

“What Your Eyes Can See”

Reading: Judges 2:6-19; Matthew 13:10-17

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Did you know that you are quite literally seeing the past? Your eyes are perceiving the light that is reflected off of the objects around you, and though light is very fast, it is not infinitely fast, so it takes time for the light to reach your eyes. And then it takes time for your eyes to send a signal to the brain, and it takes time for the brain to interpret the signals. Of course we're only talking about a tiny, tiny fraction of a second's delay, but you aren't actually seeing things as they happen. And sometimes, since your sight is lagging behind reality, your brain has to fill in some details. Your sight is not always what you think it is, in other words. We cannot see as well as we'd like to think.

After all, if we can't trust our senses, where does that leave us? If the world around me is not more or less as I perceive it to be, how can I know how to make sense of it? But there are many, many optical illusions out there designed to trick your eyesight and reveal the ways in which your sight is not always as accurate as you think it is, or your perceptions are not as perceptive as you like to think. Magicians make their living by tricking our eyes: they use misdirection, distraction, and a knowledge of human psychology to mask what they're really doing to convince us that we see them pull a rabbit out of a hat. Or take it a bit deeper than just your sight: you're giving a presentation in front of a group of people, and things are not going as well as you'd like, and with every mistake you make, you can't help but feel like every person in the audience is judging your performance and thinks you're a complete failure. But in reality, you have no idea what's going on in someone else's head. We think we can see what other people are thinking and feeling, but our eyes can't always see that well.

In our chapter of *The Story* for this week, we finally get to see the culmination of hundreds of years of waiting. God has painstakingly crafted a family of people to be *His* family, but then the problem was that they were not in the homeland He had promised them, and they needed a place to be a people. So God freed them from slavery and took them to the land, but they weren't ready, so God had to wait another generation, and then they had to conquer the land in order to claim it. And now, at last, we have the people of God settled in the land God promised them. This should be great; this is what God always wanted: a people devoted to Him, in a land set apart for Him, with God living in relationship with them. But it's not great. In fact, it's anything but great. In fact, the book of Judges is just about the lowest point in the entire Bible. It becomes clear in the very beginning that within a generation of settling the land, God's people have devoted themselves to all sorts of other gods. The book ends with a civil war in retaliation for some acts of unimaginable brutality: the rape, murder, and dismemberment of a woman traveling with her master. The morality of this nation of God has become thoroughly confused. And in the latter part of the book, this refrain keeps popping up: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Leaderless and lost, they each relied on their own sight, and the result was a disaster. We can't see as well as we'd like to think. When we rely on our own eyes, the results are often not what we want them to be.

There are some great Bible stories here in the time of the Judges. It was a time of epic heroes doing epic deeds. And there are definitely some high points in here; when God saves His people, He tends to do it with gusto. But the passage we read from Judges 2 is a pretty good summary of how this period worked: things would go okay for a while, then they would get complacent and forget about God, and some foreign nation would come along and take advantage of Israel's vulnerability.

Then, like we so often do in hard times, the Israelites would cry out to God, and God would raise up a leader, a judge, to throw off their oppressors. There are some good, hopeful moments in there. But unfortunately, even the good stories are usually tainted in some way. They did what was right in their own eyes, and sooner or later their eyes proved not to be able to see as well as they thought.

Gideon is one of the more memorable characters in the book, partly because we get so much of his story. Unfortunately, though, we get too much of his story; he doesn't end well. He's famous for his very unorthodox battle tactics, and for his fleece, which he used as a way of testing God to make sure that God was really on his side. I always thought it was a no-no to test God, because after all, Jesus Himself says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test," quoting from Deuteronomy. But Gideon tests God a couple of times, and God doesn't seem to have a problem with it, and Gideon does a good job of following God's lead. But he was doing better when he had his fleece, because eventually his success gets to his head. Later in his life, he accepts payments of gold in return for his leadership, and he uses the gold to make an idol that leads both his nation and his family astray. His sons are a tragic tale, too, since one of them ends up murdering the rest in a bid for power. Gideon started out well, but then he started doing what was right in his own eyes.

And then there's Samson, another of those great biblical heroes. He's gifted by God to be incredibly strong, and he uses that strength to fight off his peoples' Philistine overlords. There are some great stories in his life, of his superhuman feats of strength, like when he strikes down a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey, or when he single-handedly kills thousands of Philistines by knocking out the pillars of their temple. But in spite of his herculean strength worthy of song, there's really very little in his life to recommend as an example for our behavior. Frankly, he comes across as something of an ultra-violent, lecherous brute incapable of making wise decisions where his sexual appetites are involved. Yes, God is able to make even Samson a judge over Israel, but his mistakes are severe.

It's after Samson's life that we start hearing that refrain, that in those days Israel had no king, no godly leadership, and everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. Yes, they were settled in the land, but they were wandering worse than ever before. It's difficult to follow the story as you read through those chapters, because their morality and their relationship with God become so incredibly distorted that their actions just don't seem to make sense to us. One man decides to set up an idol to the Lord, which is clearly breaking one of the Ten Commandments, and then he decides to hire his own priesthood for the religion he's set up. It's as though they've completely forgotten how God commanded them to worship Him. Not long after that, the tribes of Israel are arguing and threatening one another, jockeying for position in the land. Eventually the tribe of Benjamin breaks the sacred laws of hospitality, and a woman is abused and violated to the point of death, and civil war breaks out among the tribes that ought to have been God's family. In those days they had no king, and they did what was right in their own eyes.

It should have been a completely different story. The people of God were living in the land God had promised them, and God Himself was supposed to rule them directly as their King and Father. But they wanted to see things with their own eyes. They wanted to do what was right in their own eyes. They thought they could see right and wrong well enough on their own, and they thought they could see the consequences of their choices, but what their eyes could see was not what they thought they could.

You see, the reality is that our eyes need training to really see. Most of us, I think, sooner or later tend to overestimate our ability to see the truth. Like I said before, magicians are betting on that fact; they want you to think you're seeing what's going on, when in reality they're misleading your eyes. We think we know ourselves, our motives, our desires; we think we have good reasons for doing the things we do. We like to think we're being objective in our decisions, and that we're weighing the pros and cons before we come to a conclusion. Maybe that's true a lot of the time, but advertisers are also betting on their ability to influence you in unseen ways. You're supposed to be thinner, taller, better-looking, and drive a more expensive car, and I'd bet most of us feel like it from time to time even though we know it's poppycock. We need to have our eyes opened to be able to recognize the absurdity that is thrust upon us by our world, and at the same time we need to have our eyes opened to recognize the beauty of God's truth. An average person might have preferences when it comes to art, but someone trained in art can recognize true genius in art that others might not see. Likewise, we need our eyes trained to see the things of God.

This is where Gideon failed, where Samson failed, where so many of the other judges failed in this time in history. They failed to pass on to others that training to see with an eye to God's kingdom. They failed to train their followers in doing what was right in God's eyes. It's still a current problem, I'm afraid. Jesus preached in parables, stories with a deeper spiritual meaning that wasn't immediately obvious and made you work for it, and He did that because He wanted people to work at seeing the kingdom of God. "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand," He said. Our eyes can only truly see as God wants them to see as we are trained in following Him, because your eyes can't see as much as you think they can.

As you go about your daily life, can you see the hurt deep within the people you encounter? Can you see the soul-crushing poverty around us, both economic poverty and spiritual poverty? Can you see the parents who are trying desperately to keep up with life but are silently crying out for help? Can you see the outwardly well-to-do person whose relationships are so broken that they secretly chase after fulfillment in destructive places? Can you see the person who struggles with figuring out who they are, whose sense of identity is so uncertain that they have no idea why they bother getting up in the morning? Can you see past the surface of the intolerable, unlovable people you meet to the beloved creation of God underneath?

Can you see the genuine priorities of God's kingdom? Can you see that many times, what we want to do is not what God calls us to do? Can you see that God calls us to a faithful righteousness that sets us apart from the world so much that it can only be empowered by His Spirit? Can you see what holiness looks like in your life? Can you see your life being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ? Can you see those areas of your life that need to be repented of, redeemed, and transformed?

What can your eyes see? Are you living a life that is right in your own eyes, or one that is right in God's eyes?



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