



Chapter 4 - Bugs and Cuts
Preludes of Salvation: Judges 1-16

1. Introduction

- This morning, we begin with Chapter 4 in the preaching series we have been running since the beginning of the year, which is called 'The Story of God and Us'. Chapter 4 is entitled 'Bugs and Cuts' (which I'll explain shortly). Before we start with Chapter 4, it will be helpful for us to recap the first three chapters and to remind ourselves as to where we started in this story, and ultimately, to see where we are going with it.
- A short summary:
 - Chapter 1 was called 'Wholeness', and painted a picture of the 'Shalom' of God, people, and the environment, starting with the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2.
 - Chapter 2 was called 'Paradise Lost', and details how people rebelled against God, and lost the Shalom, resulting in brokenness and destruction, including a huge flood. But God does not leave the story there; rather He plants a small sapling (so to speak) and starts to turn things around.
 - Chapter 3 (which we have just finished) was called 'The Sapling', and detailed God's work with Abraham and the 12 Tribes of Israel. It covered the Exodus, and that Paul Warby affectionately calls 'The Intodus'. And that is where we got to last week.
 - Chapter 4 then is going to cover how the Sapling grows under the Theocracy, which then gets morphed into a nation in the time of Judges. But soon the people demand a king, so that they can be like their neighbours, who also have kings, and the drama begins. The Judge of the time, Samuel, warns them against this, as centralising such a huge amount of power in any one person's hands is a dangerous move to make. David is probably the best king (and Israel probably comes closest to the restoration of right relationship with God), however, he is human and

flawed. In time, the Nation splits into the Northern and the Southern kingdoms, and the role of the prophets increases, as God uses them to remind the Israelites about justice, true salvation, and representing God and his Shalom properly.

- So that's the backdrop. Today we start with the first 16 chapters of Judges, and cover three notable personalities, each providing us with a prelude to salvation.
- Reading the book of Judges is like reading a history textbook, except that it oscillates from the boring (longs lists of unpronounceable names) to the bizarre (e.g. the lists of 'plunder' from the enemy camps - like camel's ornaments and other interesting items).
- Really what we are encountering though, is the narrative around a faithful God, dealing with an unfaithful people - the Israelites would be well led and obedient (and enjoy prosperity and peace) under any number of the Judges, and then lose the plot and end up in terrible warfare and destruction.
- In this book, The people fail to obey God and to rid the land of 'weeds' (with all the necessary caveats about 'texts of terror' and scripturally-sanctioned genocide in place), where 'weeds' refers to the Canaanites and their gods, and so these forces start to destroy the sapling of wholeness which God has raised up.
- So God raises Judges (or redeemers) to rescue the people of Israel from the mess they created through their disobedience.
- A great 'summary text' of the book of Judges is Judges 2:1 - 3:6

Judges 2

The Angel of the LORD at Bokim

¹ The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, ² and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? ³ Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."

⁴ When the angel of the LORD had spoken these things to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud, ⁵ and they called that place Bokim. ^[a] There they offered sacrifices to the LORD.

Disobedience and Defeat

⁶ After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to his own inheritance. ⁷ 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.

⁸ Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres ^[b] in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² 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 ¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, ^[i] who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, ²¹ I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. ²² I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did." ²³ The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.

Judges 3

¹ These are the nations the LORD left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan ² (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience): ³ the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo ^[i] Hamath. ⁴ They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands, which he had given their forefathers through Moses.

⁵ The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁶ They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.

- To get a sense of the flavour of the book of Judges (and to understand how God was dealing with Israel at this time), I want to cover three 'personalities' I mentioned earlier, namely Gideon, Samson and Ruth.

2. The need for a Redeemer (preludes to salvation)

Reading: Judges 1 - 16

2.1. Gideon - 'A sword for the Lord' - Judges 7:2

- The story of Gideon appears in Judges 6, 7, & 8:1-23. When the angel of the Lord first comes to Gideon, he says, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." Gideon seemed to be anything but a mighty warrior. He was so afraid of the Midianites that he was threshing wheat in a place where the wind would not be able to help carry the chaff away. He evidently didn't think God was with him, or if he did think so, he wasn't very confident that God would take care of him. God spoke to him in a way more appropriate for the person he would become than for the person he was.
- As we read about Gideon, we see that he has many fears and that he is not very confident. He has a poor self image. He's afraid of the Midianites; he's afraid of the men in his own village and so he destroys the altar to Baal at night. He is evidently afraid of the enemy's army when it gathers in a nearby valley.
- He is uncertain as well as afraid. He isn't sure God is talking to him when the angel of the Lord first appears to him. He isn't sure he has understood God's instructions correctly, so he asks God for a sign. When God gives him the sign he asked for, he isn't sure that it is God speaking--he thinks it might be a coincidence--so he asks God for another sign, just the opposite of the first one.
- God was patient with Gideon's weaknesses. God gave him the signs he needed to be confident that he understood God's direction. He showed him the fear of the enemy by letting him overhear the interpretation of a dream one of the enemy soldiers had had the night before.
- It is interesting that Isaiah uses the story of Gideon defeating the Midianites as a prelude to God bringing salvation through his prophesied about Son, and consequently overturning tyranny and oppression, and showing the way of God as the way of peace, not through victory and conquest (as Empire would put it, whether Roman, Canaanite or Israeli).
- Isaiah 9:4-7

For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, ^{lb} Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

- First, we are promised victory over tyranny - but not the normal kind of victory. 'The yoke of their burden, the rod of the oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.' Now just as we know the stories of the Somme and of Dunkirk, so Isaiah's hearers knew the stories of the old battles; and the point of the famous victory over the Midianites was that it wasn't a battle at all. Gideon and his men surrounded the camp by night, blew their trumpets and waved their torches, and the tyrannical Midianites fled in panic. Justice re-established without violence.
- Thus: justice attained without violence; peace attained without accompanying tyranny.
- And Isaiah says: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; for to us a Son is given, the Prince of Peace.' And we who live between the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the final establishment of the kingdom be came to bring, the kingdom in which justice and peace shall be knit together at last and forever - we are entrusted with a mission. Not simply to save a few souls from the wreck of this world, since God so loved the world and has promised to redeem it. Nor simply to tinker with the world's own systems, merely to do things a bit differently here or there. No: rather, by prayer and courage, and holiness and hard work - and it will be hard work - we are called to discover the practical ways in today's and tomorrow's world of seeking justice without violence, of making and maintaining peace without tyranny.

- Gideon is thus a prelude to Christ, a bringer of peace without violence or tyranny.

2.2. Samson

- Samson is one of those characters in the Bible who seems to be bigger than life: he kills a lion with his bare hands; he carries off the gates of a city; he catches foxes, ties their tails together, and puts torches in them to let them loose in the fields of his enemies; and he ends his life by pulling down the temple of Dagon on himself and on a full house of Philistines.
- His birth was announced to his mother by an angel (hmmm, who else does this remind us of?), he lived his life as a Nazarite (someone set aside for special service to God); he is described as someone God chose to use to set Israel free from their oppressors. Consider all the possible parallels between Samson and Jesus. Samson is a type of Christ.
- Samson had his personality quirks too. He wouldn't take advice from wiser people; he had a bad temper that got him into trouble with the Philistines more than once; he seemed to be unable to control his desires for different women; eventually ending up with Philistine women (a big no no for a God who destroyed foreign nations); and was so weak that he couldn't keep a secret from these women even when he knew he should keep his mouth shut.
- What do we get out of the story of Samson?
 - **People have power to shape reality in relationship with God.** What we don't see in Judges, or in the story of Samson, is God overriding people's free will. Samson is able to behave badly, not because God wants him to, but because he chooses to.
 - What we do see, however, is a God who picks up the pieces and uses the brokenness of humanity to co-labour and achieve his purposes.

2.3. Ruth

- The story of Ruth (and Naomi) is found in Ruth 1-4.
- The story of Ruth is really important because it is an example of how a foreigner could join the people of God (especially important in light of the texts on genocide of the Canaanites and other foreigners).
- The story focuses on Naomi first. When we are introduced to her, she has a husband and two sons, but they have lost everything because of a famine in the land of Judah. So, in desperation, they leave their family property located near Bethlehem and go to Moab, a neighboring country, to try to find a way to make a

living.

- In Moab, Naomi's two sons found wives. It looked like life was going to turn out okay, even though they were not in their own country. However, things went sour. First Naomi's husband died, leaving her without support except for what her sons could provide. Then the two sons died, leaving her at the mercies of her two daughters-in-law and their families. She must have felt very vulnerable, being entirely dependent on the charity of people who were not from her own people. Hearing that the famine had broken in Judah, she decided to go back to Bethlehem, and she encouraged her daughters-in-law to return to their families.
- The second part of the story continues Naomi's story, but the focus shifts to Ruth, one of her daughters-in-law. Ruth refuses to leave Naomi, and returns with her to Judah, where she now becomes an alien in a foreign country, just as Naomi had been in Moab. Things were at their absolute worst. When they return, people recognize Naomi, kind of, but she has changed so much that they say, "Can this be Naomi?" (1:19). Naomi responds, "Don't call me Naomi, but rather Mara because God has made my life bitter. I left full, but I'm coming back empty. God has brought misfortune on me" (1:20-21). "Mara" means "bitter." So, not only was Naomi completely at the mercies of peoples' good will, without money or property, and completely bereft of her family, except for Ruth, she was also bitter, and she attributed her misfortune to God's afflicting her life.
- Things were bad, but life had to go on, so Ruth volunteered to go gleaning in the fields. People who were destitute would go to fields that were being harvested and follow along, at a respectful distance, behind the harvesters and pick up the little bit accidentally left behind. Even though God had instructed his people to allow this practice as a kindness, some people resented the poor getting even the little bit they could pick up by gleaning. So it must have been humiliating and frightening to go to the fields.
- The story begins its upward swing at this point. Just when Naomi and Ruth are at the very bottom of their lives, they keep obeying God, and He begins to open doors. First, she picks a field at random, but it turns out to be the field of Boaz, a kind man, who was a close relative of Naomi.
- Second, Naomi begins to have hope that she will be able to get her land back. God had made provision in the Law for relatives to be able to buy back property that had been sold in hard times (Leviticus 25:23-28). This provision came to be known as the "law of the kinsman redeemer." Boaz was a wealthy man, and he was a relative (or kinsman), so he could buy back Naomi's land for her if he wanted to, but the law had also come to have an extra condition attached to it:

if there was a widow of the person who was the rightful heir of the land, then the kinsman redeemer was to marry her so that she could have children and thereby keep the line of inheritance going.

- So, not only would Boaz need to be generous enough to buy the land back and give it to Naomi and Ruth (who was the widow of the rightful heir), but he would have to marry Ruth so that she could have children. This part of the story is very important, because Jesus came through the line from Judah, through Rahab and Ruth to David (Matthew 1:3-6).
- As it turned out, Boaz did marry Ruth, so Naomi and Ruth got their land back and were provided for. Furthermore, Ruth had a child with Boaz, and she named him Obed. Obed became the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David, and Jesus is from the line of David
- What do we do with this? Ruth is the prelude to a multi-ethnic people of God. She embodies what Jesus achieved, and what became the new norm: people of every race, every geographical and cultural background, every shape, sort, and size were summoned and welcomed into this renewed people. Calling the church “the people of God” picks up this idea of the continuity, stressed throughout earliest Christianity, between the family of Abraham and the worldwide family of the church.

3. Conclusion

- We have started the story of Bugs and Cuts, the struggle for the sapling tree to grow amidst weeds and pestilence. From the first 16 chapters of the book of Judges, we see three ‘preludes to Salvation’ - Christ like figures who point to some element of God’s redeeming plan for this nation Israel.
 - We begin with Gideon, the trembling warrior, who actually subverts war and brings peace;
 - we then look to Samson, whose life had the unmistakable call of God, and the undeniable mess of humanity, and see God working his purposes in all circumstances (a bit of a metaphor for the book of Judges, and in fact scripture in general);
 - and finally, we explore Ruth’s life, and see who God grafted foreigners into his redeemed people.
- Let us pray. *May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy spirit be with us all. Amen.*

Sources

- 1) <http://www.evangelbaptist.org/highschool/lessons/gideon.htm>
- 2) http://www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Prince_Peace.htm
- 3) <http://www.evangelbaptist.org/highschool/lessons/samson.htm>
- 4) <http://www.evangelbaptist.org/highschool/lessons/ruth.htm>