the predecessor early in the book when the judge has victory we're told that there is rest from the enemies but we're not told that in the last couple of cycles of the book and the culmination of the book the last five chapters is actually no judge at all the people of God in complete internal disarray and moral corruption it's not even an external pressure but they're falling apart internally as well that in effect is the bottom of the spiral for Israel what this pattern of a downward spiral is showing us is that human nature is like the law of gravity it falls and Israel falls and Israel keeps falling sliding down the slippery slope they do evil in the eyes of the Lord we're told in verse 11 when they abandon the

Lord but by the end of the book we're told that Israel did what was right in their own eyes because as they abandon the Lord and do what is evil in his eyes so compromised do they become that what they actually do that is evil they actually think is right in their own eyes so far from the Lord have they gone and even the best of the leaders in this book cannot arrest the slide so the best judges they don't do it but elsewhere in Israel's history outside this book it's the same the best leaders of God's people Moses or David or Solomon or Joshua by and large cannot in the end arrest the slide of God's people down this slippery slope of sin and it's little different today we so easily forget what the Lord has done we end up then doing evil in our own eyes and then the next step is that we actually think that what we're doing that's evil is actually right in our own eyes evil in

God's eyes but right in our eyes that's a description of our society and sadly even sadder it's a description of our church when our church abandons the scriptures that remind us of what the law has done the God has done for us and who he is this book ends yearning for a good leader the last verse of judges says in those days there was no king in Israel all the people did what was right in their own eyes it's not just a statement of fact it's a statement of looking forward of anticipation longing or even yearning for a king but a king who'll do more than rescue God's people from their enemy nations round about a king who will arrest the slide into sin a king you see who'll be a greater rescuer than any of these judges ever were a king who'll change the heart of God's people and 1400 years after Joshua's death that king came a huge

[29 : 01] USA who killed wings he Thank you.