

Passing the Faith Along

Judges 2:6-10

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I. A Disaster Waiting to Happen

The problem of inbred sin plagued the wandering Israelites who were fleeing from the grips of Egyptian slavery. Sin poked its rebellious head out while the people were waiting at the base of Mount Sinai for the return of Moses. Moses had not returned, and the people were getting impatient. Who was this God that Moses was talking to? The people cried out to Aaron, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him” (Exod 32:1). They wanted a visible god they could see. In reality, they wanted a god they could fashion themselves and control. They wanted the benefits that God provides without giving God the authority and worship he deserves. This rebelliousness deserved total destruction, but God responded, “I am the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (Exod 34:6-7).

The sinful condition of the people of Israel showed itself again in a significant way when the people were camped at Kadesh Barnea, near the southern border of the promised land of Canaan. According to Numbers 12-13, Moses had sent out twelve spies into Canaan to explore the land. When these spies returned from their expedition, they spoke of a land flowing with milk and honey, a place of great abundance and riches. Ten of the spies, however, looked at this promised land with terror, for there were powerful, fortified cities inhabited with big and fierce people. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, said that they could and should take possession of the land. Who did the people follow? Fear and doubt caused the people to say, “We should choose a new leader and go back to Egypt” (Num 14:4).

No trust, no worship, no fear of God. These sinful people were a disaster waiting to happen. And disaster did happen, over and over again.

A number of problems led to disaster. First, they were faced with a . . .

A. Decision

The people had made an important decision as they camped at Shechem some forty years later. The Israelites had conquered most of the land with the help of the Lord. Their leader, Joshua, was nearing the end of his life. Before he died, he wanted to make sure that the people were committed to the Lord. In his farewell speech, Joshua told the people, “Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lords seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” The

people responded back, “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!” On that day, Joshua and the people renewed their covenant with God.

They had a problem, however, that plagued the people of Old Testament times. Their **number one problem** was the tenacity of sin. They could not keep the terms of the covenant that they had made with God because they had a fallen nature. The law of God caused the sinful nature to show its ugly head. The Apostle Paul put it this way, “For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death” (Rom 7:11). In a way, we can’t really blame the Israelites for their disobedience, for we are just like them.

Second, the people of Israel faced . . .

B. Disobedience

When we come to the book of Judges, only a short time after the covenant renewal at Shechem, we find the problem of sin illustrated with the disobedience of the people. God had commanded the people to cleanse the land of impurity and unholiness. This meant that the Israelites must wipe out the unholy nations that lived in the land. They, as holy people, must live in a land purified of immorality and idolatry.

They faced a **second problem**: the problem of disobedience. According to Judges 2:2-3, the Israelites made covenants with the people they were to destroy. They failed to break down the altars of idolatry of these unholy people. God asks them, “Why have you done this? 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” (Judges 2:2-3).

They did not follow God with total obedience. They essentially had not consecrated their all to God. They had failed at what God had called them to be: a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:5).

Third, the people of Israel faced . . .

C. Death

Their **third problem** was that their leader, Joshua, had died (Judges 2:7). Joshua was their inspirational leader. He was a visionary leader. Most importantly, he was a spiritual leader dedicated to worshiping the Lord God and keeping his commandments. The people of Israel also faced the death of the Exodus generation. Those who had been through the discipline and miracles of the desert wanderings began to die.

Fourth, these deaths led up to . . .

D. Disaster

Judges 2:10-13 says, “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. 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.”

Did you hear their **fourth problem**? Their problem was a crisis of leadership. A whole new generation did not know the Lord. Trouble was brewing over the horizon as the peoples the Israelites

failed to conquer would soon plague them with almost constant warfare. The book of Judges talks about a vicious cycle. The people would fall into sin and idolatry. The enemies would conquer them. They would cry out to God for mercy. God would respond by sending mighty men called judges to lead the people to freedom. Then there would be a time of peace in the land—until they would fall again into sin. Their disobedience led to disaster. Paul knew about the problem of sin. He writes in Romans 7:23, “I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.”

Sin leads to Disaster. This disaster was a result of, second, . . .

II. The Crisis of Faith

What went wrong with the Israelites? Why did they find themselves under cyclical bondage to their immoral neighbors? One is that *they failed to keep the . . .*

A. Creed

The people of Israel failed to pass their faith on to the next generation. Their problem was a family problem. It was a generational problem. It was a leadership problem. The people failed to do precisely what God had outlined in Deuteronomy 6:6-9: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” If the Exodus generation would have done that, their children may have found peace in the land. They failed to pass along the faith.

Another thing they failed to do was make a good . . .

B. Choice

Each generation of leaders must make personal choices of faith. A generation grew up without knowing God. Somewhere along the line, some parents made a terrible choice about what they taught their children. Some leaders failed to pass along to their followers the essential elements of the faith. The choices we make as leaders and parents have influence for many years ahead.

Their failure to keep the creed and make a good choice led to a . . .

C. Crisis

Theirs was a . . .

Crisis of faith

Crisis of commitment

Crisis of leadership.

Sin is crouching at the door of those who leave the door ajar.

Israel failed to develop leaders from the new generation. They were unwilling to pay the price that developing leaders takes.

III. The Price to Be Paid

Developing leaders always has a price. *One requirement in developing leaders for the next generation is*

A. Personhood

What do our students, our children, our followers come seeking from us? They look to us as examples of . . .

1. Intimate and genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. It is easy in the academy to let spirituality take second seat to intellectuality. We must let our scholarship enhance our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Holy Living without fault or blame. We must practice the holiness that we preach.

3. Wisdom beyond knowledge. Our students can go to the books for knowledge, but they come to us for wisdom. Wisdom costs; it costs us ourselves as we lay ourselves on the altar of commitment and become living sacrifices who know the mind of Christ (Rom 12:1-2).

4. Integrity. Can we be transparent with the people we lead?

5. Vision for the world. A leader with vision is like a gasoline station next to a welding yard. It only takes a spark to get the fire going!

Who you are as a leader will determine to a great extent who your followers will be in the future.

B. Proclamation

Paul exhorted Timothy in 1 Tim 4:13, “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of the Scripture, to exhortation, and to teaching.” Proclamation is a vital ingredient in passing the faith along. We will be mistaken, however, if we think that proclamation is simply speaking forth a prepared message.

Teaching and preaching would be great fun if all we had to do was tell our listeners what we have prepared; if all we had to do was transfer our notes to our students’ notebooks; if all we had to do was fill the time slot from 11:30 a.m. until noon on Sunday mornings with some nice, fancy rhetoric.

Passing the faith along involves . . .

1. Commitment. The new generation of Israelites did not have the commitment that Joshua’s generation had. And because of that, they failed in their calling to be a holy people.

2. Passion. Passion comes from realizing what God has done to you and for you. It comes from having the mind of Christ which loves the world unconditionally. The Israelites had no passion for God.

3. Knowledge. The object of our knowledge is God and God’s ways in the world. We call this theology. The Israelites failed at theology. They turned to meaningless and empty idols that had no power to save.

4. Skill. Skill is learned and can be taught to others. The new generation did not have the skills of godly leadership. God had to raise up special people called judges to lead these people to victory. They failed to follow the system of leadership that God had set up in the Torah.

Finally, passing the faith along takes . . .

C. Proficiency

We must make sure the next generation of leaders is firmly grounded in the Word of God. God may lead only a few of us here to become major theologians of the church. But all of us can become effective theologians in our context and within our responsibility.

As leaders, we need to be effective communicators of doctrine to those we lead. To do this, we must know the doctrine ourselves. We must study the scriptures, history, culture, human nature, etc., until we become the efficient and authoritative mouthpieces of the Almighty God.

Conclusion

The measurement of our success as leaders in the church will be measured by the legacy we leave behind, whether our students and parishioners become effective leaders in the years ahead. John Maxwell has said that the true measure of leadership is influence. Are we effective influencers of a new generation of theologians? William A. Ward has said, “The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”

A group of tourists were visiting a beautiful village. They walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. One tourist asked, “Were any great men born in this village?” The old man replied, “No, only babies.” There are no instant heroes in this world or in the kingdom of God. There are no instant theologians and leaders in the church either. Growth takes time.

Jaroslave Pelikan wrote,

My life shall touch a dozen lives before this day is done;
Leave countless marks for good or ill, ere sets the evening sun.
This is the wish I always wish, the prayer I always pray:
Lord, may my life help other lives it touches by the way.¹

Let's pass the faith along!

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.