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West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Learning from the Judges



Certain periods of history stand out to me as particularly instructive for the course of all of history. That is, sometimes we can zero in on one period of time in the past, observe how the entire span of human history recapitulates that particular period, and then learn from that period what we should do today. One of these instructive periods is the period of the judges of Israel. This period, narrated for us in the books of Judges and Ruth and the opening chapters of 1 Samuel, spans a period of roughly three-hundred-and fifty years. If you want a sense of how wide an expanse of time this represents, think back to the middle of the seventeenth century in America. Think of all the history that has transpired in America from a period of one-hundred-and-twenty-five years before the Revolutionary War up to the present day. That’s the same time span that the period of the judges covers.

For this period of about three-and-a-half centuries, there was no king in Israel, no single leader of the nation. Israel was living in the land of Canaan as a tribal federation, led by a succession of individuals whom God raised up in times of crisis and empowered to perform particular tasks. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, Samson exercised great physical strength against the Philistines. Deborah and Barak were anointed to defeat the evil King Jabin. And so on.

Now, the reason I believe the period of the judges is instructive for the flow of all history is the pattern we see during those three-hundred-and fifty years. Repeatedly during this era, the book of Judges tells us, the Israelites would end themselves in a cycle that began this way: “The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” And each time we read that phrase in the book of Judges, we see that God would raise up enemies of Israel—the Midianites, the Philistines, the Moabites, and others—as tools of chastisement against His people. Those pagan nations would oppress the Israelites, who would then cry out for relief and repent of their sins. Then, God would raise up one of the judges who, under the power of the Holy Spirit, would defeat the enemies of Israel and bring deliverance. One scholar calls this a cycle of relapse, retribution, repentance, and rescue. Following each relapse into gross sin recorded in the book of Judges is the retributive justice of God whereby He pours out His judgment and wrath against His own people. Under the weight of that retributive justice of God, the people are then brought to repentance, and they bewail their situation and await their rescue by God, who redeems them.

The grim history of Israel’s sin in the period of the judges goes against what the people pledged. When Joshua brought the people together to renew their covenant with the Lord just before his death, the Israelites promised two things, *one* positive and *one* negative. Positively, they promised to obey God. Negatively, they promised not to forsake Him for idols.

And this is significant in light of the promise God made again and again to the patriarchs. When He committed Himself to Jacob, for example, He said, “I will not leave you” ([Genesis 28:15](#)).



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Learning from the Judges - Continued

This covenant pledge of God to those who are in a relationship with Him is a key theme of Scripture. The book of Judges attests to that, that even though God chastened His people, He was chastening His children whom He loved. And though they felt forsaken for a season, God did not utterly abandon them.

However, the record is that the people forsook Him. That's the big difference between the God of Israel—the God of the covenant—and His people. God does not forsake us, but we are prone to forsake Him. What provoked the forsaking of God during the period of the judges was the Israelites' great desire to be like their neighbors. God had called them to nonconformity. God had called them to be a holy nation. God had called them to be godly and to flee from idolatry, but that was unpopular in those days. It's often been unpopular in church history. And without a doubt, it's unpopular today as well.

The people of God relived the cycle of relapse, retribution, repentance, and rescue over and over again throughout biblical history. And, dare I say, the church has seen a similar cycle over the past two thousand years as well. But we have a tendency to think such things cannot happen in the life of the church today. We refuse to take note of this recurring pattern of the actions of God, believing that God will not bring calamity upon a people who forsake Him. But the God of Israel is a God who promises both blessing and curse, both prosperity and calamity. We should not be surprised to see trouble for the church when it has been worldly, when it has been unfaithful to the Lord. Sometimes, of course, the church suffers because of its faithfulness, because the forces of darkness respond with hostility against the advance of gospel transformation. At other times, however, the church suffers because of widespread, persistent unfaithfulness. That happened during the era of the judges, and it can happen today as well.

Nevertheless, we read in the book of Judges that when the Israelites repented, God delivered them. No matter how badly God's covenant people fail, our Lord is quick to rescue His church when she repents. His people forsake Him, but He never forsakes them. Judgment begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17), but it is a judgment that is disciplinary, not destructive. It's designed to move us to repentance and faithfulness. And the era of the judges shows us that the Lord will not fail to rescue and preserve His church when His church repents and cries out to Him. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr. - Chairman of Ligonier Ministries*

Thanksgiving as Theological Act: What Does it Mean to Give Thanks?

Thanksgiving is a deeply theological act, rightly understood. As a matter of fact, thankfulness is a theology in microcosm — a key to understanding what we really believe about God, ourselves, and the world we experience.

A haunting question is this: How do atheists observe Thanksgiving? I can easily understand what an atheist or agnostic would think of fellow human beings and feel led to express thankfulness and gratitude to all those who, both directly and indirectly, have contributed to their lives. But what about the blessings that cannot be ascribed to human agency? Those are both more numerous and more significant, ranging from the universe we experience to the gift of life itself.





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Thanksgiving as Theological Act: What Does it Mean to Give Thanks? - Continued

Can one really be thankful without being thankful to someone? It makes no sense to express thankfulness to a purely naturalistic system. The late Stephen Jay Gould, an atheist and one of the foremost paleontologists and evolutionists of his day, described human life as “but a tiny, late-arising twig on life’s enormously arborescent bush.” Gould was a clear-headed evolutionist who took the theory of evolution to its ultimate conclusion — human life is merely an accident, though a very happy accident for us. Within that worldview, how does thankfulness work?

The Apostle Paul points to a central insight about thankfulness when he instructs the Christians in Rome about the reality and consequences of unbelief. After making clear that God has revealed himself to all humanity through the created order, Paul asserts that we are all without excuse when it comes to our responsibility to know and worship the Creator.

He wrote:

“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. . .” [Romans 1:20-22].

This remarkable passage has at its center an indictment of thanklessness. They did not honor Him as God or give thanks. Paul wants us to understand that the refusal to honor God and give thanks is a raw form of the primal sin. Theologians have long debated the foundational sin — and answers have ranged from lust to pride. Nevertheless, it would seem that being unthankful, refusing to recognize God as the source of all good things, is very close to the essence of the primal sin. What explains the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden? A lack of proper thankfulness was at the core of their sin. God gave them unspeakable riches and abundance, but forbade them the fruit of one tree. A proper thankfulness would have led our first parents to avoid that fruit at all costs, and to obey the Lord’s command. Taken further, this first sin was also a lack of thankfulness in that the decision to eat the forbidden fruit indicated a lack of thankfulness that took the form of an assertion that we creatures — not the Creator — know what is best for us and intend the best for us.

They did not honor Him as God or give thanks. Clearly, honoring God as God leads us naturally into thankfulness. To honor Him as God is to honor His limitless love, His benevolence and care, His provision and uncountable gifts. To fail in thankfulness is to fail to honor God — and this is the biblical description of fallen and sinful humanity. We are a thankless lot.

Sinners saved by the grace and mercy of God know a thankfulness that exceeds any merely human thankfulness. How do we express thankfulness for the provision the Father has made for us in Christ, the riches that are made ours in Him, and the unspeakable gift of the surpassing grace of God? As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift” [2 Corinthians 9:15].



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Thanksgiving as Theological Act: What Does it Mean to Give Thanks? - Continued

So, observe a wonderful Thanksgiving — but realize that a proper Christian Thanksgiving is a deeply theological act that requires an active mind as well as a thankful heart. We need to think deeply, widely, carefully, and faithfully about the countless reasons for our thankfulness to God.

It is humbling to see that Paul so explicitly links a lack of thankfulness to sin, foolishness, and idolatry. A lack of proper thankfulness to God is a clear sign of a basic godlessness. Millions of Americans will celebrate Thanksgiving with little consciousness of this truth. Their impulse to express gratitude is a sign of their spiritual need that can be met only in Christ.

So have a very Happy Thanksgiving — and remember that giving thanks is one of the most explicitly theological acts any human can contemplate. *O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting* [1 Chronicles 16:34]. In all things, give thanks to God. ~ **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. - President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary**

What is Thanksgiving Day?



Thanksgiving is an American holiday that stretches all the way back to a time long before America became a nation. The Pilgrims landed in 1620. They faced brutal conditions and were woefully unprepared. Roughly half of them died in that first year. Then they had a successful harvest of corn. In November of 1621 they decided to celebrate a feast of thanksgiving.

Edward Winslow was among those who ate that first thanksgiving meal in 1621. He noted:

“Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we gathered the fruit of our labors. ...And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want.”

In addition to the fowl eaten that first Thanksgiving, the Indians also brought along five deer as their contribution to the feast. Presumably they also ate corn.

Over the centuries, Americans continued to celebrate feasts of thanksgiving in the fall. Some presidents issued proclamations. Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation for a perpetual national holiday set aside for thanksgiving. In 1863, with the nation torn apart by the Civil War, he declared:

“I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”



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What is Thanksgiving Day? - Continued

So we have a holiday of thanksgiving born in and further nurtured during times of great adversity and struggle. We might think that times of adversity and challenge would spawn ingratitude, while times of prosperity would spawn gratitude. Sadly, the reverse is true. A chilling scene from the animated television show *The Simpsons* demonstrates this. Bart Simpson was called upon to pray for a meal, to which he promptly prayed, *“Dear God, We paid for all of this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.”*

Prosperity breeds ingratitude. The writers of the Heidelberg Catechism knew this. Question 28 asks what it benefits us to know that God creates and sustains all things. The answer is it gives patience in adversity and gratitude in prosperity. Moses also knew this. In Deuteronomy, he looks ahead to times of material prosperity for Israel, then sternly warns, inspired by the Holy Spirit, not to forget God. *“Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’”* (Deuteronomy 8:17). We did this all ourselves. Thanks for nothing. Human nature trends toward ingratitude.

Another culprit breeding ingratitude is our entitlement culture. Simply put, why should we be grateful for what we deserve and what we have a right to? I was owed this, goes the culture, therefore why would I say thank you?

A third culprit concerns what UC Davis professor of psychology Dr. Robert Emmons calls the “to whom” question. In his scientific study of gratitude, Emmons came to the realization that gratitude raises a singular and significant question: When we say thank you, to whom are we grateful?

The interesting thing here is that if we trace this “to whom” line of questioning back, like pulling on the threads of some tapestry, we find a singular answer at the end of each and every thread. The answer is God. To whom are we grateful? We are grateful in an ultimate sense to God.

Our Benefactor does *“good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness”* (Acts 14:17). Theologians call this common grace. God as creator cares for all His creation and provides for our needs. He gives us our very lives and our very breath.

Our Benefactor also does good by giving His most precious gift, the gift of His Beloved Son. Theologians call this saving grace. Gifts often cost the giver. What a costly gift the Father has given us in sending the Son. So Paul exclaims, *“Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift”* (2 Corinthians 9:15).

When we consider God as the “to whom” we are thankful, we may well be seeing both the necessity of thanksgiving and the eclipse of thanksgiving. As culture veers more and more towards a secular state it shrinks back from gratitude. So vainly we think we did this all ourselves. So wrongly we think we deserve, or even have a fundamental right to, all of this. We also know what is at the end of the string if we pull on it long enough. We know that we will be confronted with a Creator. We know we will be accountable to a Creator. Saying thank you means we are dependent, not independent. We would rather be ungrateful. Paul says we know God from all the evidence He has left of Himself, but we don’t want to *“honor him or give thanks to him”* (Romans 1:21). Then the downward spiral begins. A culture of ingratitude careens ever downward into decline.



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What is Thanksgiving Day? - Continued

We should not be counted among those who see the fourth Thursday in November as nothing more than a day of football and over-indulgence. We should be thankful for one day set apart to consider all that we have and realize that all that we have has been given to us. Of course, such gratitude should in no wise be limited to one day out of 365.

Having been imprisoned for one year, four months, and eighteen days in a Nazi cell measuring 6 ft. x 9 ft., Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote what is certainly a reminder of the meaning of the Thanksgiving holiday:

“You must never doubt that I’m traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I’m being led. My past life is brim-full of God’s goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. I’m so thankful for the people I have met, and I only hope that they never have to grieve about me, but that they, too, will always be certain of and thankful for God’s mercy and forgiveness.”

Article written by **Dr. Stephen J. Nichols - President of Reformation Bible College and Chief Academic Officer for Ligonier Ministries.**

What Is a Christian’s Responsibility to Government?

The New Testament gives us some broad principles on how we are supposed to respond to government. For example, Romans 13 elaborates on the origin and institution of government as something that God ordains.

The great theologian Augustine said that government is a necessary evil, that it is necessary because of evil. And most theologians in the history of the church have said that human evil is the reason even corrupt government is better than no government at all. The function of government is to restrain evil and to maintain, uphold, and protect the sanctity of life and of property. Given this function, the Christian understands that government is ordained of God, and so Christians, first of all, are called to respect whatever it is that God institutes and ordains.

For God’s sake we are called to be model citizens. We are told to bend over backwards to honor the king or be obedient to the civil magistrates. That doesn’t mean a slavish obedience to the civil magistrates. There are occasions on which Christians not only may but must disobey the civil magistrates. Anytime a civil government requires a Christian to do what God forbids or forbids them to do what God commands, then the person must disobey. But our basic posture toward government, according to the New Testament, is to be submissive and obedient citizens of the state. We are also given the duty of praying for earthly governments that they may fulfill the tasks God has given to them.

We have another responsibility, and this is the one that sometimes brings us into controversial areas. I personally believe in a separation of spheres of authority between the church and state. I think it is a marvelous structure in the United States of America that does not allow for the state to rule the church or the church to rule the state. Historically that meant that the church was answerable to God and the state was answerable to God. Separation of church and state assumed a division of labor; the church has its job, and the state has its job.



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What Is a Christian’s Responsibility to Government? - Continued

The church is not to maintain a standing army, and the state is not to do evangelism or to administer the sacraments. Nevertheless, they are both regarded as being under God.

Unfortunately, in today’s culture separation of church and state means separation of state and God, as if the state and the government were answerable to no one but themselves—as if the government didn’t have to respond to God. But God monitors governments; God raises them up and brings them down. Every human government is accountable to God and is accountable to maintain its affairs with justice and with righteousness. When the government is no longer acting justly and no longer protecting life—sanctioning abortions, for example—then it is the task of the church to be the prophetic voice, to call the state to task and tell the state to repent and do what God commands it to do. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr. - Chairman of Ligonier Ministries*

Book Reviews

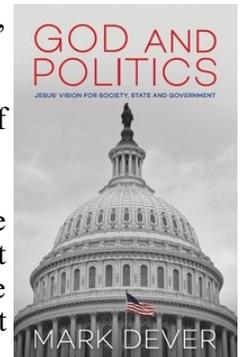
God and Politics

Mark Dever

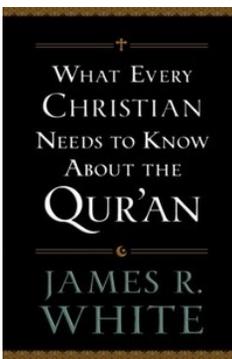
In a society where religion is increasingly private, and faith is OK as long as it’s not shared, many would seek to keep God out of their politics. But is that right, and is it biblical?

This is an important topic to consider, not just for those working in government, but for all of us as we seek to be responsible citizens in a fallen world.

Mark Dever unpacks what the Bible has to say on this topic, and teaches how we can ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s’ without compromising on what we believe. We’ll see that our duty to God is comprehensive and that there isn’t an area of life that we can separate from His influence. This little book won’t take long to read, but its impact could last a lifetime.



What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur’an *James R. White*



Relying on the media and politicians to tell us what Muslims believe isn’t going to cut it. Christians need to be better informed, whether the goal is to understand global politics or to talk to a Muslim neighbor across the street.

Through fair and accurate use of the Qur’an and other documents, scholar and accomplished debater Dr. James White examines what Muslim sacred texts teach about Christ, salvation, the Trinity, the afterlife, and other crucial topics. This book provides the answers you’ve been looking for to engage in open, honest discussions about Islam with Muslims and others.



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Birthday and Anniversary Corner - December 2016

Birthdays

Terrye B - (4)
Katie D - (9)
Jennifer A - (13)
Scott T - (19)
John Mc - (21)
Cheryl P - (22)
Jessica T - (23)

Anniversaries

John and Teresa H - (1)
Mike and Jan S - (1)
Russ and Terrye B - (5)
James and Katie D - (18)
John and LeAnn Mc - (22)

“When we understand the character of God, when we grasp something of His holiness, then we begin to understand the radical character of our sin and hopelessness. Helpless sinners can survive only by grace. Our strength is futile in itself; we are spiritually impotent without the assistance of a merciful God. We may dislike giving our attention to God's wrath and justice, but until we incline ourselves to these aspects of God's nature, we will never appreciate what has been wrought for us by grace. Even Jonathan Edwards's sermon on *‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’* was not designed to stress the flames of hell. The resounding accent falls not on the fiery pit but on the hands of the God who holds us and rescues us from it. The hands of God are gracious hands. They alone have the power to rescue us from certain destruction.”
 — *Dr. R.C. Sproul, The Holiness of God*

Disclaimer

The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or it's leadership.



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Office: 1001 Kenyon Court, Suffolk, VA 23435; **E-Mail:** pastorscofield@gmail.com
Website: www.westsuffolkbcc.com **Phone/Fax:** 757-539-0363
Teaching Pastor/Elder: Ben Scofield, pastorscofield@gmail.com
Teaching Elders: Mike Myers and Mike Prince
Deacons: John Hurst and John McPhatter
Editor: Walt Lawrence, gwlcf10415@gmail.com

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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of the month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.