

Any fans of *The Twilight Zone* here? I'll sometimes watch the original 1960s TV series on my lunch break, and I saw an episode recently that reminded me of Judges. (You know you're in a strange book when you can take your opening sermon illustration from *The Twilight Zone*!)

ILLUS: Four thieves hide out in a cave in Death Valley. They've just stolen \$1million in gold bricks, but as the lead character says, "It's one thing to stop a train from Fort Knox to Los Angeles and steal its cargo. It's another thing to remain free to spend it." Their ingenious plan is to seal themselves in suspended animation chambers where they'll sleep for 100 years until it's safe to come out and spend their fortune. When they wake up (after the commercial break), one man has died and turned to dust. The others are so driven by suspicion of each other and greed for the remaining gold, that in short order two of the three are murdered and the last dies of exposure before he ever makes it to town where he can put his treasure to good use. But the greatest irony, revealed in the final scene, is that this future world they risked so much to reach and where they intended to spend their wealth, has no use for gold, since they learned to manufacture it and now it has no value. Rod Serling's final remarks are fitting: "The last of four Rip Van Winkles, who all died precisely the way they lived, chasing an idol across the sand to wind up bleached dry in the hot sun..., worthless as the gold bullion they built a shrine to. Tonight's lesson in *The Twilight Zone*."

It's a fitting summary of the book of Judges—particularly the irresistible but ultimately suicidal power of idolatry. Israel could not resist the gods of their pagan neighbors, and it nearly destroyed them.

Our text begins with a surprise:

**v6** *When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land.*

If you've been following along, this verse should make you sit up and ask, "Wait... WHO?!" The first verse of this book told us Joshua died. So what is he doing here 40 verses later, dismissing the people?!

Structurally, this author has given us 2 prologues to the book. (There are also 2 epilogues—the 2 strange stories of chs 17-18, 19-21. The middle section, chs 3-16, are the stories of the judges, often called "the judge cycles." But as we'll see, Israel isn't just riding a cycle around and around; they are rapidly spiraling down into chaos.) The first prologue

(1:1-2:5) is concerned with Israel's relationship with the Canaanites; the second is focused on their relationship with God. The first recounts the political and military action that led to the situation in Judges. The second reveals the spiritual dimension of their compromise.

When we come to verse 6 then, there's a break in the time sequence, but no break in thought. The author takes us back to the days of Joshua, but his intention is to demonstrate the truth of the warning from v3: "their gods shall be a snare to you." That's the focus of today's text—the snare of idolatry. Three themes:

- The anatomy of evil
- The anomaly of God
- The opportunity that's yours

### The Anatomy of Evil

**vv6-7** *When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

It was a great generation. The leaders led, and the people served. Why? They had seen and they remembered "all the great work the LORD had done for Israel" (v7). Joshua died and was buried (vv8-9), along with the rest of his generation (v10a). And suddenly, everything changed:

**v10b** *And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.*

To say they "did not know the LORD" doesn't mean they lacked information. It means they weren't in relationship with Him. His saving acts were no longer precious to them. Essentially, they forgot. Not passively, as though He just faded from their memory with neglect. As the next verses show, this was an active, deliberate turning away. They didn't remember His grace, they didn't believe His promises, and they didn't want the restrictions of His covenant.

**vv11-13** *And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.*

Full-on apostasy in one generation. It's shocking! Let's look at the anatomy of evil.

### 1. Idolatry puts me in charge.

Notice that strange phrase “the Baals.” “Yahweh” (i.e., “the LORD,” all caps) is the personal name of the one true God, who had entered into covenant with Israel. “Baal,” on the other hand, is a common noun, like “god.” It’s not the personal name of the Canaanite god. These gods were usually named after the particular region—e.g., “Baal-hermon” (3:3) is the god worshiped in the place called “Hermon.” So you could actually have several gods, referred to as “the Baals”—and the Canaanites did. Theirs was a pluralistic culture, with lots of gods to choose from. **And that was precisely the point—you get to choose.**

Israel worshiped only one God. The first principle of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh was “I am the LORD, your God, who brought you out of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:2-3). The central prayer of the Jewish faith was the Shema: “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.” (Dt 6:4-5) Israel’s God is not like the gods of the Canaanites. Their gods could be mixed and matched at will. But Yahweh demands total obedience and exclusive loyalty.

Everybody in this story is religious. That’s not the problem—or the goal. The question is, will Israel submit to the one true God? Other gods let you be in charge. None of them demanded lordship over every area of life; they let you choose or discard based on your own interests and needs. When it comes to idolatry, you are in charge—at least at first.

### 2. Idolatry appeals to our immediate needs, fears, and desires.

Notice verse 13: “the Baals” and “the Ashtaroth.” Ashtaroth was the female consort to Baal, and together they were an essential part of Canaanite religion. These gods were associated with fertility—i.e., large herds and plentiful crops which were vital to an agrarian culture like this one. Fertility is stability to farmers like these. To the Israelites, it only made sense to learn from their pagan neighbors how to get by and make a living in this new land. And so they prioritized pragmatics over principle and combined lip service to Yahweh with trust in Baal. Yahweh was fine for deliverance from Egypt and thundering on Sinai. But when

it came to everyday matters like farming and sex... well, they had to get practical. And Baal was obviously quite good at those things.

Such a danger in idolatry! We can remain a practicing Christian, looking and feeling like nothing is wrong, because **idolatry doesn’t ask us to become an atheist; it just asks us to make Jesus coexist with our idols.** “I’m not denying Jesus; I just think I have better ideas for how to run this part of my life...”

### 3. Idolatry is spiritual adultery.

This text will never make sense unless you understand this. The language is too extreme: “did evil in the sight of the Lord” (v11). How is this “evil”? They aren’t hurting anybody. This isn’t murder or oppression or rape or abuse. God’s reaction seems way over the top: “They provoked the LORD to anger” (v12). Why? What’s the big deal?

**v17** *Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them.*

There it is. Idolatry is adultery. It’s breaking your exclusive vows of love and fidelity. It is taking the affection, trust, and service you owe your spouse and giving that to someone else. Notice more closely the language of v12: “They abandoned the LORD” = to forsake something rightfully deserving care & attention / “the God of their fathers” = the God who made and kept promises to them and their family / “who had brought them out of Egypt” = the God who frees and redeems / “they went after other gods from among the peoples around them” = the foreignness and strangeness of these gods.

What grieved God the most about their idolatry was not that He was their King and their sin broke His law. It’s that **He was their Husband, their sin was adultery, and it broke His heart.**

**James 4:4** *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

BTW, the verbs in this section perform 2 functions. First, they highlight how radical and complete was their apostasy: “served, abandoned, went after, bowed down, abandoned, served.” And they furnish us with a working definition of idolatry: **Who/What do you serve? What does**

## ***your heart go after? What tempts you to abandon your loyalty to God?***

This clarifies the gospel, doesn't it? The gospel isn't primarily, "Come to God or you'll be punished." It is, "Come to God or you'll miss out on the ultimate love story." From the beginning, we have given our hearts to others. But God, the ultimate Lover, has pursued us. Jesus came to win His bride. He died because of our flirtations and adulteries. And now, every spiritual whore like you and me can come to Him, be washed clean of every stain, and be joined in love to Him to live happily ever after. Is your momentary pleasure worth that incredible romance?

4. Idolatry leads to slavery.

Israel is absolutely miserable:

**vv14-15** *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.* <sup>15</sup> *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.*

Why do we sin over and over? Judges demonstrates that sin isn't just an act we perform. It's a power we obey—a master that holds us in its grip, dragging us lower and lower into the pit (cf. v19). Until we get a proper view of sin, we will never fully understand salvation. ***Salvation isn't just a religious term; it's a violent conquest where Jesus wrenches sinners from the dread clutches of a domineering, life-destroying master.***

Idolatry starts out with you in charge, choosing your gods, fixing your problems, meeting your needs. But it always ends right here. Enslaved. Plundered. Powerless. Addicted. "In terrible distress."

## **The Anomaly of God**

1. He gets angry (vv12,14,20).

If there's anything in this text more surprising to modern ears than that sincere, private religious practice can be evil, it's this: God gets angry.

A quote from an email I received some time ago: "Love is not angry, jealous, vengeful, or any of the other "negative" traits of humanity. Love is beyond that. Love is all-encompassing and unconditional. I don't have to

be a "good" person to receive God's love. It's automatic. I don't need to do anything to "deserve" God's love. I don't even need to believe in God, or be redeemed, to receive his love. It's automatic."

How can the God of love get angry? All truly loving people are angry about something. They have to be, not in spite of their love, but precisely because of it. This is not loveless anger; it's the anger of a jilted lover. ***Anger at unfaithfulness is the price you pay for being loved.***

2. He gives us exactly what we deserve—and want.

The point of emphasis here is that the Lord is not being petulant; He's bringing justice. He's giving them exactly what they deserve. The punishment fits the crime:

**v15** *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.*

His actions are in keeping with His earlier warnings. But His actions are also perfectly in keeping with theirs. "The hand of the Lord was against them for harm" = lit. "against them for evil." The vocabulary matches Israel's behavior in v11: "the people did what was evil." ***They did evil, so the Lord gave them evil.***

Notice also the form of the Lord's punishment:

**v14** *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.*

"He gave them over... He sold them" (v14). He's not stirring up some unnatural penalty for their misbehavior (e.g., childless, drought). He simply gave them over to the natural consequences of their own actions. They went after the gods of the surrounding people, so the Lord gave them the full experience of the surrounding people. It's not like He said, "OK that's it. You've made me mad. Now you're going to have to deal with ME!" No, He just said, "You like the Canaanites? Fine. Now you're going to have to deal with them." He's no longer protected them from the hostility of their neighbors. God gives these people exactly what they want: to have nothing to do with Him and to be free to run their own lives.

Judgment is when God gives people up to the self-destructive,

enslaving, dehumanizing path they themselves have chosen. These people wanted to get away from God; and God in His justice, let them have exactly what they want.

v15 is careful to reiterate that the Lord is actively involved here. He isn't simply taking His hands off the situation. This is an expression of His anger. But at the same time, it is a natural consequence of the actions that they themselves have chosen.

The greatest judgment God can lay on a person in this life is to give him over to his sin (cf. Rom 1:18,24,26,28). **When the Lord's displeasure is most severely kindled, He does not say, "I will bring severe pain into your life." He says, "I will no longer restrain your rebellion or protect you from its consequences. Sin on."**

Lewis: "There are two types of people in the world: those who say to God 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" (*The Great Divorce*)

3. He offers help even when we don't ask.

**vv16-19** *Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.*

God sees that the people's hearts are breaking, and He cares about that. In His infinite goodness, He won't let them remain in misery for long. He doesn't even wait for them to cry out to God for relief. His response is spontaneous and free.

He responds to their "terrible distress" (v15b) with divine aid in the form of judges. Notice a couple things:

- God raised them up (vv16,18).

As we'll see as we get into the story, there's no appointment process. No elections. No central office for judge oversight. They come from different regions, use different styles, deliver different tribes from different enemies. The point is, God does this. God raised up deliverers for the people as they need them.

- v18 The LORD was with them (v18).

These are not great moral examples! Yet, the NT doesn't repudiate them. In fact, it commends them for acting in faith (Hb 11:32-33) and stepped out courageously for God. ***This seems to be the most important thing we should notice in their lives—God called, and they obeyed.*** As such, they illustrate what the life of faith looks like in a fallen human being—imperfect, badly flawed, but commendable in the end.

- They "saved" the people from their sins. (vv16,18)

That title "judge" might make it sound like their main ministry was to settle disputes like a magistrate. It wasn't. They delivered the people from their enemies. This shows us that the judges are not just illustrative of the life of faith; they are also typological of the Founder of our faith. ***They point us to Jesus.***

These guys have massive faults and shortcomings: Ehud – left-handed assassin / Deborah – woman. As the story goes along, the judges' behavior goes quickly downhill. Gideon – idol worshiping family, presumptuous with God, leads people into idolatry / Abimelech – arrogant & vengeful / Jephthah – son of prostitute, terrible vow which costs him his daughter / Samson – violent, narcissistic, lustful. The last judge demonstrates emphatically that the institution of the judges will not be able to help the people of Israel. The book begs for something or someone else. Israel needs a lasting kingship—a permanent, righteous leader. A servant-king whose life embodies God's law. Someone who could save Israel from her own sins and the oppression of others.

## The Opportunity That's Yours

Verse 20 brings us to the climax of the narrative. The Lord was angry, He offered mercy, but to no avail. His patience has been exhausted. His anger flairs up again in response to the wholesale and persistent apostasy. His reaction is described in a speech:

**2:20-22** 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, <sup>21</sup> I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, <sup>22</sup> 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."

Notice:

- God no longer speaks to them, but about them: "this people."
- He groups them with the pagans whose gods they have embraced: v20 "Because this nation [lit.] have transgressed my covenant... I will no longer drive out the nations."
- In His prior speech (2:1-3), He grappled with the dilemma their actions created for Him. Now there's no tension; He simply invokes the terms of the covenant in terms of direct cause and effect: "Because they have transgressed my covenant... I will." Israel didn't keep their side of the covenant, so He won't keep His. They forsook Him, so He won't give them the land. (God's covenant with Moses was, after all, a conditional covenant from the beginning. Ex 19:5-6)

Notice though, He doesn't break off the relationship altogether. All along, ever since the time of Joshua's death, He had been testing them by leaving these nations (v22, 3:1,4). These nations are a test from God, not torture. Tests can be passed! They can accomplish good things in our lives! A test forces us to rise up to meet it. The ongoing presence of this enemy forced Israel to reconsider their relationship to God—His goodness, their failures, His wisdom.

He left the nations to teach Israel warfare (3:2)—i.e., to teach them to be vigilant and depend upon Him every moment. In the long run, this could have been a rich spiritual blessing to Israel. Had they learned this lesson well, **they would ultimately have been better off living in vigilant dependence upon God with the Canaanites nearby than living independent of Him with perfect stability and security.**

What about for us? The way the passage ends leaves us with a warning and a word of hope.

Warning. The test Israel faced gave them an opportunity to demonstrate whether they really understood the terms of their

covenant with God—His goodness, redemptive love, holy calling on their lives. It's the same for us. Living amidst "Canaanites" gives you an opportunity to see whether you really understand the gospel, how radically Jesus redefines reality, what has happened to you. Examples:

- political power, perspective of "our team" and "the enemy"
- goals for our kids
- love of comfort and ease
- compartmentalizing our lives – letting God rule our ultimate destiny and our basic doctrinal beliefs, but letting the culture tell us what real love is and how sexuality should work

A Word of Hope. Ultimately God didn't leave it all up to Israel. Why was intermarriage such a problem?

**vv5-6** So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>6</sup> And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.

The more they mix with the Canaanites, the less they exist as the unique nation of Israel. Assimilation was the ultimate end, and if Israel is absorbed into the Canaanite nations, where is the Messiah going to come from? **His eternal glory, His saving plan, His redeeming love is at stake. God wasn't going to leave that chance up to these guys!**

Neither will He for you! On this side of the cross, the war with evil has been won! We are in a fundamentally different situation. God has taken the sword of his wrath from our hands and plunged it into His own heart. We share in the victory of Christ. God hasn't left this up to you! He has charged Himself with your holiness, your growth into Christlikeness, and your eternal joy. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us!