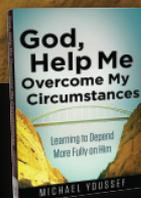


God, Help Me Overcome My Circumstances

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CHAPTER 2

BEWARE OF SPIRITUAL AMNESIA

Of all the books I have written, this book may be the most urgent, practical, and important. The book of Judges deals with the spiritual crisis we face today in our families and churches—a crisis of spiritual amnesia. As I look at our world, our secular and post-Christian culture, and our increasingly rudderless church, I see a mirror image of events that took place during the period of the judges.

Just as generations of Israelites in that era repeatedly fell away from God's commandments, our generation is falling away from its biblical foundation. As a culture, we have ceased to look for answers from the Word of God. Our schools and universities—many of which were founded as institutions of Christian instruction—no longer take the Bible seriously.

The satanic forces of this world are trying to cut us off from our heritage of faith and rob us of the truth—and *the satanic strategy is working*. Churches that once proclaimed the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ—namely, that Jesus alone saves—are now a dwindling minority. A 2008 survey released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life revealed that 70 percent of all Americans believe there are many religious paths to God and eternal life. This includes 65 percent of all self-identified Christians and 56 percent of all evangelicals. How can a person claim to be an evangelical Christian while denying the Lord's own claim (in John 14:6) to be the only way to God the Father? If Jesus is not the only way to God, then why did he have to die on the cross?

If we fail to transmit our faith and values to the next generation, our culture and our nation will suffer the same fate as ancient Israel.

That's why the book of Judges is so instructive for us today. It's a warning to us whether we are single or married, whether we are parents or grandparents or have no children of our own. If we fail to transmit our faith and values to the next generation, our culture and our nation will suffer the same fate as ancient Israel.

DON'T BECOME CANAANIZED

At the beginning of Judges 2, God sends an angel to shake the people of Israel out of their spiritual amnesia:

Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you." As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD (2:1-5).

The angel gives God's message to the people of Israel, reminding them of the covenant God has made with them—and of their disobedience. The angel's words hit the mark. The people are shaken from their spiritual amnesia, they remember the covenant between God and Israel, and they weep in repentance for having broken the covenant.

This passage shows us the lengths God will go to in extending mercy to his people. He actually sent an angel to remind them of all he had done for them and of the covenant he had made with them. The people of Israel were spiritual amnesiacs, and they had forgotten God's love for them.

The people of that generation did not set out to defy God or openly rebel against him. They continued to be religiously observant. They continued to do charitable works. They went through the motions of their religion.

But they had squeezed the truth of who God is to the margins of their lives. They didn't deny Yahweh or remove him from their society. They simply pushed him off to the side and denied him his central place. They wanted to worship God, but they also wanted to enjoy the Canaanite ways.

God had commanded Israel to eliminate the Canaanites (see Deuteronomy 20:16-18). But the Israelites could not bring themselves to do as God commanded. Instead, they found much to admire about the Canaanites. They cozied up to the Canaanites, exchanged agricultural and metalworking ideas, and even incorporated

some of the Canaanite religious practices into their worship of Yahweh. In short, God's chosen people became Canaanized.

The seeds of Israel's decline began with spiritual compromise—the same kind of spiritual compromise we now see throughout America. Our churches are compromising the truth of the gospel. Even many self-proclaimed evangelical Christians are compromising biblical truth and morality.

Many Christians today are like the Israelites who looked at the people around them and said, “What’s so bad about these Canaanites? They seem like nice people. Sure, they worship idols instead of Yahweh, but we should be tolerant and open-minded. I know God said we should have no other gods before him, but who are we to think we have the corner on truth? I’m sure there are many paths that lead to the same destination. Besides, I wouldn’t want anyone to think I’m intolerant.”

The seeds of Israel's decline began with spiritual compromise—the same kind of spiritual compromise we now see throughout America.

In truth, our God is an intolerant God—and rightfully so. He tells us, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20:4-5a). That is an intolerant statement by a righteously intolerant God. That’s what he means when he tells us he is a “jealous” God. He will not share his people with other gods. He will not tolerate idolatry.

Tolerance is not always a virtue. Showing tolerance toward sin, idolatry, blasphemy, demonic practices, and immorality is no virtue at all. Such tolerance is an offense to God, and it should be an offense to you and to me.

When Christians tolerate evil, when they allow moral lines to become blurred, then Christ is dethroned as Lord. Once he is relegated to being just one way to God among many, once he is no longer *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life, and the *only* way to God the Father, moral relativism is sure to follow. Once Christianity becomes just another religious philosophy—like the eightfold path of Buddhism, the five pillars of Islam, the dharma of Hinduism, or the bridge to total freedom of Scientology—the seeds of destruction have been planted. The authentic Christian faith is not a

moral principle or a spiritual practice. It's a relationship with the One who is the only way to eternal life.

If the book of Judges teaches us anything, it teaches that we must never give an inch to false religions, we must never settle for partial victories over sin, we must never give up our spiritual birthright, and we must never forget our spiritual heritage. Departure from the truth is never inevitable. We must always contend for every soul and pray intensely for our children and our children's children. We must stand firm for future generations so they will never fall prey to spiritual amnesia.

THE ART OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

The Bible tells us that children are a heritage from the Lord (see Psalm 127:3). Our children do not belong to us. God has placed them in our care. We are stewards of these precious souls God has entrusted to us. And one of the key responsibilities we have as stewards of these children is to train them for the battle, for spiritual warfare.

It's important that we understand that our enemy, the devil, is not very creative. Satan is not an original thinker and he has no new ideas. If you study the Bible and human history, you'll see that he has only one trick up his sleeve, and he relies on it over and over again. In every generation, he dresses it up and tries to sell it as a new idea, but it's the same deception he used in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 3:1, Satan said to Eve, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'"

**We must stand firm for future generations
so they will never fall prey to spiritual amnesia.**

Satan used this same trick on the generation of Joshua. After God had led Israel out of bondage in Egypt, through the Red Sea and the Jordan River, through one victory after another, Satan spoke to the Israelite people. His message was: "Are you sure you heard God correctly? Are you sure God really wants you to be so intolerant of other people and other faiths? You know, these Canaanite gods have a lot to offer. They are gods and goddesses of nature, of fertility, of pleasure. Surely God would want you to receive the blessings that come from worshiping these other gods."

And Satan is using this same trick on our generation today. He's whispering into the ears of church members, pastors, seminarians, and Bible teachers, "Are you sure you are interpreting the Bible correctly? Are you sure the stories of creation, Adam

and Eve, Noah, Moses, and Joshua are still believable in this scientific age? You know, the evolutionary scientists seem awfully sure of Darwinism. Maybe we should simply embrace evolution as a fact and treat the Bible as an allegory—filled with helpful insights, but not to be taken seriously as history.”

In the stories of the book of Judges, we see that our God of grace does not give up. He never lets us down and never lets us go.

Satan is fighting, cruelly and relentlessly, for the souls of our children. And that’s why we must teach our children the art of spiritual warfare. As parents, we are their role models, and we must allow them to watch us and learn from us as we do spiritual battle. It’s not enough to give our children a good education, a good financial start in life, and a pat on the back. To do so is to send our children into spiritual war without armor, without weapons, and without training for battle.

The apostle Paul tells us as parents to train our children and “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4b). Later he describes “the whole armor of God” that enables us to stand firm in the battle: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith (to extinguish Satan’s flaming darts), the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit (which is the Word of God), and the power of prayer (see Ephesians 6:13-18). This is how we equip our children and prepare them for battle. We equip them with the authority of the Word of God. We are committed to seeing our children win the only battle that truly matters—the battle for their eternal souls.

BLOOD ON OUR HANDS

The book of Judges serves as a warning, but it also serves as an encouragement for our faith. It demonstrates to us the relentless grace of God. Over and over, he delivers the people of Israel from their folly and sin. That is a great encouragement to our hearts today. In the stories of the book of Judges, we see that our God of grace does not give up. He never lets us down and never lets us go. He pursues us and continually draws us back to him.

The book of Judges picks up precisely where the book of Joshua leaves off. Near the end of his life, Joshua said, “Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the

gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15b). When the people of Israel confidently responded, “We also will serve the LORD,” Joshua intensified his warning, saying, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God” (Joshua 24:19b).

Joshua seemed to foresee the repeated cycle of failure that would be recorded in the book of Judges. Yet he also bequeathed to Israel a legacy of faith and faithfulness. He gave Israel a vision of a bright future if the people would put away their foreign gods and incline their hearts to the God of Israel. If Israel would be faithful to God, then God would continue to fight their battles and give them land they had not labored for, cities they had not built, and vineyards and olive orchards they did not plant.

But each subsequent generation must learn from the previous generation. After Joshua dies, the people of Israel commit a grievous error:

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. . . . And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel (Judges 2:6, 10).

A generation arose that was utterly ignorant of all that God had done for Israel. Why was this generation ignorant? Because their parents failed to pass down their heritage of faith. Their parents neglected to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Faith in God cannot be transmitted genetically. It cannot be absorbed by osmosis. Faith must be intentionally taught and transmitted from one generation to the next.

In America, many Christians of the “Greatest Generation”—the generation that endured the Great Depression and fought World War II—failed to teach the next generation, the Baby Boomer generation. They failed to pass on to the Boomers the all-important art of spiritual warfare. As a result, the Baby Boomer generation had nothing to pass along to the next generation. That is why younger generations today are spiritually stunted, biblically illiterate, and woefully unprepared for spiritual battle.

I don’t say this to assign blame or find fault. The only reason for looking back is to learn the lessons of the past and apply those lessons to the future. My goal is to

prescribe the remedy for spiritual amnesia—because once spiritual amnesia sets in, compromise and spiritual decline surely follow.

Before I blame anyone else, I look in a mirror. I have to confess that my generation of Christians let down the next generation. We who stand in our churches' pulpits have failed the next generation. We have ceased to proclaim, "Thus says the Lord."

When Paul gave his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, he said, "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26-27). Can my generation of pastors say the same? Are we innocent of the blood of all? Or have we held back from declaring the whole counsel of God?

We have focused on making people feel good so they will want to come back to church—and in so doing, we have failed to call sin "sin."

I fear that we who are called to shepherd God's flock have blood on our hands. We have failed to call people to repentance. We have focused on making people feel good so they will want to come back to church—and in so doing, we have failed to call sin "sin." We have failed to declare the whole counsel of God, and we have allowed an entire generation to grow up not knowing what sin and repentance are or what God expects of us. And we have sent that generation into the battle without armor, without weapons, without even informing them about the enemy they face.

If you are a mother or father, grandparent, teacher, coach, pastor, Sunday school teacher, or Christian mentor, you have a responsibility. You are called to pass a living testimony of God's grace to the next generation. You have influence with the next generation, and your influence confers on you a responsibility to train these young people for spiritual warfare. Don't send them into battle defenseless and unprepared.

You may think that moral relativism and secularism, postmodernism and political correctness are new concepts. In fact, these notions are as old as the book of Judges.

The Israelites were tolerant toward the Baals and the Ashtaroht. They practiced moral and spiritual relativism. They were open-minded toward other religions and immoral lifestyles. Joshua's generation failed to train young people for battle, so the next generation lost the battle.

DROWNING IN MATERIALISM AND DEBT

What is the job description of an Old Testament judge? If you're thinking of a judge sitting at the bench in black robes, such as a Supreme Court justice, that's not what an Old Testament judge was like. The Hebrew word translated "judge" in English actually meant "deliverer."

Old Testament judges delivered God's people from the messes they got themselves into. Throughout the book of Judges, we see the same scenario repeated again and again with exacting precision:

Step 1: God's people become complacent in their peace and prosperity, and they compromise their faith.

Step 2: The Lord's anger is kindled so he gives his people over to their oppressors.

Step 3: The people cry to the Lord for help.

Step 4: God raises a deliverer, a judge, to rescue them.

Step 5: The cycle returns to Step 1 and begins all over again.

But there is an important feature of this cycle that we dare not miss. If we read the book of Judges casually, we may overlook this all-important detail: With each revolution of the cycle, with each succeeding generation, there is a downward spiral. When this cycle returns to *Step 1*, we are not back where we started. The culture has slipped further into decline. Every succeeding time the people compromise their faith, they sink lower, they become more wicked and depraved, than the preceding generation.

We have seen this pattern played out in our own society. The history of Western civilization has been marked by periods of debauchery and decline, followed by revival and restoration.

For example, America enjoyed enormous post-World War I peace and prosperity in the era known as the "Roaring Twenties." Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "It was an age of excess"—an excess of wealth, materialism, alcoholism, hedonism, and rebellion against God and traditional morality. It was a time of sexual "liberation" (that is, promiscuity) for women. It was a time when homosexuality first became openly tolerated in the arts and entertainment communities. Hollywood actor William Haines was the top box office draw while living an openly homosexual lifestyle. During the 1920s, people rebelled against tradition—musical tradition (hence, "The Jazz Age"), gender roles (a popular 1926 song was "Masculine Women,

Feminine Men”), and moral and religious tradition.

The Roaring Twenties ended with the Crash of 1929, which ushered in the Great Depression. During the Depression and World War II, those who had thought the party would never end suddenly found their world was shaken and crumbling. The peace and prosperity of the Roaring Twenties came crashing down around them. Many people repented of their hedonism and depravity, turning to God for help and hope.

By any objective standard, America in the twenty-first century is a nation in spiritual and moral decline. Many observers date the beginning of American decline back to 1962, when the Supreme Court outlawed prayer in public schools. Others date it to 1973, when the Supreme Court legalized unrestricted abortion. These court decisions unleashed a tidal wave of harmful effects on our nation—not the least being the estimated fifty-six million human lives destroyed by legal abortion as of 2013.

“We the People” can choose to say, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

But while court decisions can cause serious harm to society, it is truly the people themselves who determine the moral and spiritual strength of a nation. “We the People” can choose to say, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” And “We the People” can also reject God and his truth. We choose whether or not to pray, to live righteously, to witness for Christ, and to raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Throughout the twentieth century, the vast majority of children were born into two-parent families. Having children outside of marriage was not only abnormal, it was considered shameful. In 1964, 93 percent of American children were born to married couples. As of 2010, only 59 percent of American children are born in wedlock. The result of this moral decline: Children are forced into poverty. According to the US Census Bureau, the poverty rate for children in single-parent homes is 37.1 percent, compared with only 6.8 percent of children in two-parent homes. A child raised by two parents is *82 percent less likely to be in poverty* than a child raised by one parent.

As the family breaks down in America, we are seeing a corresponding breakdown

of America's moral fiber, especially the Protestant work ethic. The notion of the American dream was based on the idea that anyone could succeed in America if they were willing to work hard and play by the rules. Hard work creates wealth, a principle strongly affirmed in both the Old and New Testaments (see Proverbs 10:4; 12:11; 14:23; 16:3; 21:25; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Acts 20:35; Colossians 3:23; 2 Thessalonians 3:10). Working hard and creating wealth is a duty we have not only to ourselves and our families, but to the Lord and to our society. Today, fewer and fewer people are working and more and more people are living off the labor of the hard-working, tax-paying few. This is not just an economic or social problem; this is a moral and spiritual problem, and it is leading to the decline of our nation and our culture.

We are entertaining and drugging ourselves into a stupor.

As individuals and as a society, we are drowning in debt. In 2001, the United States national debt totaled less than \$6 trillion. The day this book is published, the national debt will exceed \$18 trillion. Every single hour, we add an additional \$100 million to the national debt. By 2016, the debt will top \$20 trillion.

Americans own more stuff than any society in the history of the planet—cars, boats, jet skis, TVs, video games, computers, smartphones, and other assorted luxury items. Yet the American people are swallowing antidepressants and other mood-altering drugs at an astounding rate, spending \$60 billion more on prescription drugs in 2010 than they did just five years earlier. We are entertaining and drugging ourselves into a stupor.

THE AVOIDABLE TRAGEDY

If we are not at odds with our culture, then we are at odds with God. Remember the warning of James: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

Some people look at the cultural decline all around us and call it progress. According to this progressive mindset, an enlightened and progressive society tolerates rampant abortion, pornography, sexual promiscuity, unwed parenting, same-sex marriage, indolence and dependence, and irresponsible, unsustainable

debt. If we continue down the slope of moral and spiritual decline, we will suffer the same fate as Israel in the time of the judges.

This noble experiment called America now appears headed for the ash heap of history, to lie alongside other failed kingdoms, empires, and republics of the past. America will not be conquered by invaders, destroyed by nuclear war, or dismembered by terrorists. If America passes away, *it will be destroyed from within* by the spiritual defection and moral compromise of her people, just as Israel was destroyed from within by compromise with the Canaanites.

The death of America will not mean the death of Christianity. Faith in Christ will go on. As G.K. Chesterton correctly observed, “Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.” But the death of America as a moral and faithful nation will be an incomprehensible tragedy—a tragedy that we, like ancient Israel, could have avoided through faithfulness to God. That’s why we must cry out to God for the next generation.

If we are not at odds with our culture, then we are at odds with God.

In Deuteronomy, God speaks affectionately of finding Israel in a desert land, in a howling wilderness, and God encircled the people of Israel and cared for them, keeping them as “the apple of his eye” (see Deuteronomy 32:10). But here in Judges, we sense the wounded heart of God as he grieves over his people for squeezing him out of the center of their lives. Here we see that God’s most difficult battle is not with the pagans. It is with his own people.

God can deal with the pagans with a snap of his finger. But he agonizes over his rebellious children who turn their backs on him and use his grace as a license to sin. He grieves for his children who rationalize sin, who redefine marriage, who make excuses for the slaughter of innocent children, who call themselves Christians but follow lust, greed, and selfish ambition. He aches for those who name the name of Christ, but who live lives that are indistinguishable from the lives of the Canaanites.

BEQUEATHING A HERITAGE OF FAITH

Even though the story of the book of Judges is heartbreaking, its message is encouraging. The book records the history of Israel’s failure. But it also records

the message of God's grace. The book of Judges tells us that if we cry to God, if we repent and turn to him, he will extend grace to us—and not just to us but to the next generation:

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them (2:16-18).

The book of Judges tells us that if we cry to God, if we repent and turn to him, he will extend grace to us—and not just to us but to the next generation.

God raised up judges to deliver the people of Israel from their oppressors. God showed mercy and grace to the people of Israel, even after they had whored after the false Canaanite gods. But even after God showered them with mercy, the hearts of the people turned away from God and toward the Canaanite idols:

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways (2:19).

If you think you are grieved by the decline of your culture, by the sin and immorality that surrounds you, by the suffering and sadness that pervades this fallen world, how much more must our loving Father grieve over us and our nation? Don't repeat the pattern of Israel in the days of the judges. Don't let your children, your grandchildren, or the children you teach and influence become another generation who did not know the Lord. Be faithful to God and transmit your faith to the next generation. Here are some suggestions for teaching your faith to the children you influence:

1. *Worship with your children.* This means more than merely going to church together once a week. Begin a daily habit, in the morning or before bedtime (or both), of coming together for family worship. Read Bible stories together. Share your feelings of thankfulness, prayer requests, and stories of what God is doing in your life. Sing Christian songs together. Pray together. Discover the joy of daily family worship.

2. *Instruct your children.* Find a family devotional book that is appropriate for the age level of your children. Read Bible stories together, then discuss them. Find ways to apply stories of the Bible to the lives of your children. If a child is facing an intimidating challenge at school or in music lessons or in Little League, encourage that child with a story about David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17), Daniel in the lion's den (Daniel 6), or Peter and John before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4).

3. *Pray regularly with and for your children.* Pray at meals and at bedtime. Pray when your child is hurting. Thank God together during happy moments. Find ways to acknowledge God's presence so that your children will continually be aware of his love and mercy in their lives.

The Scottish Reformation leader John Knox was such a bold man of faith that Mary, Queen of Scots, once said of him, "I fear his prayers more than I do the armies of my enemies." In 1572, as Knox lay on his deathbed, he called to his wife, Margaret, and said, "Read me that Scripture where I first cast my anchor." She read to him from John 17, the high priestly prayer of Jesus before he went to the cross. That prayer comforted him, and he began to pray for his family, for his fellow countrymen, for those who had rejected the gospel, for those who had recently received the good news, for God's people who were facing persecution, for the wife and children he left behind, for future generations of believers.

Margaret listened as John prayed. His voice grew weaker and weaker until finally his lips ceased to move. John Knox died as he had lived, constantly interceding, continually praying, until he finally passed into the presence of his Lord. That is a great way to live, a great way to die, and a great way to bequeath a heritage of faith, godliness, and prayer to the next generation.

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Lord, why me? Why now? Why this?

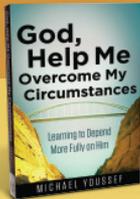
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