

The disintegration begins

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[0 : 00] We come now to our Bible reading from the book of Judges, chapter 2, and you'll find this on page 201 in our big church Bibles.

Page 201, Judges, chapter 2, and I'm going to read from verse 6 in chapter 2 to verse 6 in chapter 3. While you're finding that, let me just say that you'll see on your seat one of these Old Testament timelines, just a paper version of the thing I produced last week.

One or two folk have said they'd like to have a copy of that because it helps to fit everything together. So please do take that away if you would like to, and I trust you will find it helpful. So let us hear the words of the Lord God, Judges, chapter 2, verse 6.

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. 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. And Joshua, the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-Herez, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash.

[1 : 31] 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.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.

So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.

Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.

[2 : 35] Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them.

They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge.

For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them, and bowing down to them.

They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And he said, Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did or not.

So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua. Now these are the nations that the Lord left to test Israel by them.

[4 : 08] That is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war, to those who had not

known it before.

These are the nations. The five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sidonians, and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-Hermon, as far as Labo-Hamath. They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons. And they served their gods. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Is it just me, friends, or is it rather warm in here tonight?

[5 : 25] Is it a little bit warm? Do take a jacket off or anything that's just going to help you not to fall asleep in the first five minutes. But seriously, if you do, I took my jacket off a few minutes ago. If you want to take something off just like that to cool yourself down a little bit, you are most welcome.

Well, let's turn to our Judges, chapter 2, verse 6 again. And you may have seen on our bulletin for this week that I've given this sermon a rather dismal title.

And the title is The Disintegration Begins. But really, our passage for tonight, I don't know if you felt that as I was reading it out, but it can hardly be given a more optimistic title than that.

Because we're very much on a downward slope. I think I said this last week, a downward slope here through the book of Judges. And this passage is full of warnings for the people of God, warnings which we will do well to take to heart.

Now, this process of disintegration in faith and lifestyle is clearly shown by two verses, one at the beginning of our passage and the other at the end.

[6 : 32] So look with me first at chapter 2, verse 7. This looks quite good. And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua. But now turn over and look at chapter 3, verse 6 at the end of the verse.

And they, that is the people of Israel, served their gods, that is the gods of the Canaanites that they had not expelled from the promised land. So do you see what's happened between chapter 2, verse 7 and chapter 3, verse 6?

The people of Israel have moved from a position of serving the Lord, the one true God, to a position of serving the Baals of the people of Canaan.

So what can have happened to cause such a terrible disintegration? What I want to do tonight is to try to plot the course of that change and decline, which took place in a very short time, only a generation or so, 20 or 30 years.

And let's bear in mind, as we wend our painful way through these paragraphs, that one of God's purposes in including the book of Judges in the canon of Scripture is to warn his contemporary people, people like us, the church, because similar declines and disintegrations can take place in any generation.

[7 : 48] So there's a loving warning here to us from the Lord. Any real warning has love behind it, doesn't it? If parents warn their children against an electric cable or against going into a field where the sign says, don't come in, there's a bull here.

When the parents warn their children, it's love that lies behind the warning. The warnings of Scripture are backed by the love of God. Now this whole passage from chapter 2, verse 6 to chapter 3, verse 6 really serves as a summary of the contents of the whole book of Judges.

And let me illustrate the function of this passage like this. Imagine you're going out for a day at the zoo with your friends and your family. And you get to the zoo gates and you go up to the little turnstile place, the office, and you pay your eye-watering attendance fee at the office.

And the smiling attendant, who's just emptied your wallet, then gives you a folded-over leaflet, which proves to be a map of the zoo. So you spread out the leaflet and it tells you where you're going.

The map tells you where you'll find the sea lion's pool and where you'll find the giraffes and the elephants, the Brazilian three-toed sloth, and that rare and dangerous beast, the Scottish wildcat.

[9 : 05] So map in hand, map in hand, you set off around the zoo. But you're better equipped to enjoy the details of the zoo because this map has already put into your mind an idea, a general idea of the ground that you're going to cover.

Now, our passage for tonight is like the map of the zoo. All the vivid and rich and interesting details of the book of Judges are going to follow. We shall start looking at that next week. But our passage for tonight describes the trends, and it shows us what to look for.

If you like, it shows us in broad-brush terms how and why the disintegration of Israel's faith sets in. It shows us how God thinks about the Israelites and what God does for them and what God does to them.

You'll see the action really begins at chapter 3, verse 7, where the Lord raises up the first of the 12 judges in the book of Judges, Caleb's nephew, Othniel, as I say, next week for him.

But in our passage for tonight, the author of Judges simply tells us in chapter 2, verse 16, it's a very general summary, chapter 2, verse 16, that the Lord raised up judges who saved the Israelites out of the hand of those who plundered them.

[10:17] Now, you'll see that the action, as I say, really begins later. But this is just a general overview. That's the outline of the action. But we have to wait till later before we reach the interesting individuals around whom the story revolves.

Now, just one final point before we get into the text. You may be puzzled about this word, judges. These judges, so-called judges, that the Lord raised up, were not judges as we understand judges. They were not senior law court officials wearing gray curly wigs and sitting up behind a high desk in a court of law, hearing cases and sentencing criminals. No, they were men and one woman, men of action.

They were military leaders. Their job was to lead the army of Israel into battle and defeat a particular oppressor. Look again at verse 16 in chapter 2.

The Lord raised up the judges who saved them, the people, out of the hand of those who plundered them. So this verse suggests that these judges were saviors, saviors with a small s.

[11:25] They saved the hapless Israelites out of the hand of those who plundered them. So, for example, we're going to meet Gideon, who saved the Israelites from the Midianites. We're going to meet Samson, who saved them from the Philistines.

There were other oppressors as well from different nations and tribes. So these judges are deliverers or saviors with a small s. And because God sent them to rescue his people, they foreshadow in a small way the great saviour, with a capital S, who was to come more than 1,300 years later.

Well, we'll take our passage under three headings tonight. First, Israel's initial decline. Now, let's start with chapter 2, verse 7. As I said a moment ago, the situation looks encouraging and hopeful at chapter 2, verse 7.

The people of Israel are still serving the Lord while Joshua was alive, and, says the verse, for some time afterwards, while Joshua's fellow elders were still living. But really, the picture wasn't too happy even while Joshua was still alive.

Now, to demonstrate that, perhaps you just turn back a page or so to Joshua, chapter 24, the very end of Joshua. And Joshua 24 brings the book of Joshua to a climax, and it records Joshua's final words to the people of Israel.

[12:50] And throughout this last chapter of Joshua, the old leader is challenging the people. He's cajoling them and commanding them to serve the Lord after his death. And he throws down a great gauntlet to them in verse 15, which is really one of the most challenging verses in the whole of the Old Testament.

And if it is evil, says Joshua to the Israelites, if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve. He then gives them a choice of two possible sets, alternative sets of foreign gods.

Either the gods your father served in the region beyond the river Euphrates, where Abraham came from, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

And then you see in verses 16 to 18, the people answer by saying, we will serve the Lord. Look at the end of verse 18. We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.

But Joshua then replies in verse 19, you're not able to serve him. He's holy. He's jealous. He's not prepared to have an adulterous people. He wants only your affection.

[13:57] If you forsake him and serve foreign gods, he will turn and do you harm and consume you. You see, Joshua knows the people's frailty all too well, just as Moses had known them in earlier years.

And he says to them in verse 22, you are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord to serve him. And they said, we are witnesses. And he said, now here's the surprising thing. Then put away the foreign gods that are among you and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel. In other words, I know what you're up to.

You're secretly worshiping some of these detestable idols even now, aren't you? Joshua was no fool. He knew what was going on. So to turn back to Judges chapter 2 verse 7, I think we have to say that when Judges 2 verse 7 says that the people were serving the Lord all the days of Joshua, well, that may have been true at a superficial level.

But the people also had strong inclinations to idolatry in their hearts at the same time. As do you and I.

[15:11] Is that not right? We sing, we love you, O Lord. And we do. We do. And yet at the same time, idols clamor for our worship, for our hearts.

I won't ask you to put up your hand, but if I were to say, please put your hand up if you're aware that there are idols that are beckoning you to bow down and worship them and wrap your soul around them, I guess every honest hand in the building would go up.

Yes, we love the Lord, and we're learning to love him more and to serve him. But the world that we live in bristles with seductive idols, and we feel their magnetic power.

Now that's what Joshua saw in the people of his day. They professed allegiance to the Lord in clear terms, but he still had to say to them, put away the foreign gods that are among you.

Now look again at Judges 2 verse 7. The people served the Lord while Joshua lived, and they continued to serve the Lord for some years afterwards, while some of the influential elders who were Joshua's colleagues were still living and exercising their influence.

[16:19] Then you'll see in verses 8 and 9, Joshua dies and is buried. And then, verse 10, all Joshua's contemporaries also die.

And then, and this is a critically important piece of information, there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

Now isn't that an extraordinary piece of information? Why did the next generation not know the Lord? Presumably because their parents hadn't taken the trouble to teach them.

Just look carefully at that last sentence in verse 10. It doesn't say that the new generation did not know about the Lord. It says that the new generation did not know the Lord.

They were not acquainted with him. They had no personal knowledge of him or trust in him or love for him. No doubt they knew certain things about him. They would have seen their parents gathering for worship and offering sacrifices and singing and so on.

[17:23] But somehow their parents had not introduced them to the Lord so that they should be his friends and servants. Even though they knew certain things about him, they were strangers to him.

And verse 10 says that not only did they not know him, they also did not know the work that he had done for Israel. For example, the crossing of the dry river bed of the Jordan, the miraculous fall of the walls of Jericho.

And they would have heard of these things. But I guess they'd heard of them as if they were ancient history. But they had no real experience of the power of God. Now there's a clear lesson for us, isn't there?

And that is that one of the great responsibilities of Christian parents is to teach their children to know the Lord. Now friends, let me say this to younger ones who perhaps are not yet married and don't yet have any children.

Having a family is rather like having an earthquake. It's an experience that profoundly rearranges your life. And when a young couple, and I can still remember this, when a young couple have their first baby and they get home from the hospital, they look at each other rather dumbstruck and they say, what do we do now?

[18:37] Where do we go from here? Nappies, cot, cot blankets, nappy rash ointment, read the right books, breast is best and all that kind of thing. Get a car seat that fits the child and fits the car.

Fend off over anxious granny. And, and, says young father to young mother, we've got to teach this little scrap of humanity to know the Lord. Otherwise, he will be serving the Baals and the Ashtaroth. Or the modern equivalent. So for the next 20 years, we gently but steadily teach our growing children who the Lord is and what he has done, not just for us, but for the world and for the church.

And what it means to live a happy and disciplined life of Christian service. And we don't force feed them. We take it at a pace appropriate to their age and maturity. But we read the Bible with them. We pray with them. And very importantly, we develop the kind of relationship with our children that makes it as natural to talk about the Lord at the tea table as it is to talk about the football or the weather or even the rugby.

[19 : 43] Now, friends, let me assure you, there is no formula, there's no hard and fast formula for engineering the new birth into our children's lives.

The new birth is given by God alone. But Christian parents, by personal example, as well as by their teaching, can create the kind of environment in which a newborn Christian can grow and develop strongly.

Now, the local church has a big part to play as well and supplements the teaching of the parents through Sunday schools and young people's groups. And these church groups are really significant. But the prime responsibility rests with the parents. You'll have seen the way that our minister conducts the baptism of a baby or a young child here. He always says to the parents, it is your responsibility to bring up this child to know the Lord.

And as you'll have noticed, he always looks the father, particularly in the eye. And he says, it's your responsibility, my brother, particularly, because you're the head of the family. And that's a message that the young father needs to hear because young fathers will often abdicate responsibility to their wives.

[20 : 51] But the manliness of a Christian man is partly expressed in his willingness to step up to the plate and decide that he is going to do everything in his power to make sure that his children do not end up serving the idols of the world.

Now, it's no accident in Judges 2 that what we read in verse 11 follows straight on from what we read in verse 10. Verse 10, another generation after them arose who did not know the Lord or the work that he'd done for Israel.

And what happens next? And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and they served the Baals. So if the new generation are not lovingly taught what it means to know the Lord, the Baals are lying in wait for them and they will quickly snare them.

So there's the first thing, the initial decline. Now, this leads me on to our second heading, which is Israel's addiction to Baal. We have to ask why Baal and Baalism were so attractive.

Why did the Israelites forsake the great, wonderful God, the God of the Exodus, the God of Abraham? Why did they go running after Baal? Or as verse 13 puts it, the Baals and the Ashteroth.

[22 : 12] Well, let me say a little bit about Baal and Baalism. People have always thought that it's rather important to eat, which it is.

And if you're going to eat, it's important to have good soil and good seed to put into the soil. And if you're going to supplement your vegetarian diet with roast lamb and braised beef and goat cutlet, you've got to have good livestock.

You've got to have strong rams with broad chests and width across the shoulders and the rear end. You've got to have bulls with long straight backs. You've got to have active billy goats. And of course, you've got to have ewes and cows and nanny goats that milk well and produce good young stock.

Vigor, vitality, virility, fertility. Without those things in livestock farming and arable farming, we're not going to eat well. Now, the pagan Canaanites worshipped Baal.

And the word Baal means master or lord. And the Canaanites conceived of Baal as the God of storm and fertility. But this is how the Canaanites thought that Baal worked.

[23 : 23] Baal had a female counterpart or consort in their way of thinking. Baal was male and his consort was Ashteroth or Astarte. And the Canaanites thought that Baal and Ashteroth had to be engaging in a great deal of what you might call marital activity if the ground was to be productive and the farm animals were to bring forth plenty of strong young animals.

I'm trying to put this as delicately as I can because I realize that we're British and rather coy. But we need to understand what was going on here. Now, the essence of pagan religion is that you have to coerce and manipulate the gods in order to get the desired result.

The essence of true Bible faith is quite different. It is that you trust God and you obey him. But the pagan worshiper has to manipulate his deities.

So how were the worshippers of Baal and Ashteroth going to persuade Baal and his consort to engage in regular sexual activity? That was the question. Answer. The worshippers must engage in such regular activity themselves.

So the conscientious Baal-worshipping man would regularly visit a holy, in inverted commas, shrine of Baal where he would spend time with a sacred shrine prostitute engaging in the requisite activity so that Baal and Ashteroth should look down from their lofty residence, that they should see the conscientious worshiper in bed with the sacred prostitute and thus be reminded of what they ought to be doing up there in their celestial bedroom.

[25 : 04] So Baalism was both orgiastic, it produced orgies, and it was manipulative. It glorified sexual activity in a pretty unrestrained way and thus it was worlds apart from the delightful restraints of the Bible's teaching on sex, which, just in case anyone has forgotten, is the teaching that sex is blessed and approved by God only within the context of faithful, lifelong, heterosexual marriage.

So Baalism was orgiastic but also manipulative, the idea being that the fertility of the land, the livestock, and indeed the people themselves depended on the sexual vigor of Baal and his consort and that in turn depended upon the promiscuous activity of the people.

Now it was this combination of the worship of a false god with orgiastic sexual activity that was such a detestable, horrible thing in the sight of God and it was the main reason why the Israelites were commanded by God to drive the Canaanites out of the promised land.

There was no place in God's land for that kind of belief and that kind of behavior. So we have to ask how did the Israelites, how was it possible that they could have gone that way and gone that way so quickly?

Well the main reason surely was their failure to drive the Canaanites out of their land. Just look back to chapter 1 verse 28. I tried to emphasize this last week but let's notice it again.

[26 : 42] 1.28 When Israel grew strong they put the Canaanites to forced labor but they did not drive them out completely. And so it goes on over the next few verses. Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites in Gezer.

Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron. Asher did not drive out other ones and Naphtali did not drive out other ones. And so it went on. And the repetition of that phrase this tribe and that tribe of Israel did not drive out the Canaanites.

That reveals the grief in God's heart that his people had not been willing to be thoroughly obedient to him. I think you can understand what would have happened on the ground even though we're aware of how damaging it was for Israel.

If people of different cultures and races find themselves living cheek by jowl together naturally they begin to adapt to each other and to work out ways of living together.

Think of it like this. If you're British sort of white British stock and you go to live long term somewhere in Africa or Asia you learn the local customs you learn the local language and the culture.

[27 : 49] You set your heart on being friendly with the national population. You shrink from the idea of living in an isolated ghetto. And of course it works the other way around as well.

If you've come to Scotland from Asia or the Middle East or Africa to live here you learn the local customs you learn to speak English you learn to enjoy Scottish food and even the Scottish weather. It's the natural way that we behave isn't it?

Now when the Israelites began to colonize the promised land something of overriding importance was at stake. The issue was which was true the faith taught by the God of Israel or this debased religion of the Canaanites.

These two were not alternative versions of the same thing. They were very different from each other and this is why the Lord was so clear and emphatic in his command to the Israelites to drive the Canaanites out completely.

So how might a young Israelite have been attracted to Baalism? Well just imagine a young Hebrew farmer becoming friendly with his Canaanite neighbor who's also a young farmer.

[28 : 58] They want to be friendly to each other. They don't want to be standoffish. And the Canaanite farmer says to the young Hebrew I know a bit about your God Yahweh. I've heard about the walls of water standing up at the Red Sea.

I've heard about the crossing of the River Jordan. I have no objection to your Yahweh. But you know here in Canaan we do things rather differently. We've learned a lot over the years about the

rhythms of nature.

We've developed quite an understanding really quite a theology of crops and livestock and how everything works together in the best way. I'll tell you what Barak that we're having a celebration tomorrow up on the hills at our little shrine.

Why don't you and I meet together after tea maybe at seven o'clock and I'll take you up and I'll show you what we do. I can see you're a young man with red blood in your veins. I think I can promise you an experience of worship that you'd really rather enjoy.

So the young Hebrew goes and he quickly falls into the snare. He's been unwilling to obey God to drive the Canaanites out of the land and he pays a terrible price for his disobedience.

[30 : 06] He gets hooked. Now what can we people learn from all this? Our situation is different from that of the ancient Israelites in one respect and that is that we have no command to drive non-Christian people out of our country.

Our orders from heaven are not to drive them out but lovingly to bring the gospel of Christ to those who are not Christians in our country. But we're in exactly the same position as the ancient Israelites when it comes to God's commands to us to set our hearts firmly against the idols of the world.

And our command from God is to set our hearts against them with resolve and determination.

Christians are committed to the lifelong development of the practice of rejecting idols.

It's a lifelong thing reject the idols. Not everything that the non-Christian world promotes and values is wrong in the sight of God. There are babies in the bath water.

So for example our society is much better I think than it was 50 years ago at providing for disabled people. There's a better level of understanding of mental illness for which we can be very thankful as well as a physical disability.

[31 : 26] We can welcome trends of that kind. But much of what the modern world values is both godless and dehumanizing. And we must not only set ourselves against idols on the personal level but we also need to offer non-Christian society a critique of its idols.

We need to make our voice heard in public places in parliament and if you get the chance to be in there one day in the media in the universities and colleges and at school.

In our evangelism therefore we not only say Christ is wonderful therefore come to Christ we also say to people your idols are pathetic and dehumanizing therefore come to Christ.

You see our evangelism entails not only a true portrayal of Christ but also an opening of the can that contains the idols so that people can look into the can and see that it's really full of worms.

So Judges 2 verse 11 is a warning to us to avoid the bales like the plague. It's a shocking warning that if the people of Israel these people whose parents had known the Lord and had seen his great and mighty works if they could fall into idolatry we of course can go the same way and it would happen to us simply because we had never resolved in our hearts to have no truck with the idols of our age.

[32 : 52] Just notice the verbs that the author of Judges uses in order to convey the shame and horror of the Israelites behavior. Chapter 2 verse 11 they served they became servants of the bales.

Verse 12 they abandoned the Lord they went after other gods they provoked the Lord to anger.

Verse 13 again they abandoned the Lord and served the bales.

And look at verse 17 that's a particularly horrible one. They hoared after other gods. In other words they were like debauched young men running into a brothel panting for satisfaction.

They became addicted to Baal so that Baal was really in their blood in their DNA. Idolatry is addictive. It coarsens and dehumanizes people.

So we've had a look at the initial decline the addiction to Baal and now thirdly let's notice the double faithfulness of the Lord to Israel.

[33 : 54] Double in this sense that he is faithful to them first in his anger and second in his love. Now let's see his faithful anger first in verse 14.

So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them and he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.

Whenever they marched out that means marched out to battle the hand of the Lord was against them for harm as the Lord had warned and as the Lord had sworn to them and they were in terrible distress.

And just think of those phrases in verse 15. The Lord had warned them and the Lord had sworn to them. Now the Lord had given them solemn warnings back in the book of Deuteronomy that if they were to disobey him if they were to start worshipping false gods there would be dire consequences. Now we won't turn this up now but it's all spelt out in Deuteronomy chapter 28 that disease destitution defeat disaster and disgrace would all come to them thick and fast if they turned away from the Lord and turned away from the law of Moses.

[35 : 08] The Lord was not to be trifled with either then or now and the Lord makes no idle threats. So what happens to the Israelites here in verse 14 is not just that plunderers came and plundered them it's much worse the truth is that the Lord gave them over to plunderers and look at the next sentence he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.

It was God who allowed them in fact who caused them to be defeated and ground down and made miserable. And did you notice that extraordinary statement in the middle of verse 15 that the hand of the Lord their God was against them for harm.

Can that really be true? Has God changed sides? Can the God of Israel be fighting against Israel? Yes at this point because he's faithful to his anger. He promised them that he would come against them like this if they turned away from him and he's true to himself.

He's true to his promise. And the New Testament assures us that he is still like this that his anger will be revealed at the day of judgment and indeed is being revealed even now as Paul puts it in Romans chapter 1 against all those who embrace idols and suppress the truth about him.

Is it astonishing that God should do as he said he would? It would be astonishing if he didn't act in line with his promises to Israel. But let's notice also that God is faithful to his love for Israel because he had promised his love also to them.

[36 : 48] Back in Exodus chapter 6 he had said to Israel through Moses I will take you to be my people and I will be your God I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob I will give it to you for a possession and it's this committed covenanted love that the Lord is showing in Judges 2 verse 16 and following just as it was the Lord who gave Israel over to the plunderers in verse 14 it is the Lord who raises up the judges in verse 16 to save the people out of the hand of their plunderers verse 17 says that they soon turned aside from the Lord after they had been rescued and verse 19 makes the same point even more strongly but God had covenanted his love to them and he was surely and certainly going to keep his promise to be their God and verse 18 shows us the motivation of the Lord's heart in all this why did he keep on rescuing his disobedient people there it is you see in verse 18 for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them and that sentence is a very strong echo of the words at the end of Exodus chapter 2 where we read that

God heard the groaning of the Israelites when they were in slavery in Egypt and he remembered his covenant and he saw them and he knew their dreadful plight the Lord loved Israel with a passion and a devotion that went right to the heart of his being so he is faithful to his anger and faithful to his love and we might add this another astonishing feature of his treatment of his rebellious Israelites and that is his sheer patience with them you would think wouldn't you that the Lord had had quite enough of their rebelliousness by now he raised up judges verse 16 to save them and yet verse 17 they did not listen to their judges then verse 19 whenever a particular judge died they turned back and were more corrupt even than their fathers so the disintegration got even deeper and you'd have thought that the Lord on that day might have written right across the page of his diary today project Israel is ended abandoned finished but no he doesn't take the covenant and tear it into a thousand pieces and drop it into his dustbin in his astonishing patience he then places

Israel under extended probation in order to test them did you notice how that verb comes three times in this passage verse 22 to test Israel and chapter 3 verse 1 the same phrase to test them and chapter 3 verse 4 for the testing of Israel and the way that the Lord tests Israel is by leaving the Canaanite nations amongst them so he says in chapter 2 verse 21 I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died in order to test Israel by them whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did or not so do you see how the Lord is graciously giving them another chance he turns their failure to drive out the Canaanites into an opportunity for the Israelites to prove their renewed obedience in the words of verse 22 to see whether they will take care to walk in the way of the

Lord or not now friends you'll realize I'm sure that the picture of the Lord God that emerges in this part of Judges is exactly in line with the picture of God that is taught right through the whole Bible he is faithful it's part of his very nature he's faithful to his anger he must punish the sin and rebelliousness of the Israelites because what kind of a God would he be if he promised to chastise sin and then failed to chastise it when it happened he would be weak and unreliable and unjust he's angry with human sin and his anger must be satisfied and given vent to until it is exhausted but also he's faithful in his love he's faithful to the covenant the promise which expresses his love and his unshakable commitment to his people and as you and I look up as it were historically from the book of Judges and as we look forward down 1300 years of human history we see how the anger that must be expressed and the love that must be satisfied are brought to their dreadful and yet wonderful fulfillment at the cross of

Jesus because it was his death that simultaneously exhausted God's anger against our sin fully exhausted it and at the same time expressed his love for us in that he was prepared to receive the wages of our sin in the person of his unique son and has he not been patient with us has he not been very patient with you and with me surely therefore there's only one response that we can rightly make to a God like this who is faithful and just in his anger and faithful and true in his love and that is that we should bow down before him and rejoice that he has been so kind to the undeserving let's bow our heads and we'll pray dear God our father may it never be true of us that we take for granted the patience and kindness that you have shown to sinful people and we pray that you will always fill our hearts with a great sense of love joy and gratitude as we think of the intervention of the

[43 : 01] Lord Jesus who was himself the great judge and the great savior the rescuer whose rescue lasts forever unlike that of the judges who were only able to help the people for a short time so we pray dear father that you will help us day by day with joy to renew our trust in your son and indeed in you and that you will fill our hearts with gratitude and we ask it in Jesus name Amen
Amen