

The Deadly Downward Spiral

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[0 : 00] So we're going to turn to our Bible reading now. And we're continuing in the book of Judges that we began last week. So do turn that up. If you don't have a Bible, we do have plenty of church visitors' Bibles available.

They're at the front and the sides. If you're not sure where they are, if you give a wave at Dave's floating, I'd be very happy to bring a Bible to you. And do turn up when you have one to Judges chapter 2, and we'll begin reading at verse 6.

If you are using a visitor's Bible, that's page 201. Judges chapter 2, beginning then at 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 Gash.

[1 : 24] 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 Ashtoreth. 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.

[2 : 34] As the Lord had warned and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress. 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 buying 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.

[4 : 10] So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hands of Joshua. Now, these are the nations that the Lord left to test Israel by them.

That is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generation 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 Lebo-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.

[5 : 28] Well, amen. This is God's word. Well, do open once again in your Bibles to Judges chapter 2.

Now, life is full of decisions. What path to take? What work to pursue? Whom to marry?

Where to live? What church to belong to? And it's possible to look back on those decisions and ask, did they work?

Was I successful? Has life taken on the shape that I hoped it would? But that is only one angle from which to measure things.

And there's always another, a more fundamental one. How does God see my life and my decisions? How does God see our church and our decisions?

[6 : 25] And what do those decisions reveal about our hearts? About our love for the Lord? About our loyalty to the God who has loved us and redeemed us?

And that is really the view we have in today's passage. Last week, we had the ongoing conquest from the perspective of the Israelites in terms of the places they took, the battles they fought, the victories they won, the people they drove into forced labor instead of out of the land.

But this week, we get the spiritual perspective on these same events. We get how God sees them. They are the same events.

Notice Joshua. He begins both sections. Chapter 1, verse 1. And then again, chapter 2, verse 6. This isn't a timing blip.

He doesn't die twice. Rather, these are two perspectives on the same events. Much like Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are two perspectives on the same event.

[7 : 38] The introduction to Judges is in two parts with two perspectives. Last week, in Judges 1, verse 1 to 2, verse 5, we saw the tragedy of what should have been. God had promised His people a rich inheritance.

He'd provided everything they needed to take hold of it. But Israel's obedience began to falter. What began as compromise, leaving enemies in the land, making peace with what God had commanded them to oppose, that became the gateway to lasting corruption.

That passage showed us Israel's failure from the ground, tribe by tribe, place by place, compromise spreading through the land. But now, in our passage today, we are taken above this history to see God's own verdict on what had really happened.

This passage shows us the terrible journey from enjoying a rich inheritance to embracing ruinous infidelity. humanity. This passage pictures and deals with what it looks like for our hearts and our affections to be torn from the one who truly loves us and to become tainted and polluted by that which will destroy us.

And so we see, firstly, in verses 6 to 10, the rude to idolatry. The rude to idolatry. When we lose sight of God's gracious acts in history and their deep and ongoing implications for our lives today, we are already ripe for ruinous idolatry.

[9 : 16] Just like last week, this passage starts with great promise. Verse 6 takes us back to Joshua's farewell address recorded in Joshua chapter 23 and 24. Joshua dismisses the people.

They head off to enjoy the inheritance that God had promised. They go to take the land and it's going well. Verse 7, the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua throughout the days of the elders who outlived Joshua.

Those who had seen the great work that God had done for Israel. Verse 8, Joshua is designated the servant of the Lord. Verse 9, he's buried in his inheritance the pocket of land that he'd been given personally back in Joshua 19.

It's all going so well until with the dying off of those generations and then we have in verse 10, there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

Here is the rude to idolatry. It begins with forgetting the wonders of what God has done, forgetting his mighty and majestic acts in history by which he saved and sustained his people.
[10:36] And bound up with that is then having no real relationship with God. Now, it's not that this new generation would not have known about God, it's that they did not know God.

It's the same language that's used in 1 Samuel chapter 2 about Eli's sons. They were priests, they knew the sacrifices, the altar, the language, the rituals of Yahweh's worship. They knew all about God, but there we read, now the sons of Eli were worthless men, they did not know the Lord. And that's the same danger here.

A generation can know the language, the heritage, the rituals, even the land itself, and yet not know the Lord. And so the slippery route towards idolatry, towards apostasy, begins with amnesia.

They did not know the works that God had done. There was no real and living appreciation for the wonders of the Exodus rescue, the miracles of crossing the seas, the battles that had been won.

[11:46] And so, if we are to remain serving the Lord and not to succumb to idols, there needs to be a vibrant appreciation of the events God has enacted in history and of their significance.

We must keep saying and singing, tell me the old, old story. We cannot separate knowing God from knowing his mighty deeds. Because knowing what he has done ought to drive us to him so that we cling to him, so that we love him, so that we respond to his gracious acts with love towards a person.

And so what does a life look like that knows the Lord? Well, it is a life that is shaped by the realities of his grace worked out in history. It's a life that listens to his words, that lets it shape us, and that trusts that he really does know best.

Best for us, best for this world. And so as a church, that means that we must not only expound the word of God, though we must, but we must exemplify and enjoy the ways of God.

We must both hear and respond to the living and abiding word of God. You see, when the Bible becomes just a textbook, when church becomes a lecture hall, when faith becomes a merely intellectual exercise in one-upmanship, then it will not be long until disaster sets in.

[13:25] Listen to David Jackman. He says, no creed is alive that is not embraced. No virtue is safe that is not enthusiastic.

And so we see throughout the Bible that God weaves ways of remembering his mighty works into the warp and woof of people's lives.

He gives feasts in the calendar to his Old Testament people. He gives memorial stones to draw attention to his gracious activity. And he gives us the gathered worship of the church where his word is preached and his sacraments are administered.

Never simply so that we can recall facts. But to woo us, to woo our hearts to the one behind those mighty acts of salvation, those mighty acts of grace.

And so this is a word to all of us. It's possible to have the heritage and the hymns, the buildings and the books, but not new God. To hold off his salvation from us, to hold off his scriptures from us, so that they're not mastering us and remaking us.

[14:35] It's a word to all of us, but it is also a word about our children. Often what accompanies those feasts and monuments is the commands to instruct and teach your children.

At Passover we read, and when your children say to you, what do you mean by this service? You shall say, it's the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover. Passover. Or at the beginning of Joshua, the stones are set up to mark the crossing of the Jordan, and we read, when your children ask in time to come, what do these stones mean to you?

Then you shall tell them. And here in Judges 2, for all the success and promise of Joshua's generation, there was one devastating failure. The next generation did not know the Lord.

And so surely we must feel the weight of the need to ensure that our children are raised to know and love the Lord, that they're well acquainted with his mighty acts in history, with their ongoing significance.

The blessing of children from God's hand comes with the responsibility to make it our ultimate priority that they are raised in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

[15:47] in our church we have something like 130 children, with a deluge coming through the younger age groups of junior church.

That is a wonderful ministry to be given to teach and train those children. What a thing to give your next five or ten years to seeing these little ones grow up to know the Lord, to know his mighty acts

in history.

So that these little ones will become the ministers of tomorrow, the mothers and fathers of the future who raise godly children themselves. So they are godly leaders in church, in the home, in the workplace.

But our youth programs are only a part of that. They partner with parents, parents whose chief responsibility it is to raise their children to know and love the Lord. That is the great priority of our family life, that our children do not just know about the Lord, but know the Lord.

And so that does involve teaching and instructing, and it involves watchfulness over what they are being taught and what they're consuming at school and TV. It means explaining to our children the great acts of God, the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, with all that that means.

[17:08] But it also means embodying and enjoying the life of faith. Listen to Deuteronomy. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children.

And Moses goes on to say that the truth of God ought to mark the ordinary rhythms of life, our sitting, our walking, our lying down and our rising.

So that our children pick up that what we teach them is of the utmost importance. And they also see that same truth enfleshed in us. They see that life itself is shaped around God.

And so it is worth asking ourselves, how do we talk to and in front of our children about coming to church? Do our children see that gathering with the Lord's people is our settled joy and priority?

[18:17] Or do they learn from us that it's easily moved aside for leisure or convenience, watching the football, running a marathon? I'm sure none of us would want to teach our kids the wonders of God, the wonders of salvation, only to have them observe in us that church is good as long as there's nothing better to do.

And so we do need to ask, how does the grace of God direct and alter the ordinary family life of your home, of my home? Our children will pick up in us the love and gratitude that we pour out towards God when they see us praying to him, giving thanks sincerely before our meals, praying with him at bedtime and modeling and acknowledging our real, genuine dependence upon him. They will see in us the reality of God's grace when it marks our marriages. Yes, when things are going well, but particularly so when things are trying, testing.

They'll see the mercy of God when they experience us modeling forgiveness towards them, asking for forgiveness when we need to. For the next generation needs more than just knowing about God and knowing how his church works.

They need to see and to hear the grace of God so plainly that by his mercy they know the Lord for themselves. Listen to Ralph Davis.

[20:00] He says, amnesia produces apostasy. When we allow either God's quiet keeping or his dramatic rescue to slip into oblivion, we are on our way toward Baal.

And we could add, when we let his quiet keeping or his dramatic rescue slip into oblivion, our children will be on the way toward Baal too.

Well, secondly, we see verses 11 to 19, the results of idolatry. The results of idolatry. Idolatry brings grievous consequences, but even those consequences reveal the inimitable and glorious character of the Lord.

Where a generation does not know the Lord, it follows that they will do what is evil in his sight, and they'll be given to idols. That's exactly what happens here, verses 11 to 13.

They spell out the apostasy of this generation who did not know the Lord. They do evil. They abandon the Lord, verses 12 and 13. They serve the Baals and the Ashtaroth, verse 13.

[21:09] Even after his gracious interventions with the judges, they, verse 17, whore after other gods. Now, Baal was a god of the Canaanites, and Ashtaroth was another.

She was Baal's consort, his lady. And Baal worship was bound up with fertility, children, animals, crops, rain, life. And it was earthy, sensory, sensual religion, often bound up with sexualized ritual, as people sought to secure fertility and abundance from the gods.

And so typically the means of doing so was to go and have sex with a temple prostitute in order to jumpstart Baal and Ashtar's sexual activity.

And when that happened, it would explode onto the world with rain and the like. Now, it doesn't take a lot of imagination, does it, to see why that might be a lure and a snare to the Lord's people? But the lure was more than sensual. Imagine Callum the Canaanite speaking to his new neighbor, Isaac the Israelite. Yes, it sounds wonderful to have a god who rescued you out of Egypt. [22 : 29] Terrific. One that brought you through the wilderness. Fantastic, yes. But this is Canaan. It's a verdant land. We're an agrarian people here.

You need to know how to prosper here in our world. I'm not saying leave Yahweh behind. He sounds great. But this is a new phase of life with new needs. So let me introduce you to another way, another form of worship.

After all, look at our crops. My wife Claire, she's just had her 11th child. We can show you here how to enjoy the milk and the honey. That is often the voice and the lure of idolatry.

Not reject the Lord outright, but keep him, of course, yes. But only add this into you. Except the reality is, and what Israel have experienced, is that Yahweh is the one who can provide food even in a desert.

And he does not even need rain to do so. Brothers and sisters, we do not fall for idols that do not play to some desire within us.

[23 : 40] And our idols reveal the places where we do not actually trust God. Where we do not really believe that his way is best and is good.

When we give ourselves to idols and look to them to provide what we don't have, to sustain us, to satisfy us, to give us meaning, then verse 12, that is abandoning the God who's rescued us. It's calling God a liar. Now, we might think that the 21st century, we've moved on from such crude religion. We're much more sophisticated today.

But are we really less sexually driven as a society? Are we really less interested in material prosperity? How to get ahead? Our world is obsessed with sex.

It's become a defining characteristic of identity to express who we really are. We are told means indulging whatever satisfies our sexual longings, however perverse it might be.

[24 : 48] Of course, today, it's not about fruitful crops, but it's about fulfilled lives. And so we must have sexual freedom and all that it offers to us and promises to us to enhance our social standing or our personal autonomy.

We can say today, Christ is great for heaven, but perhaps not for my loneliness. He's great for a Sunday, but perhaps not so much for my success, my wealth, my ambitions.

He's great for forgiveness, but perhaps less so for my security here and I. Well, that's the fertile soil from which idolatry sprouts.

Listen to A.R. Fawcett. He says, Our high calling is to be in the world, but not of the world. It is not our being in the world that ruins us, but our suffering the world to be in us.

Just as ships sink, not by being in the water, but by the water getting into them. Well, how does God respond to his people's idolatry?

[26 : 06] Wrath. Verse 12. They abandoned the Lord who had rescued them out of Egypt. They bowed down to other gods. So God is provoked to anger.

Verse 13, they abandoned. Verse 14, his anger is kindled. The cycle continues after each judge. Further abandonment. Verse 19.

And then verse 20, more wrath. God hands Israel over to plunderers. He sells them to their surrounding enemies. Verse 15, his hand is against them for harm.

As the Lord had warned and as the Lord had sworn. The enemies God had promised to drive out for Israel. The battles he was going to fight for his people. He no longer will. Because his people have broken covenant.

And so instead they taste defeat. They are plundered, surrounded, and given over to the treacherous path that they choose. We instinctively feel uneasy at talk of God's wrath, don't we?

[27 : 15] It should never really sit comfortably with us. Even when it is a comfort, when God is judging wickedness. When that is being dealt with, it is still fearsome.

It is a sign of a world not yet made right. And a reminder that but for the grace of God, go we. But God's wrath also reveals his character.

The first way it does so is in his jealousy. His wrath towards his covenant people is born out of jealousy. Now we might not think that jealousy is a virtue.

In us, jealousy is often skewed and tainted by sin. But to quote one preacher, jealousy is love burst into its proper flame. One cannot love well, love meaningfully, love deeply and committedly without jealousy.

God meant it in the second commandment and after the golden calf when he said, you shall worship no other gods for the Lord whose name is jealous is a jealous God.

[28 : 24] Jealous is one of the names of God, not because his love is insecure and distorted, but because his love is real, profound. How cold and callous would it be for a husband to just shrug his shoulders with indifference at the thought of his wife's adultery?

That is not love. God's anger is kindled because he has loved perfectly, abundantly, graciously, and yet his people have gone off to fornicate with grieving images, whoring themselves to pieces of wood.

God's anger here assures us that his love is real, that his love is undivided, that his love is unbreakable, that when he declares that he loves us, he means it.

Secondly, we also see that God's wrath is not a whim. Verse 15, this happened, this wrath happened as the Lord had warned and as the Lord had sworn.

He had graciously rescued them, he'd made covenant with them, he'd sworn that he would bless their loyalty but curse their rebellion. And so God's anger is not irrational, it's not inconsistent, it's not whimsical or cruel, it's evidence that he is true to his word always, unbreakably faithful, even in judgment.

[30 : 05] Not one word of his falls to the ground. But there's more to God's character, isn't there? There always is. The third thing it shews is grace.

Because for all the spiritual adultery and for all God's good and rightful anger, only with Yahweh do we also get verse 16.

Then the Lord raised up judges, deliverers, who saved them out of the hands of those who plundered them. Sheer grace amidst the plundering.

God raises up deliverers to bring rescue. Even his judgments in history are restrained and tempered by his patient grace. Friends, if we are ever caught in despair at our sin, the mess that we've made, the consequences we face, if we ever fear that we've moved beyond God's hand, read verse 16 and read verse 18.

You see, the judges are not raised up primarily because of Israel's repentance, but because of the Lord's pity. Ours is a God who sees his people in distress and he's moved by it.

[31 : 25] He stretches out his hand of grace all over again. That language of distress echoes Exodus 2, where Israel groomed under slavery.

The Lord heard and he acted and he rescued them. And here, hundreds of years on, God has not changed, has he?

He does not change. His mercy is new each morning. But here's the thing. When the dark power of sin within us combines with the alluring power of idolatry around us, it is very hard to break.

Indeed, the only thing strong enough to break it is the cross. From here, the rest of the book of Judges hurtles towards that final verdict.

In those days, there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. But friends, we knew there was a king, didn't we? A righteous king.

[32 : 35] We knew that there's one who's been raised up and now sits on the throne in heaven, raining until every enemy is plundered and placed under his feet.

And we knew that in him, God's character is revealed more fully still. God's wrath and judgment have been poured out in full measure upon Jesus. Jesus is the deliverer of all deliverers, whose ministry is not curtailed by death like the judges.

God's jealous love has bought us at the high price of his own son. His grace has been displayed before the whole cosmos in all of its glory as the victory of Christ is seen in the church being built here on earth.

And so, oughtn't we also to know more fully how grievous spiritual adultery is? You see, the New Testament only intensifies the warning here.

Listen to the writer of Hebrews. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God and has profaned the blood of the covenant?

[33 : 51] You see, we know God's promise and his revelation and his grace in full bloom. And so, how much more should we shudder the thought of his wrath?

How much more treacherous would it be for us, bought by the blood of Christ, to give ourselves to anything that is not Christ? Friends, God is no liar.

He offers to us all that we need in Christ. He robs us of nothing that we truly need. He is not miserly and cruel. He is the God who rescues from the pit of hell to the promise of heaven, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

There is not anything that this world can offer us that's worth abandoning God for in order to serve something else. But if we do, then we ought to be prepared for, thirdly, the severe mercy of God. Chapter 2, verse 20, to chapter 3, verse 6, the severe mercy of God. God's judgment in history is restrained. For his covenant people, it is discipline designed to pull us back from facing his full-blown judgment and wrath.

[35 : 19] It's intended to be restorative. The cycle continues on its downward spiral. Apostasy brought wrath, then judges and deliverers arose in God's grace, but they were ignored, verse 17.

Verse 19, their intermittent bouts of rescue ended when they died. And then apostasy came again. Verse 19, more corrupt than before. Remember, this is part of the introduction to judges.

This passage gives us the interpretive lens through which to read the whole of the cycle of the judges. Apostasy, wrath, grace through a judge, grace through apostasy, wrath, and so on.

It's a cycle that reveals again and again the deeply jealous love of God, his faithfulness to all of his words, promise and warning, and his unquestionable grace. And so we see the cycle continue in verse 20.

Further apostasy brings further wrath. God takes their covenant breaking seriously, and now he refuses to drive out the enemies. Same conclusion as last week, same events, but with his spiritual perspective.

[36 : 29] But notice the two reasons he does this. These concluding verses are punctuated by the language of testing. Look at verse 22, for the testing of Israel.

Chapter 3, verse 1, to test Israel. Chapter 3, verse 4, for the testing of Israel. And God, in his judgment, is testing two things.

First, in verses 22, in chapter 3, verse 4, his testing is bringing into the open whether his people will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did or not.

The nations not yet driven out by Joshua will remain as a means of testing the faith of those who've been brought into the land. But God's testing of his people is not God tempting them into sin.

It is God exposing, proving, and refining their faith. It brings into the open whether his people will trust and obey him.

[37 : 42] Isn't that what James says? For the believer, the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. steadfastness. In the face of Israel's rebellion and sin, God's judgment would draw out and reveal where there was genuine faith.

And so we have the list of the nations that are left to test Israel. The Philistines, the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and so on. Left amidst Israel to test them, to expose reality.

And the second part of the testing is linked. chapter 3, verse 1 and 2. Those who had not experienced war would now learn war.

You see, previous generations of Israel had to learn in the midst of battle to trust God to fight for them. They had to learn that the Lord was their only source of help and their only guarantee of victory.

God's love will now be to the people who had not been in the midst of it. And now this generation must learn the same thing. God hands his people over to the consequences of their sin.

[39 : 00] War amidst enemies, plundering, conflict, opposition. And he does so so that they might learn that God can be trusted and must be followed.

Of course, today our war is not fought with the sword. But it may be that when we make peace with the gods and idols of our world, that God hands us over to taste the bitterness of such things.

And as they have their way with us, creating havoc and mess, that may just be God speaking loudly to us, teaching us, training us, testing us, refining us.

Now not every hardship is a direct consequence of some particular sin. The Bible will not let us draw those lines simplistically, but sometimes the Lord does let us taste the bitterness of what we've chosen.

so that we learn again that he alone is good. And in heeding his discipline, we learn war. And we learn to trust him in war.

[40 : 13] We learn that the world, the flesh, and the devil are waging war, perpetual war against us. And we learn that the only way to persevere and prosper is by clinging to and trusting the Lord God.

Judges is a message to the Lord's people that in his covenant love, when faced with an adulterous people, the megaphone he uses to wake them is judgment and discipline as an expression of his gracious character.

Remember where this all began, chapter 2, verse 7. The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua. But then look at where it ends. Chapter 3, verse 6.

Still with serving, but serving other gods. All because a generation arose that did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

But it does not have to be that way. God is speaking to us today. We can come back to him. And he's speaking to us today that we would know him.

[41 : 30] Knew his character. Knew his covenant love. Knew and taste his mighty act of salvation. That we would know the grace held out to us in Christ.

But the Bible would always say to us, are we listening? He's speaking today that we would know him.

Are we listening? Let's pray. Father, we need your help.

Our hearts are so prone to wonder. Our hearts are often fertile ground for idols. And so help us, we pray.

Grant your grace to us that we would know and feel the weight and wonder of the work that you have done for Israel. The work that you've done for us. And so stir our hearts afresh.

[42 : 39] The new desire would ever diminish our love for you. We need your help and we ask for it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.