

Falling Again (Again)

Our Upside-Down World Series, May 8 & 9, 2021 | Judges 10:6-18
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VERY FEW THINGS STAY THE SAME.

Toy Story 2 reminds us that very few things stay the same.

The Toy Story movies follow a group of toys originally owned by a boy named Andy.

In the original Toy Story movie, Andy's favorite toy—Woody the Cowboy—learns to share Andy's affection with the new toy, Buzz Lightyear.

As Toy Story 2 begins, Andy is preparing for Cowboy Camp. He is planning to take Woody. This is time Woody looks forward to spending with Andy.

However, just before Andy leaves, Woody's arm tears.

Andy's mom takes Woody and places him on a shelf, hoping to repair him later. As she puts Woody on the shelf, she said, "Well, you know, honey, toys don't last forever."

Ah, there's the challenge. Children grow up. Toys wear out. Very few things stay the same.

What's a toy to do? What are we to do?

Even our spiritual lives change over time.

Those of us who are followers of Jesus have the Holy Spirit in our lives. That means we're being sanctified or made holy over time. If we're being sanctified, then we would expect that our spiritual lives would keep getting better and better.

However, we also encounter setbacks in our spiritual lives. We face distractions, the flame of our love for God fizzles, and we encounter difficulties.

The constant is that our spiritual lives change over time.

Knowing that our spiritual lives change over time is good news to me.

I am not one of those "steady-as-she-goes" types of people. If my life were like the tap on a sink, then sometimes my spiritual life runs hot, sometimes it runs cold.

If you're one of those people whose spiritual life changes over time, then it should be hopeful to you to know that you're not the only one.

However, the fact that few of us have steady spiritual lives comes with encouragement. If we're going through a down season spiritually, we don't have to stay there. We shouldn't stay there!

What do we do during spiritually down seasons? First, let's dig deeper into the problem.

OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES HAVE UPS AND DOWNS.

The people of Israel fell again (again) in Judges 10:6-9.

The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

We've seen this cycle before.

Judges records a period when the people of Israel fell into a predictable pattern of behavior. They would sin against God, worship false gods, and think and act in evil ways. God would allow them to be oppressed by the people whose gods they were worshipping. Then they would reach out to God, he would send a deliverer, and they would experience a period of peace. Eventually, they would sin again, and the cycle would start over.

This time, the downside of the cycle was worse than ever.

Usually, the people of Israel would worship the gods of the Canaanites who had lived in the Promised Land before them. This time, they added a whole list of gods to the mix. In past cycles when the Israelites worshipped false gods, they continued to worship the Lord the God of Israel. They simply added their other idols alongside of their half-hearted worship of the Lord. However, Judges notes that this time they stopped worshipping the Lord and mostly forgot about him.

Naturally, their world turned upside-down.

God hit them from two sides this time. The Philistines oppressed the Israelites from the south and west. The Ammonites came at them from the east. The Israelites suffered for 18 years.

Truth: Our spiritual lives have ups and downs.

This was obviously the case for the people of Israel. Their devotion to God had ups and downs. The "up" times were awesome and dramatic as God intervened to save his people. Their "down" times were desperate and included decades at a time of idolatry and bondage. Like the Israelites, there are seasons in our lives when we are spiritually up and then there are seasons when we are spiritually down. Hopefully the contrast between the two in our lives is not as stark as it was for Israel, and hopefully the down times are not as desperately down. Still, the ups feel great, and the downs are awful. The down times feel like we're failing.

Knowing that we have ups and downs, we could graph our spiritual lives.

If the line at the bottom represented the flow of time, then we could plot our spiritual condition day by day, month by month, and year by year.

If we're spiritually up, then we would put a point up higher on the graph. If we're spiritually down, then we would plot a point closer to the bottom.

If you could plot the history of your spiritual life on a graph, what would that graph look like? What would it say about where you've been?

More importantly, if you could plot a point on that graph today, where are you right now?

Simply and truthfully put, there are ups and downs in our spiritual lives.

OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES NATURALLY POINT DOWNWARD.

The Israelites' condition showed a massive trend downward in Judges 10:10-14.

And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." And the LORD said to the people of Israel, "Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."

God's response was different this time.

While the Israelites seemed to be turning back to God, they weren't really. They were willing to acknowledge that they had left the Lord, but they were ready to do so simply because they were hurting. They weren't really turning back to God; they were reaching out to the Lord for help in the same way they would reach out to any one of their other gods.

Consequently, the Lord wasn't impressed.

The Lord reminded them that they had gotten themselves into trouble one time after another and that he had saved them repeatedly.

However, this time they had also forsaken the Lord in the process.

Consequently, God told them that they would have to turn to their new, false gods for help. He was done with them. He would not save them this time.

The outcome was also different this time.

Of course, eventually the Lord did raise up a deliverer for them. His name was Jephthah. The Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah, he led the people of Israel into battle, and they defeated the Ammonites. However, Jephthah's leadership of Israel was flawed from the start. Jephthah wound up making a tragic vow to God and causing a civil war in Israel that led to more than 40,000 Israelite deaths.

Here's the end of Jephthah's story in **Judges 12:7**:

Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead.

There is no peace during Jephthah's life, just a note that Jephthah judged Israel.

After Jephthah came a string of three more judges, and their life stories are summarized in basically the same way: they lived, they judged Israel, they died. There was no period of peace associated with any one of them.

The arc of history for Israel during the era of the Judges was constantly pointed down.

Truth: Our spiritual lives naturally point downward.

Given that we have the Holy Spirit working within us, this may seem counterintuitive.

However, if we do nothing, spiritually speaking, our spiritual lives do not stay the same. We don't stay at the same level spiritually.

Quite the contrary. If we put no energy into our spiritual lives, we tend to decay spiritually.

In the physical world, we could talk about this in terms of entropy. Basically, everything tends toward chaos and decay.

If you've ever cleaned a room, then you know what entropy looks like. You clean a room and hope that the room will stay clean. However, as soon as you use the room again, it gets dirty. Even if you never walk into the room, it will quickly be covered in dust.

In theology we call this "total depravity." Total depravity doesn't mean that we're all awfully wicked. Instead, total depravity means that everything is touched and impacted by sin.

In our sinful world, our spiritual lives tend toward entropy, chaos, and decay, unless something or someone intervenes. What does this mean? It means...

WE NEED SEASONS OF RENEWAL.

The Israelites experienced a small season of renewal in Judges 10:15-16.

And the people of Israel said to the LORD, "We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day." So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel.

However, the Israelites experienced a brief season of renewal here.

They acknowledged that they had sinned against God.

Beyond that, the people of Israel said that they were willing for the Lord to treat them anyway he saw fit and that they would belong to him regardless.

They even put away some of their foreign gods, went back to the worship of the Lord, and began to obey God in part for a time.

Consequently, the Lord grew impatient with the people who were causing Israel misery.

BBC's *The Repair Shop* and Fred Bear show the truth about renewal.

The Repair Shop is a BBC series about a group of craftsmen in England who repair treasures that have been passed down through generations in families.

In one episode, someone brought in a treasured family teddy bear named "Fred."

Of course, after being loved and played with for 50 years, Fred Bear was a bit threadbare.

But there was a new baby in the family, and they wanted to give Fred Bear to this new baby.

Fred Bear needed some renewal.

The Repair Shop's artisans spent hours repairing, restitching, and restuffing Fred Bear so that he was ready to be loved for another generation.

Truth: We need seasons of renewal.

Like Fred Bear, over time our spiritual life tends to grow a little threadbare and in need of some tender loving care from an artisan.

Then we must pour additional time, energy, and focus on our spiritual condition.

We need seasons of renewal.

However, we discover in Judges 10:17-18 that Israel's season of renewal was limited.

Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, "Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

The Ammonites sent an army into Gilead, part of Israel on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

The leaders of Gilead could have reached out to God for guidance, power, or a deliverer.

Instead, they sought a human leader, and that's what they got in Jephthah.

The Spirit of the Lord was with Jephthah in battle; however, the renewal was over.

We want our seasons of renewal to be real.

We're looking for something more than a brief spiritual high that feels good but does little.

We want real, substantive renewal that even involves change in our lives.

We want something that lasts.

How will that happen? How do we get it?

FIVE STEPS TO REAL RENEWAL

1. Step off the world's assembly line.

Think of the world as a giant assembly line that we're sitting on.

As we go through life, we are progressing down that assembly line. We are being shaped by the world's perspectives and processes to be useful servants of the kingdoms of this world.

To step off that assembly line means that we are hoping to separate ourselves intentionally from the perspectives and processes of the world.

Instead, we want to be shaped by the perspectives and processes of the Kingdom of God.

However, when we're shaped by the perspectives and processes of the Kingdom of God, we will always feel a little out of place in this world. We'll always be a little bit different. The world will never feel quite right.

If we're going to be renewed, it's essential that we step off the world's assembly line.

2. Step away from sin.

Sin has an absolutely corrosive effect on our spiritual lives.

Sin is sticky stuff. When we sin, we think that we can keep it contained in a small corner of our lives. However, since it's sticky, it tends to attach itself to other parts of our lives that we never intended. Because it's sticky, it gums up our lives and causes us to function in a subpar kind of way. And because it's corrosive, everything that it touches deteriorates.

Hebrews 12:1 has all of this in mind when it counsels us to set sin aside:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely ...

If we want to be renewed, then we need to confess and repent of the sin in our lives.

The only way we get freedom from the sin in our lives is through Jesus.

3. Step into new routines.

The Bible gives us routines that anchor our day: The Bible counsels us to take time daily to study the Bible; the Bible also counsels us to tend to our own rhythms of work and sleep.

Biblical routines also anchor our weeks: Every week we need a Sabbath for rest and worship.

The Bible even adds routines to our years: In the Old Testament, the year was anchored for God's people by annual festivals that celebrated God's mighty deeds for them. The same is true in our age; we need to take full advantage of annual holidays that prompt us to focus on God. Those are supposed to be times of renewal for us.

Beyond these regularly recurring times, the Bible calls us to mark the milestones in life. The Bible has much to say about the times when we are born, marry, have children, and die. We add milestones like graduations, job changes, and even retirements. We need to prepare for these milestones and think about them intentionally. They are times for renewal.

4. Step out of your comfort zone.

It may be time to do something bold for God!

In **Ephesians 4:11-13**, Paul told us the reason for God giving us spiritual gifts:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ ...

Of course, that list of gifts is incomplete, but it gets the point across.

God has given every one of us gifts to use for serving him. When we use those gifts, we build up the Church and change the world. Our gifts have impact!

The amazing, wonderful, ironic thing is that, when we use our gifts to change the world, God ends up changing us.

Do you want to be renewed? Sometimes the solution is to do right things for God's glory and see what amazing things he does through you and in you.

5. Step toward God in prayer.

In **2 Chronicles 7:14**, God anticipated a day when his people would have turned away from him and experienced dry spells (literally and figuratively) as a result. God was speaking specifically about the Temple at this time, but the principle applies to renewal as well. God said:

... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

If we're looking for renewal, prayer is a critical ingredient. We won't get renewal without it.

Renewal is possible.

God knows that our spiritual lives have ups and downs, and he has promised for generations that he would provide renewal for us when we seek him.

Isaiah 40:28-31 empathizes with us, reminds us that God does not ever waver. However, when we do, God will renew us:

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Jesus himself promises to be the one through whom we find genuine renewal. In **Matthew 11:28** he said:

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Paul gives us such clear, compelling hope of renewal but reminds us that it is through Jesus and in Jesus and for Jesus. **Ephesians 3:14-19** says:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Let's ask God to renew us.