

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*When the Word of the Lord Was Rare.*"

Go ahead and open your Bibles to **Judges 2** and I will open us in prayer.

Last week I shared that we were going to talk about the vision of our church. We haven't done so for over seven years.

We began by considering the dramatic change that takes place between the books of Joshua and Judges:

- Joshua is largely a book of victories
- Judges is largely a book of defeats

As much as Joshua is victory, after victory, after victory, Judges is defeat, after defeat, after defeat.

We see why this happened in **Judges 2:7-12**. Let's briefly read through these verses again...

Judges 2:7 And the people served 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. 8 And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. 9 And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. 10 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. 11 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.

You see Israel's unfaithfulness began after Joshua's death.

Let me invite you to think about Israel's life as a nation up to this point, so you can see why this is such a pivotal moment.

Egypt served as a womb for Israel to grow as a nation: 70 people went into Egypt at the end of Genesis, and they multiplied and became millions of people:

- They left Egypt, which was their birth as a nation
- From that moment they were under the strong leadership of Moses for 40 years
- Moses died and then they were under the strong leadership of Joshua for 25 years
- He led them into the Promised Land and in victory against the Canaanites.

So here's the point...

When Joshua died this was their first time without a leader.

How were they going to respond?

They were supposed to start following God. He was supposed to be their King We know that from 1 Samuel when the days of the judges were ending.

The people asked the prophet Samuel for an earthly king, it displeased him, he prayed to the Lord about it, and listen to how God responded...

1 Samuel 8:7 The Lord said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have REJECTED ME FROM BEING KING OVER THEM.

It is clear God was supposed to be Israel's king.

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So when Joshua died, it's clear the people had no leadership:

- Moses and Joshua are dead
- They won't look to God

You could say, “Weren't the judges the leaders of the nation?”

Not really. They were deliverers more than they were anything else. God raised them up when He wanted to give Israel victory over an enemy nation afflicting them.

So here's the important question...

If nobody is in charge, then who is in charge?

The answer is...

Every single person.

Turn to the right to **Judges 17:6**...

- **Judges 17:6 In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**
- **Judges 18:1 In those days there was no king in Israel.**
- **Judges 19:1 In those days, when there was no king in Israel,**
- **And then the book of Judges ends with this verse: Judges 21:25 In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**

It's true that there was no king in Israel, but there was supposed to be one, and that was God.

With no king, everyone did what was right in their own eyes, which is to say the people were their own highest authority...and this reveals the last reason Israel went from victory to defeat...

Lesson one: Israel moved from victory to defeat because they did (part four) what was right in their own eyes.

The days of the judges were 340 years long and they were some of Israel's darkest days.

The first 16 chapters serve as a history of that time. The remaining five chapters, 17 to 21, which is where we read that repeated phrase, serve as an appendix to the book.

The appendix provides two accounts from the days of the judges that illustrate what it looks like when **every man does what is right in his own eyes**.

If you're familiar with these two stories you know that they are some of the most bizarre and darkest in all of Scripture. People are doing things that aren't only evil, they don't even make sense. One of the reasons it is so difficult to teach these chapters is it is hard to explain why the people are doing what they're doing.

What's my point?

When God is not king and man does what is right in his own eyes, it is a disaster filled with wickedness and confusion.

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Now here's what's absolutely shocking about all of this...

It doesn't say everyone was doing what *they knew was wrong*. If it said that it would make sense.

It says **Everyone was doing what they thought was right**.

They were engaging in all this wickedness and they thought it was the right thing to do!

If you read the last five chapters you can tell that at times the people were trying to do the right thing...even if it was really messed up.

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This is important...

Doing what is right in man's eyes is often doing what is evil in God's eyes.

When man is his own moral compass, it becomes obvious that he needs a different moral compass.

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Let me share a story with you from my life that I think about when reading the book of Judges...

When I was in the military we did an amount of land navigation. You're given a map, compass, and told to find different points.

Something you learn early on – hopefully – is that if you're off even a little, let's say one or two degrees, because you're walking so far and for so long, you can end up very far from the destination YOU THINK you're heading toward.

But you don't find out you're going the wrong way until you get to the very end and turn in your points to the evaluator who grades you.

Here's what didn't matter:

- How you felt when you were walking...
- How convinced you were that you were going the right way...
- How hard you tried...

All that mattered is you didn't end up where you were supposed to go.

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You reach the evaluator, turn in your points, he marks them wrong, but imagine you say...

"I was very sincere. I thought I was going the right way. I tried hard. I had no idea that I was so far off."

He isn't going to care is he?

We understand this, but I don't think people apply this same thinking to our relationships with God.

As long as:

- They're being sincere
- Think they're going the right direction
- Trying hard

Then God will be satisfied.

But it doesn't work that way. He gives us His Word, because He wants us to follow it.

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Let me ask you this...

If people are not following the Word of God, what are they following?

- How do they know what direction to go?
- What do they use?

They follow their heart.

Everyone falls into one of two categories: the Bible is our authority on truth, and right or wrong, or we do what is right in our own eyes.

Following your heart and doing what's right in your own eyes are the same thing.

The problem with that is...

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

Sometimes you meet people and they say:

- *Well I am just following my heart*

- *This is what my heart is telling me to do*

You should tell them that there probably isn't a worse thing for them to follow.

When we think about deceitfulness, we typically think of deceiving others. But the ironic part about this verse is it tells us our own hearts are deceiving us.

Listen to these other verses about our hearts...

- **Matthew 15:19** out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.
- **Ecclesiastes 9:3** the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live.

Genesis 6:5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that **EVERY INTENTION OF THE THOUGHTS OF HIS HEART WAS ONLY EVIL CONTINUALLY.**

You could hear this and say, *"But all this was before the flood. After the flood things must have been better."*

Listen to what God said after the water receded...

Genesis 8:21 The Lord said in his heart, **"I will never again curse the ground because of man, FOR THE INTENTION OF MAN'S HEART IS EVIL FROM HIS YOUTH. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done.**

Things were no better. The only reason God didn't flood the earth again wasn't because man was better. It was simply because God committed to not doing so.

It seems to me the only reason God flooded the earth was to remove the demonic influence. But as far as man's heart, nothing changed.

Consider these two verses...

Proverbs 14:12 and **16:25** say **There is a way that seems right to a man,**

No pause here for a moment.

I'm guessing many of you can probably finish this verse for me. But if you weren't familiar with it, what would you expect it to say?

There is a way that seems right to a man:

- *And it isn't always the right way*
- *Or it doesn't always go the way he wants*
- *Or sometimes it doesn't go as well as he would like*

Instead...

but its end is the way to death.

It's like God provided the worst possible result of man doing what he thinks is right. Could there be anything worse than ending in death?

Let me share two verses with you from the sermon on the Mount, but let me first explain the symbolism so they make sense:

- The eye represents our beliefs
- Light represents truth and righteousness
- Darkness represents lies and unrighteousness

Matthew 6:22 “**The eye is the lamp of the body** (or what you believe). **So, if your eye is healthy** (if what you believe is true), **your whole body will be full of light** (your life will be full of righteousness), **23 but if your eye is bad** (if what you believe is a lie), **your whole body will be full of darkness** (your life will be full of unrighteousness). **If then the light in you is darkness** (if what you believe to be true is a lie), **how great is the darkness!** (how terrible will that lie and unrighteousness be as it's played out in your life).

Imagine spending your whole life believing something, and basing your life on it, only to die and learn it was a lie.

Now coming back to our account, let me show you how the days of the judges, or another way to say it is – the days of man doing what's right in his own eyes – came to an end.

Turn to **1 Samuel 3**. Look at verse one...

1 Samuel 3:1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

This is the young prophet Samuel who later anointed Saul and David.

When it says **in those days** it's referring to the days of the Judges.

Samuel is a transitional figure:

- He was the last judge and the first prophet.
- He's the transition between these offices.
- He's the man God used to bring Israel out of these dark days.

So even though this is 1 Samuel, and not Judges, we are looking at the end of the days of the judges, because Samuel and his sons were the last judges.

Notice it says **there was no frequent vision.**

What does this mean? Does it mean there were only boring people with no ideas?

We think of people with vision as people:

- Who are creative
- Who see the big picture
- Who come up with a plan and carry it out

But that's not what the Bible means when it mentions vision.

Briefly look back at the second half of the verse...

The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

Do you see the relationship between God's Word and vision?

- There was no vision, because there was no Word of the Lord.
- God's Word is the vision.

And this brings us to lesson two...

Lesson two: vision should come from God's Word.

Listen to another verse making this point...

Ezekiel was part of another dark time in Israel's history. The temple was destroyed, the Jews had been cast out of the land, and they found themselves as exiles in Babylon. Listen to this verse describing that time...

Ezekiel 7:26 They SEEK A VISION from the prophet, while THE LAW perishes from the priest and counsel from the elders.

The people looked for **vision**, but they couldn't find it, because **the law**, or God's Word, is disappearing. And that's because vision comes from God's Word.

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Listen to another verse making this point...

Proverbs 29:18 Where there is NO PROPHETIC VISION the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he WHO KEEPS THE LAW.

It's common for Proverbs to couple two synonyms together, and in this case **prophetic vision** is coupled with **the law**, or the Word of God, because they're synonymous.

So when we talk about having vision for our church, we are talking about being governed by, or regulated by, the Word of God.

- The Israelites couldn't come up with their own vision and say, "This is our vision for the nation."
- Similarly, we can't come up with our own vision and say, "This is our vision for the church."

Instead, the vision must be grounded in God's Word.

Sometimes the senior pastor at a church will have the word "vision" in his job description. It will say something like, "He casts vision for the church."

I think I understand what they mean, but if that vision isn't grounded in God's Word then what is it really?

- It's a man doing what's right in his own eyes.
 - It's a man following his heart.
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We do need vision:

- We need to know where we're going.
- We need to know what we're doing.
- We need to know what we should be focusing on.
- We need to know what our church should look like.

But all of this must come from Scripture.

Listen to **Proverbs 29:18** one more time...

Proverbs 29:18 Where there is no prophetic vision THE PEOPLE CAST OFF RESTRAINT, but blessed is he who keeps the law.

This makes sense doesn't it?

Without vision, which is to say without the Word of God, people are unrestrained. They don't have God's Word:

- Guiding and influencing their actions.
- Controlling and inhibiting their sin

And this is the why the days of the Judges were so bad: there was no vision and **the people cast off restraint...**which brings us to Lesson 3...

Lesson three: God's Word restrains sin.

Let me share an interesting example of this with you...

I told you earlier that Israel was under Moses for 40 years and then Joshua for 25 years.

But there was one time when Israel was without both of them, and it is when Moses and Joshua went up on Mount Sinai and the people were left at the base of the mountain.

Listen to what it says about that time...

Exodus 32:25 (NKJV) Moses saw that the people *were* UNRESTRAINED (for Aaron had not RESTRAINED them, to *their* shame among their enemies).

Just like **Proverbs 29:18** they **cast off restraint**.

Their behavior was so bad they embarrassed themselves to their enemies.

The pagans knew the Israelites claimed to be holy, so when they weren't, you can imagine how the word spread.

It's similar to the shame the church experiences in the eyes of the unbelieving world when we exhibit unrestrained behavior: it makes a bad witness.

This is the point of church discipline: to restrain sinful behavior.

So guess how God brought the days of the judges to an end?

He raised up the first prophet, Samuel, who gave people the Word of God! That's what prophets did: they spoke for God.

God used Samuel to lift Israel out of the darkness of the days of the judges by providing the light of God's Word...which had been absent for 3.5 centuries.

This delivered them from the problems that plagued them following Joshua's death, specifically:

- Not knowing the Lord
 - Not knowing the things the Lord had done
 - Not remaining holy, or separate, from the surrounding nationsⁱ
 - Doing what was right in their eyes
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You can see how terrible it was for Israel to lack vision, or God's Word, so I'd like us to appreciate the tremendous blessing it is for us to have it at our fingertips.

I'd like to do that by asking you to listen to two verses from **Amos 8:11 and 12...**

[God says], "Behold, the days are coming that I will send a famine on the land (this is where it gets interesting...), Not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but [A FAMINE] OF HEARING THE WORDS OF THE LORD. (Listen to what it was like for the people...) 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, SEEKING THE WORD OF THE LORD, BUT SHALL NOT FIND IT.

They sound lost and crazy. They're running around trying to figure out where to go and what to do.

Fortunately, we'll never be in this situation. We will never have a famine of God's Word.

We'll never have to say...

"It's terrible! We're experiencing this and we don't know what to do. We don't know what God wants to say to us. What is God's vision for the church?"

We have Scripture to lead us and tell us how to live our lives and conduct the affairs of the church.

So over the next few weeks as we discuss the vision for WCC, hopefully you'll see that it's drawn from Scripture, versus something we came up with on our own.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by taking your minds back to **Jeremiah 17:9**...

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

If something is **desperately sick** it can't be fixed, or cured. And that's what this verse is saying about our hearts. The Hebrew word for **desperately sick** is *'ānaš* (pronounced ah-nash). It occurs 8 other times in Scripture, and of those eight times, five times it is translated as incurable.

It's the word used in **2 Samuel 12:15** for David's child of adultery becoming sick and dying.

The idea is our hearts can't be fixed. No matter how hard we try, we can't do anything about their condition.

Earlier I mentioned another dark time in the Jews' history, when they were in exile in Babylon. Their hearts had gotten them in trouble then too. They started worshiping idols instead of worshiping God.

But the solution wasn't for them to fix their hearts. Instead, God told them they needed new hearts:

- **Ezekiel 11:19 I will remove the heart of stone...and give them a heart of flesh,**
- **Ezekiel 18:31 Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and GET YOURSELVES A NEW HEART and a new spirit.**
- **Ezekiel 36:26 I will GIVE YOU A NEW HEART, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.**

Scripture doesn't talk about us fixing our hearts because they're incurable. Instead, we need God to give us new hearts.

This occurs through repentance and faith in Christ...

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

If you've never repented of your sins and put faith in Christ to save you, or you have any questions about the sermon I'll be up front after service and I'd love to speak with you.

Let's pray.

Material I cut...

We don't have time to read the whole chapter, but I want to try your attention to a few verses that illustrate God giving the people vision again.

Here's what you need to know so this makes sense...

Everything we are re going to read physically illustrates what is happening spiritually.

Look at **verse 2**...

1 Samuel 3:2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place.

Eli couldn't see. He had no vision. He was physically blind, but it's a picture of his spiritual blindness.

1 Samuel 3:3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was.

This lamp isn't just physical, it's also spiritual. The lamp – or spiritual light – hadn't gone out completely. God was still going to reveal light to His people.

1 Samuel 3:4 Then the Lord called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!"

God starts speaking to Samuel – giving him His word, or giving him vision, and then Samuel would give that word or vision to the people.

Skip to **verse 13**...

1 Samuel 3:13 And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.

The word of the Lord provides restraint. Eli couldn't restrain his sons because he didn't have God's Word.

Skip to verse 21...

1 Samuel 3:21 And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

The Lord revealed Himself to Samuel by the Word of the Lord, and then Samuel revealed that Word to the people.

Look at the first verse of chapter 4...

1 Samuel 4:1 And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

God spoke to Samuel and Samuel delivered that Word – or vision – to the people. This is how they were lifted up and out of the darkness of the days of the judges.

1 Samuel four: 15 Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see.

Eli is completely blind now physically, but picturing his spiritual blindness.