

GOOD COMING OUT OF BAD

• JUDGES 3:1-7 •

"Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them. . . . to find out if they would obey the commandments of the Lord, . . ." (3:1, 4).

A fellow was crying on the shoulder of a dear friend. The girl of his dreams had recently refused his proposal of marriage, and now his life seemed so empty. "Don't let that get you down," advised the friend. "A woman's 'no' often means 'yes.'" "She didn't say 'no,'" the man replied. "She said, 'Phooey.'"

Judges pictures occasions on which Israel said, "Phooey," to God. God instructed His people to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan. Every human being along with all of their idols were to be destroyed. Israel not only failed to carry out this command, but they even began to serve the idols of the land. This produced the vicious cycle of sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, and sin again. This is a thoroughly depressing scene in the history of God's people. If the story stopped at that point, Judges would be the most dismal book in all of the Bible.

Judges 3 shows the difference that God makes when He enters the picture. How exciting it is to see God working to remedy the mistakes of the people He loves so much. What a comfort it is to know that our God can take a muddled life and turn it into a beautiful work of art! Judges 3 pictures God working through His people in spite of their failures!

Verses 1 and 2 say,

Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them (that is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly).

In verse 4 the writer says these nations "were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the Lord." Israel had obviously failed in their service to God by not destroying the people of the land. However, God did not allow their failure to destroy the fulfillment of His will. In fact, God even used their failures to accomplish His purposes for the future.

God used the very people that should have been destroyed years ago to test His people in two vital areas. First, He wanted to test them in war. This generation of Israelites had not participated in the wars by which Israel originally conquered the land. Thus, they had no experience in the ways of war. God was now going to teach them through the use of the nations around them. Second, God wanted to test their willingness to obey Him. Just as many had never fought in battle, many of those same people had never had a real opportunity to prove their loyalty to Jehovah. This was an opportunity to see if His people would obey His commands. Thus, God was able to work through the failures of His people in the past to see if His people would carry out His will at this time.

Along with every test came an opportunity for the people of God. Through the wars they would fight, they would learn the meaning of commitment to a cause. They would learn that being children of God would cost them something. Through this time of testing, God's people would learn what it means to obey God and to follow His commands with diligence and faithfulness. Though these would be trying times, God afforded His people opportunities to learn from their failures.

IN OUR SINS

Just as God's tests provided opportunities for His people in the days of the judges, He continues to provide tests for His children today. For example, God even gives us opportunities in our sins. Even as disappointing as Israel was to God, He continued to call them to His side. Isaiah 1:18 says: "'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the Lord, 'Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.'" How beautiful God's amazing grace is!

With this kind of grace available to us, no reason remains for us to continually grovel in the guilt which has arisen from the failures in our lives. That is why the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to "lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us" (Hebrews 12:1). We cannot "run the race of Christianity" while carrying a load of sin on our backs. No heavier load can sin lay upon us than that of guilt. Guilt can linger long after the repentance and forgiveness. This kind of heart condition causes one to say, "I know that God has forgiven me, but I cannot forgive myself." This person will remain so blinded by his guilt that he will never clearly see the opportunities God can give him.

Sin is an awful thing. It strikes at the very heart of our loving heavenly Father. However, after we have repented and obtained forgiveness, a new world of opportunity suddenly dawns. We can show others that a Christian can rebound from a failure to live a faithful life before God.

IN OUR SUFFERINGS

Paul explained to his Philippian brethren that the suffering which he encountered as a prisoner in Rome had resulted in "the greater progress of the gospel" (Philippians 1:12, 13). Because of his imprisonment, he was able to share the gospel story

"throughout the whole praetorian guard." This would not have been possible for an outsider, but Paul could do it because he was a prisoner. Thus, opportunity sprang from suffering. For this reason, Paul could write that he "rejoiced in his tribulation" (Romans 5:3). He knew that "tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." In other words, the troubles that will cause tears to stain your cheeks are the very troubles that give you the hope for a mansion in heaven. Opportunity rises from suffering!

One of the old arguments against the existence of God is that a totally good and all powerful God would not allow the human suffering that exists. But this reasoning assumes that suffering is a completely evil experience from which no good ever comes. While suffering is a terrible thing, God is able to bring good out of suffering.

In one dialect of the Chinese language, the word "crisis" is written with two characters. One character means "danger," and the other means "opportunity." It would seem that the Chinese understand the hidden value of suffering. With every crisis that comes to our lives comes a very real and hidden danger. After all, it would not be a crisis if nothing bad were happening. However, with every crisis comes something else that is just as real—the opportunity for growth. When we are in the middle of a crisis, we do not want to see the good that can come out of it. We naturally grieve before we start looking optimistically at what has happened. We cry, and we cry some more, until one day we awaken to see the opportunities that have come our way. That is when God can begin to help us grow.

While we would never pray for trouble to touch the life of anyone, we certainly do see the powerful effect suffering has. The sad reality is that some will never feel the need for God until tragedy strikes. These folks will never look up toward heaven until they are lying helplessly on their backs.

You would think we could see the farthest when the sun is shining bright, but that is not the case. At midnight we can see the farthest as the stars in the sky sparkle thousands of miles above us. If we only experience in our lives the light of day, we will never know the beauties that can only be seen at night. As in the days of the judges, God takes the clay of our failures and

struggles and helps us to bring good out of them.

CONCLUSION

God brought good out of the bad in the life of the nation of Israel. We do not sin that grace may abound, but when we do fail, we have the assurance that God (upon our genuine repentance) can bring good out of our failures. He does not glorify our sin, but He does forgive it and enable us to learn from it.

God brings good out of our sufferings as well. He does not delight in our suffering. He even weeps as we weep. He does, however, turn our sufferings into good. When suffering comes, we learn of our blessings, are enabled to see the important things of life, and we see the strength we have in God.

Live for God faithfully. When failure and suffering come, let God turn them into good.

—Craig Tappe

Applying Scripture to Life

The Christian's Wealth

Bill Bright tells this story: "Some years ago I visited a famous oil area in the United States. In that area there was a man by the name of Yates, who owned a large sheep ranch. Yet Mr. Yates was unable to pay the mortgage on his ranch and was in danger of losing it. He had little money and did everything he could to try to provide food and clothing for his children, while trying to pay the mortgage. This poverty-stricken person was indeed one of the most wealthy men in the world, though he did not know it.

"One day, representatives from an oil company came to visit him. 'We believe there's oil on your property,' they said, 'and we'd like to drill.' They began to drill, and within a few days, at 1,115 feet, they discovered a great ocean of oil. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day; the second came in at 180,000 barrels a day. And after 35 years of production, one of the wells still has the capacity to produce 125,000 barrels per day.

"This man owned it all. It was his ranch. And though a modest-sized ranch, it covered this

great ocean of oil. It was all his. The day he purchased the land, he received with it all the oil and mineral rights. I have visited that area on different occasions, and I have even seen the oil oozing up out of the casings of the producing wells. He was a man of great wealth but he did not know it. He was living in great poverty because of his lack of knowledge.

"I do not know of a better illustration of the Christian life. The moment we receive Christ, all the mighty power of God is available to us."

Tomorrow

A teenage girl in Morris West's novel *The Clowns of God* speaks for many youth when she says to her father, "You have given us everything except tomorrow."

Judgment Day

A preacher stopped preaching for three months, and when he was asked, "Why?" he replied, "I am going to have my judgment day now while I can do something about it."

Impersonal Style

A president of Dartmouth College was criticized for his impersonal style. He was talking to his daughter about the matter and inquired, "Susan, do you think I'm cold, aloof, and noncommunicative?" Her reply said much: "Oh, no, Mr. President, I don't think so."

Feel Deeply

Someone has rightly said, "It is a matter of universal observation that a speaker who would excite deep feeling must feel deeply himself." David Hume was a great skeptic and condemned much of that which the Christian holds dear. One day, as he was rushing through the streets of his city, hurriedly putting on his raincoat, someone stopped him and said, "Mr. Hume, where are you going in such a hurry?" "To hear George Whitefield," came the answer. Utterly surprised, the questioner asked, "Why, you don't believe what Mr. Whitefield does, do you?" "Certainly not!" came the answer. "But Whitefield does, and I want to hear a man who does."