

## Introduction

Intelligence is defined as the ability to acquire and use knowledge. The faster one can acquire and use knowledge, the more intelligent that person is said to be. A significant part of acquiring and using knowledge is the ability to recognize patterns. This is why so-called IQ tests measuring cognitive abilities are often filled with questions that require pattern recognition.

I recently watched a video by physicist Sabine Hossenfelder. She said there are *two kinds* of people: there are those who can extrapolate missing information from an incomplete data set. You see the pattern, right? If there are two kinds of people and one kind of person can extrapolate missing information, the other kind must be those who cannot extrapolate missing information.

Whether it's spatial awareness or memory speed and memory processing or solving equations or learning a new language, the ability to recognize patterns quickly makes these tasks much easier. Our lives are often governed by such patterns. Even something as seemingly innocuous as social media is a pattern—an algorithm. Algorithms determine what posts you are shown. “The Algorithm” wants to cause you to engage with the posts and the way to do that is to present you with posts that stir up your emotions. This information comes from patterns of those with similar demographics as you.

What we've been seeing in the book of Judges is a pattern—an algorithm. Over and over again Israel forgets the Lord and serves other gods. The Lord raises up someone to discipline his people. Israel then remembers the Lord and cries out for rescue and the Lord rescues them. Then they forget him again.

It's like the definition of insanity that is often attributed to Albert Einstein. Insanity, it is said, is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. It's like the old joke: “Doctor! Doctor, it hurts when I do this.” “Then don't do it.” If you keep doing the thing that causes you pain, you have no one to blame but yourself!

There's another pattern in the book of Judges, one that we tend to overlook. I would suggest the reason many of us find the book of Judges so very depressing is because we miss this particular pattern. My aim this morning is for us all to see it and to begin recognizing it, not only in the pages of Judges, but in our own lives as well. We're in Judges 10.

Jdgs 10:1 After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim.

<sup>2</sup> And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died and was buried at Shamir.

<sup>3</sup> After him arose Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years.

<sup>4</sup> And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. <sup>5</sup> And Jair died and was buried in Kamon.

<sup>6</sup> The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, 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. <sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.” <sup>11</sup> 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? <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. <sup>14</sup> Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.” <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel.

Judges 10:1–16

## After Abimelech

We’ve seen an increasing depravity in the judges. The first judge was Othniel, who was not an ethnic Israelite. He was of Canaanite origin yet worshiped the God of Israel and was therefore part of God’s covenant people. He was faithful and delivered Israel. Then came Ehud. He, too, was faithful, though he relied a bit on human cunning to deliver Israel. Still, he is presented as a faithful judge. After Ehud came Shamgar. Little is said of Shamgar other than he saved Israel when he killed 600 Philistines with a cattle prod.

Then came Barak—an unwilling judge who was fearful. Despite his apparent cowardice, God delivered Israel through him—and through Deborah and Jael. The fear wasn’t the problem; his unwillingness to obey and obey immediately was the problem. Rather than being remembered as a hero, he is remembered more for a woman defeating the enemy with a tent peg.

Then the story slows down as we come to the Gideon cycle. Gideon was all over the place. He was fearful and lacked confidence so the Lord built him up and strengthened him. He showed flashes of faithful obedience such as when he destroyed his father’s community worship site that was dedicated to Baal, at great personal risk. Despite receiving more assurance of God’s power than any other judge, he continued asking for more assurance, which God continued to give.

Despite all his assurances and in spite of his initial bravery in destroying the altar to Baal, he allowed his anger and vengeance to compel him to chase down the men who had

killed his brothers and he oppressed his own people in the process—including killing the men of Penuel because they didn't show him respect. Further, he sought the trappings of being a king while rejecting the title and used his wealth to further oppress his own people by creating an idol for them to worship.

After he died the people descended even further into idolatry. His son through his concubine was made king and then promptly was rejected as king, resulting in much suffering and misery. The story is a sordid affair of selfishness and political intrigue, violence and murder, subterfuge and betrayal. It's a terrible story that ends badly for all involved.

Then we come to the story of Tola and Jair. They were judges after Abimelech, verse 1 says. It's interesting, however, that they are not said to have been raised up by God himself. Rather, "After Abimelech, *there arose to save Israel* Tola the son of Puah". Surely God is the one who raised him up. Back in chapter 2 the author revealed the pattern of the cycle of judges: Israel sinned, God raised up an oppressor, Israel cried out, God raised up a deliverer, Israel sinned again. *The Lord* raised up judges. Here, however, the author does not specify this. In fact, Gideon is the last judge specifically said to have been raised up by the Lord. Abimelech claimed power. Tola and Jair "arose" to be judges.

The description of their time as judges is altogether too brief. Tola is identified as the son of Puah and the grandson of Dodo. He judged Israel 23 years and died. The most significant detail about him is his ancestors. Then came Jair. He judged Israel 22 years. He is identified as having "thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had 30 cities". The most significant thing about him is his descendants.

We miss the pun. Hebrew is full of puns and words that sound alike. The Jerusalem Publication Society captures the pun in English in their translation of this verse:

Jdgs 10:4 (He had thirty sons, who rode on thirty burros and owned thirty bor-  
oughs in the region of Gilead; these are called Havvoth-jair to this day.)  
Judges 10:4, Jewish Publication Society version

Daniel Block points out the word for donkey is not the usual word for donkey. The author chose this word, in part, for the pun, but also to suggest these aren't pack animals, but transportation. Kings rode on such animals as they were sure-footed on the slopes and rough terrain of the land of Canaan.

The point is that Jair lived in prosperity. His sons inherited that prosperity. Think of these two judges. They came *after Abimelech*. There is no foreign oppressor identified in the text. It doesn't say some nation began to oppress them. Abimelech was the oppressor. His father Gideon was the oppressor. Imagine the chaos these two men brought to their own people. Gideon's ephod enticed Israel to idolatry. The judges were supposed to call the people to faithfulness, not entice them to unfaithfulness. Abimelech's brief reign of terror lasted just three years, but those three years were unstable and harsh and violent. How fitting that his life ended with such violence—with a millstone crushing his head and his armor-bearer thrusting him through with a sword.

Both these judges are in the region where Gideon and Abimelech were. No military exploit is listed, suggesting their time as judges were more like Deborah's time. She was not a warrior. She's specifically described as a prophetess, calling Israel to faithfully follow YHWH. She imposed justice. She helped the people live in fairness and in faithfulness. This is what Tola and Jair did.

Jair is specifically said to have lots of sons who each had a donkey. The wording indicates these were “riding donkeys” not “work donkeys”. They were transportation, not for carrying cargo. That each son also had influence over a town indicates the prosperity they were experiencing. *This was always God’s plan for Israel!* His plan was to bless, not to curse. Their sin brought about suffering and pain. God wanted to bless his people so he instructed them how to receive his blessings. If they would faithfully follow him and reject the idols of the nations around them, they, like Jair and his family, would receive blessings. Mark Boda and Mary Conway illustrate this for us.

[T]hese two figures remind us of **another pattern for leadership: one typified by consistency and carefulness, which provides the environment for safe and sustained growth among God’s people.**

Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, ZECOT

After Abimelech, the people needed this reminder. In that region of the land arose two judges who demonstrated for the people of Israel what faithfulness looked like. Tola reminded them of their legacy, of faithful men and women who had come before. Jair reminded them of the future God wanted for them. Like Deborah they functioned more as prophets than as military leaders. They showed the people how to live faithfully, in safety and security and prosperity. They showed the people what God wanted to give. Then we come to one of the darkest paragraphs in the entire book.

## Gods, Gods, and more Gods

Tola and Jair seem to have had a bit of a stabilizing influence on the people of Israel. It was only after they died that we’re told Israel did evil again. In chapter 8 we’re told that as soon as Gideon died, the people made Baal-berith their god. Apparently Baal-berith, one of the various manifestations of Baal the storm god, who was often depicted as a bull, was not enough for Israel. Verse 6 tells us they did evil in the sight of the Lord again and served the Baals. *Plural*. One form of Baal was not enough, so they worshiped all sorts of versions of Baal.

The various versions of Baal were also not enough so they worshiped the Ashtaroth. That’s plural. The singular is Ashtoreth. As with Baal, they weren’t satisfied worshiping the singular Ashtoreth, so they worshiped the Ashtaroth—plural. Oh! It turns out that worshiping the various Baals and Ashtaroth wasn’t enough so they also worshiped the gods of Syria. And the gods of Sidon. And the gods of Moab. And the gods of the Ammonites. And the gods of the Philistines.

In the ancient world to worship a god simply meant to offer the right rituals to satisfy the god’s vanity. Need rain for your crop? You don’t need to *love* Baal; you just need to offer the right sacrifice according to the right ritual. Do the right thing and Baal *has to* give you rain. Want to have a baby? Perform the right ritual for this goddess and presto, blamo! You get pregnant! None of the gods in the ancient world cared if you worshiped other gods as well. *Of course you also worshiped other gods!* It’s how things were! Not one single god cared if you worshiped other gods.

Well, there was one. The Lord God of Israel insisted that other gods were no gods at all. YHWH God of Israel insisted on singular devotion to him and a wholesale rejection of all other gods. He insisted that his people refuse to bow before any idol or carved image. This wasn't out of vanity, but a recognition that the Baals and the Ashtaroth and gods of Syria and Sidon and Moab and the Ammonites and the Philistines were no gods at all. They were just idols. Vapor. Mist. Empty. Unable to speak or to act.

While the Lord God insisted on singular devotion to him, the gods the people worshiped did not insist on such singular devotion. Rather than include YHWH in their worship, the text says, "They forsook the LORD and did not serve him". They rejected him outright! They didn't even include him among the many gods they worshiped. They simply ignored him.

It should come as no surprise that verse 7 tells us the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. He's angry because they are choosing death instead of life. They are choosing to worship gods that can do nothing for them while he offers them everything—and they are forsaking him. True to his word, God sold them into the hand of the Philistines and the Ammonites.

The Philistines are largely in the southwest of Canaan. The Ammonites are largely to the east of Canaan. This means they are, essentially, surrounded by enemies. Verse 8 says "they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year", and oppressed all those who lived east of the Jordan for another eighteen years. Then it got worse. In verse 9 the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah and Benjamin and Ephraim, with the inevitable result being that Israel was caught between two pincers: Philistia on the west and Ammon on the east.

Israel is in trouble, and the trouble is caused by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord: they worshiped false gods. They have caused their own distress through their rebellion against the Lord. "Doctor, doctor, it hurts when I do this!" When Ammon crosses the Jordan, the danger increases because Israel has been weakened by eighteen years of oppression, and this weakening has affected all the tribes. Now they invade into the mainland, into the territory of the most-powerful tribe of Judah and the tribes immediately bordering Judah.

In verse 10 it appears the people realized they've tried all sorts of gods, no doubt offering the prescribed sacrifices and performing the necessary rituals. Never mind the fact they are worshiping the very same gods their oppressors are worshiping; why should those gods give them victory? The Ammonites had been faithfully serving those gods for much longer! It's clearly not working so they try one more God, only this time it is the God who is real and who has proven himself again and again.

They cry out to YHWH God of Israel and say, "We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals." So true! That's exactly what they've done! They have sinned against the Lord. They have forsaken their God. They have served the Baals. And the Ashtaroth. And the gods of Syria. And the gods of Sidon. And the gods of Moab. And the gods of the Ammonites. And the gods of the Philistines. Though YHWH God of Israel sought to bless them and bless them greatly, they rejected him for these gods that are no gods at all. See God's response in verses 11–12.

Jdgs 10:11 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? <sup>12</sup> 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.

Judges 10:11–12

What is God's point here? When he rescued them from the Egyptians, he made them his people. Remember that the exodus from Egypt was first and foremost about the tabernacle. Making them his people was about God seeking to dwell among them. That is the reason for the sacrifices and the law of Moses. They were to enable a holy God to dwell among an unholy people. What a gift! What incredible grace God has shown them.

He saved them from the Amorites. When they were in the wilderness they were attacked and God protected them—protected *his people*. He reminds them he had already protected them from the Ammonites before, through Ehud. The Ammonites were allies of Moab and God protected them. He had already rescued them from the Philistines. Back in chapter 3 there is the brief mention of Shamgar the son of Anath. He saved Israel when he killed 600 Philistines with a cattle prod.

God rescued them from the Sidonians in chapter 4 with Barak. There he rescued Israel from northern attackers, and Sidon was to the north. He rescued them from the Amalekites twice. In chapter 3 they were allied with Moab and then in chapter 6 they were allied with Midian. God rescued Israel from them both times. Then he mentions the “Maonites”. Scholars believe this is a name of a particular tribe within the Midianites, representing the whole of the Midianites.

Why does God remind them of this? He certainly isn't playing the guilt card: “Look at all I've done for you!” They've tried everything for eighteen years and now things are only getting worse so they turn to the only one who can do something for them. Why should the gods of Ammon hear their prayers when surely the Ammonites are praying as well? At this point, they are crying out to YHWH God of Israel, though. Surely he will step up and do something. He has just reminded them of all the times he has rescued them. So what does he say after reminding them?

Jdgs 10:13 “Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. <sup>14</sup> Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.”

Judges 10:13–14

The very God who has protected them hasn't changed, so what has? They have. They have forsaken him. They've forsaken him before, though, so why is he now refusing to help them? After serving the Baals and the Ashtaroth and the various others gods they worshiped, now they've decided to give ol' YHWH a try. They're not crying out to him in faith. They are treating him like the Baals and like the Ashtaroth: perform the prescribed rituals and the deity must do what you ask. In this case? Well, *confess your sins*, amirite? Just tell 'em what he wants to hear and he'll make all your troubles go away.

## Real Repentance

God's response to their confession is surprising. The pattern we've seen over and over again seems to be changing. It is as though God's patience were wearing thin. What is happening

here is Israel cries out to him as if they were rubbing a magic lamp and the genie must grant their wishes. This is why God tells them to “cry out to the gods you have chosen”. Israel doesn’t really want the Lord; they want his *protection*. They don’t want YHWH in their midst; they want his *blessings*. They don’t want God; they want his *stuff*.

They’re treating him the way the gods were treated: do the thing they want and they will do the thing *you* want. Religion in the ancient world was very transactional. Religions today are still very transactional. You give something and you receive something; so long as you both get what you want out of the transaction, everything’s good. When God reminds Israel of all the times he had rescued them, he wasn’t reminding them they needed to fulfill their part of the “transaction”. He was reminding them of his desire *for them*. His aim was to dwell among them.

God is holy and they were not. This is why he gave them the system of sacrifices. The sacrifices were not meant to be a means for Israel to receive the stuff they wanted. The sacrifices would enable a holy God to dwell in their midst. God himself is the blessing, even as he promised material blessing as well. If they would love him and look to him in faith, the blessings would simply flow as a direct consequence of God dwelling in their midst.

Israel was rightly affronted when God told them to cry out to the false gods they had been serving. They were just as shocked and stunned as any reader today is. They begin to recognize the real issue and while their approach remains essentially transactional, now they begin to truly repent.

Jdgs 10:15 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.”<sup>16</sup> So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel.

Judges 10:15–16

They acknowledge again that they’ve sinned. They also acknowledge God’s justice in doing whatever “seems good” to him. *Just not today*. Deal with our sins as you see fit, but please do it tomorrow, for today we need you to do something about, you know, *the Ammonites*. This is essentially what they were saying before, though. You confess sins, because that’s what this particular deity requires...only now they see the need to put away their foreign gods.

When it says “they put away the foreign gods among them” it means they were bowing down to statues and carved images—the very things God told them to reject outright. Remember the purpose of the conquest was to remove idolatry from the land, the land where YHWH God of Israel would dwell among his people! Remember the warning God gave them through Moses when they were still in the wilderness preparing to enter the land.

In Deuteronomy 7 God told them to devote the people of the land to “completely destruction”, and then explained what that meant. It means not intermarrying with them, so that they are not enticed to worship their gods. It means to destroy their altars and their carved images. It means to chop down their Asherah poles and smash their idols. It means to remain faithful to YHWH God of Israel.

As we’ve seen, the entire purpose of the conquest was to claim all the land God promised them for the exclusive worship of YHWH. Only YHWH God of Israel demanded this. All

other gods in the ancient world were cool if you also worshiped other gods, so long as you kept your end of the bargain.

Ancient religion was very transactional. Baal didn't care *how you lived your life*, so long as you offered the right sacrifices in the right way. What does the Lord require? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." To love the Lord is to put away all other gods. To love the Lord is to tear down every idol in your heart, that your heart might be devoted entirely to the Lord.

Israel actively put away the foreign gods they had been serving and began to serve the Lord. That is, they began to worship him and only him. Whereas God's response to their initial "confession" was a bit unexpected, his response to their real repentance is not. Verse 16 says, "and he became impatient over the misery of Israel".

God does not delight in suffering. In his wisdom, suffering and pain is part of this world, but God takes no joy in it. God does not delight in the death of anyone—including those who hate him. He said this to the prophet Ezekiel:

Ezek 33:11 Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?  
Ezekiel 33:11

God wants them to live. He wants them to prosper. He wants them to reject their sin and embrace life, and he is life. He wants their hearts. Because of his love for his people, he became impatient with their suffering. God is preparing to act.

## The Pattern

We have this idea that God's default mode is anger and judgment, that God's primary demeanor is wrath and it's only when you're able to overcome his default mode that he can be kind and offer blessings. In other words, God is always angry, but sometimes you can interrupt that anger by doing the right thing. If you can do that right thing, God won't be angry. This is the very opposite of how God has revealed himself.

God's default is love and mercy and kindness. God's default mode is to offer blessings. God desires to give himself to others. The very reason he created humans was to have someone with whom he could share himself. This world was created to be a place of blessing and prosperity, not judgment and suffering. Sin interrupts God's desire for blessing. Sin is the thing that stirs up God's righteous anger.

When we read the book of Judges we tend to see one particular pattern: Israel's sin. Over and over again. Israel cries out to God, "Doctor, doctor, it hurts when I do this". God repeatedly tells them, "Then don't do that." Too often we miss the greater pattern in the book: God's desire to show mercy and to pour out grace upon his people.

The pattern of the book of Judges is not one of transactions. If Israel does the thing that God wants, God will do the thing that Israel wants. That's not the pattern. Such a transaction would indicate there is something God needs that only Israel can provide, so if they can simply agree on the terms, both sides would get what they want. God lacks nothing

and therefore needs nothing. Even if God could need something, he would simply cause that thing to exist.

If God needed gold or silver, God can create gold or silver. This is why the relationship between God and his people cannot be transactional: God doesn't need them or their stuff. Israel, however, needs God—and he offers himself to them! Remember, the whole point of rescuing them from Egypt was so that he would dwell among them in the tabernacle.

The pattern we miss is this: God's love is an initiating love. Everything God does with and for Israel is intended to initiate a response from Israel. God does not rescue Israel because Israel has done something for God. God rescues Israel because he loves Israel. His love is an *initiating* love. Even his initial refusal to rescue them was an initiation, an attempt to move them to repentance. God knew their sin would inhibit his blessings, so he acted to bring about their repentance that he might get back to rescuing them.

God's pattern is this: he gives, and his people respond in faith. God rescues, and his people respond in faith. God saves, and his people respond in faith. See the pattern? God initiates. God does not respond to something we do by becoming favorable toward us. God loves us and we respond to his love. That's not a transaction. That's the reception of a gift, and the gift is God himself.

This is what we see when we look at God's words to them. He reminded them he saved them from the Egyptians. God did that. This act of rescue is what initiated the relationship between God and Israel. God took them to Mount Sinai and made a covenant with them. This act is what defined the relationship between God and Israel. Faithfully following him was merely a response to his rescue, a right response to his love and mercy. There was no transaction involved. God gave; Israel received. The way in which they would receive was faithfully worshiping him and only him.

When Israel sinned against God—repeatedly—it's easy to begin to think this is the dominant pattern in the book. It's not. The dominant pattern is God brought them into the land, promising to give them the land and its blessings. When Israel forgot him and began to serve other gods, the Lord initiated their rescue by raising up a nation against them, that they might recognize the foolishness of their actions and return to him—and return to *life*. The pattern that should overwhelm us is the pattern of God's grace and kindness, repeatedly given to those utterly undeserving of it.

Church, if the pattern is depressing, we're looking at the wrong pattern! The right pattern is filled with hope! God is merciful! God is kind. God is love. The Lord desires to be with us, to dwell among us, and he has done everything necessary to make this possible. The only "transaction" that takes place is God offers himself for us.

God's "pattern" is grace. It is the continual, persistent giving of himself to people utterly unworthy of such a gift. It is given freely, not because it is one-half of a transaction. It is the Lord Jesus giving himself fully and completely to his people, that he might pour out his blessings on them.

The right response to this pattern, in fact, the only response that makes any sense is faith. The Algorithm, so to speak, is simple and straightforward. God gives himself and his people respond in faith and obedience—not *to receive* his gift, but because they *have received* his gift.

In the words of Tim Keller,

The central basis of Christian assurance is not how much our hearts are set on God, but how unshakably his heart is set on us.

Tim Keller

Church, rest in this incredible truth.