

## You Really Need a King:

*The Downward Spiral of Idolatry* (Judges 2:6-3:6)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 4, 2016

### Introduction

- ❖ Last week we began a new sermon series in the book of Judges. We plan to cover the whole book and all the stories with all of the fascinating characters, and we won't leave out any of the graphic and sordid details. **If you've never read Judges, you're going to be in for a shock. This is *not* a sanitized book.** Most of the stories don't show up in children bibles for a reason. It's hard to make them PG, let alone G-rated.
  - ▶ The stories are filled with violent killings, political assassinations, human sacrifices, gang rapes, dismemberments, and the kidnapping of young girls, which takes place in the last few verses of the book. There's no redeeming conclusion. In fact, the very last verse of the book paints a picture of how dark those days were. *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."* (21:25)
- ❖ Now according to the wisdom of the world, doing whatever is right in your own eyes is sound advice. *"Do what you think is right. Just follow your heart."* That's what the world will tell you. **But according to the Bible, doing whatever is right in your own eyes is never a good thing.** Scripture recognizes that humans are too sinful, too self-destructive to do what is truly right if they're only doing what is 'right' in their own eyes.
  - ▶ **Instead, the Bible says we need a good king to rule over us – one who rescues us, defends us, and teaches us to walk in paths of true righteousness.** But there was no king in those days. Hence the title of our series: *You Really Need a King*. That's one of the main lessons to be learned in Judges. **Humans were never meant to be our own kings.** When we're left to our own devices, to be our own authorities – the book of Judges happens. It's bad news. **We were created to serve a king (not to be our own), to live under his loving rule and good authority.**
- ❖ This is why, in our English Bibles, the book of the OT have been ordered accordingly. It's teaching a point. The book of Judges leads directly into the book of Ruth, which chronicles the story of the great-great grandmother of Israel's greatest ruler, King David. And Ruth leads us into 1-2 Samuel, which tells of how David arose to the throne. But 1-2 Samuel bring us to 1-2 Kings, and there we read of how David and David's son and his grandson, and so on – **all proved to be failures at being the King we really need.** By the end of the OT, the people of God are still waiting, still hoping, but growing impatient and more in doubt.
- ❖ Now let's not get ahead of ourselves, let's go back to this morning's passage. **Our passage essentially serves as a prologue to the rest of the book.** Most of the chapters in the rest of the book are character-focused, on a particular judge that God raises up.
  - ▶ But we're just in the prologue. Now last week's passage presented a historical account of the half-hearted attempt by the twelve tribes of Israel to settle Canaan, God's Promised Land. And the common refrain we came across in chapter one was *"they did not drive out"*.
    - **And because these pagan nations remained in their midst, their idolatrous and immoral practices remained a snare to God's people.** It wasn't too long before Israel came to adopt their ways.

- ❖ God would then punish them by sending a nation to conquer them. Israel would then cry out to the LORD, and he'd raise up a deliverer. A judge who would rally the people and drive out the oppressors. And the people would serve the LORD until that judge would die, and then Israel would fall back into idolatry. And the vicious cycle would repeat itself.
  - ▶ **Our passage helps set the stage by offering a theological rationale for Israel's irrational choices and explains how one ends up on the downward spiral into idolatry and apostasy.** I see seven stages, if you will, that explain how Israel went down this path. Let me name them, and then we'll walk through each. So the first stage is spiritual **accommodation**. Which leads to spiritual **amnesia**. Which leads to spiritual **apathy**. That then triggers God's **anger** but also his **deliverance**, which arrives through a chosen deliverer. Those are the fourth and fifth stages. The sixth is a stage of **testing**. The seventh is **recurrence** where the cycle restarts.

### Stage 1: Accommodation

- ❖ Let's begin by considering **the first stage of spiritual accommodation where we fail to separate from sin**. That brings us back to the constant refrain of Israel's failure to drive out the Jebusites and Canaanites and Amorites from their land. Now why is that a big deal? **Why completely drive them out? Isn't that pretty intolerant? Too ethnocentric? Too nationalistic?** A little multiculturalism would do them good, don't you think?
  - ▶ Look, we need to make a clear distinction between the melting pot we call America – with our pluralistic, multicultural society – and the twelve tribes of Israel – God's chosen covenant people who were called to be instruments of just judgment upon the perverse and wicked nations in Canaan. (cf. Lev. 18:6-30; Deut. 18:9-14).
  
- ❖ Israel wasn't dealing with domestic policy on immigration. **The issues she faced were not political but explicitly theological.** But some would still argue that, theologically speaking, they're being intolerant. There's no respect for religious liberty. Just let those Canaanites worship their own gods in their own way. There's no need to drive them out.
  - ▶ But look at it from the Bible's point of view. **Not driving out all the nations from among their midst is like not removing all the cancerous tumors in your body.** Because that's how these wicked nations are portrayed. And if that's the case, then there's no justification for leaving some behind, for tolerating even just a few. **How many tumors would you want the surgeon to leave behind in your body? How many would you tolerate?**
  
- ❖ **From the Bible's perspective, tolerating these nations in your land is a deadly choice.** Because their cancerous ways will continue to spread as the Israelites assimilate with them and accommodate to their idolatrous practices. That's spelled out at the end of chapter 3:5-6, *“<sup>5</sup>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.”*

- ❖ Earlier in chapter 2 the same concerns were described. Look at v11, *“<sup>11</sup>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.”*
- ❖ Now who are these Baals? Baal is actually a generic name for any god. But in this case, because he’s paired with the goddess Ashtaroth, we’re talking about the ancient Canaanite storm god. **This Baal was understood to be in charge of rain and fertility – related to crops, livestock, and children.** The Canaanites believed the fertility of the land depended on the fertility of Baal and his consort Ashtaroth. So naturally, the worship of Baal involved a sexual component. Cult prostitution was part of the worship, and the ritual was intended to encourage the divine couple to do their thing and make it rain.
  - ▶ For members of an agrarian society, where abundant crops, livestock, and children were so valued, you can see the strong appeal of Baal worship. And of course, the sexual immorality involved appealed to their basest desires. This is why Israel abandoned the LORD to serve the Baals and the Ashtaroth.
- ❖ This what happens when you fail to separate from sin. The Lord calls us to holiness and holy devotion to him alone. **But if we’re not vigilant, if we begin to tolerate and accommodate sin in our lives, then we’ll begin a slow but sure descent down the pathway to apostasy.**
  - ▶ D.L. Moody once said that Christians are like a ship. **A ship is supposed to be in the sea, but woe to the ship that gets the sea into it!** That’s when you begin the slow but sure decent to the bottom of the sea.
- ❖ The same goes for us believers. We’re supposed to be in this world, otherwise God would’ve brought us home by now. We have a purpose here, a mission. **Like Israel, the Church is to be blessed by God to bless the nations, but that’s only possible if we maintain a distinct identity apart from the nations as the holy people of God.**
  - ▶ So like Israel, we fail our vocation if we accommodate and bow to the Baals of this world. If we get the sea into our hearts, if we’re cherishing and serving the things of this world, then it's no surprise if we end up shipwrecking our faith. So let's ask the uncomfortable questions: Have we been making spiritual accommodations? Have we been entertaining sin in our lives? Have we been tolerating sin in our church?

## Stage 2: Amnesia

- ❖ That’s the first stage along the downward spiral of idolatry. **The second is spiritual amnesia where we fail to remember God’s saving deeds.** This tends to affect the second-generation the most. I’m talking about the children of the faithful. What happens is the first generation has firsthand experience of God’s faithfulness, of his power and mighty deeds. Initially they’re vigilant and passionate to keep alive the memory of what God has done to rescue us.

- ▶ **But in time, if they spiritually accommodate to the world, if the sea seeps into the community, then the first generation will eventually fail to keep alive the memory of God's saving deeds.** And the second generation has forgotten about God altogether. They've got spiritual amnesia.
- ❖ That chain of events is described in brief in chapter 2. In v7 it says that the people served the LORD all the days of the first generation. *"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."* The first generation had firsthand experience of God parting the Jordan River (Josh. 3), bringing down the walls of Jericho (Josh. 6), making the sun stand still (Josh. 10), etc.
  - ▶ **But apparently they failed to pass down these stories of God's mighty and merciful works.** Joshua dies in v8. They bury him in v9, and in v10 it says, *"And all that generation also 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."*
- ❖ **This is an indictment for all believing parents who fail to pass on to their children the stories of how God has worked in human history to accomplish salvation.** Whether we're talking about the Exodus, the Fall of Jericho, or the sacrifice of God's own Son on the Cross – believing parents are responsible to keep these memories alive.
  - ▶ Parents, take it upon yourself. Don't leave it up to the children's or youth ministries. You are the primary disciplers of your own children. **God's going to call you to account one day – not the children's or youth minister – for whether you've faithfully stewarded your gospel influence as a parent, whether you regularly reminded your children of the faithfulness of God in the gospel.**
    - If talking with your children about God's gracious provision – especially in the gift of his Son – if that's not normal conversation in your home, then make it a new school year goal for the family. Trust me, there's never a right time to start where it won't feel awkward or when it'll come natural – that is, until you actually start. So aim to start this week.
- ❖ **And beyond parents, church members are responsible to remind each other of God's faithfulness in our lives, in the gospel.** That, in fact, is the reason why we celebrate the Lord's Supper today. To bring to remembrance what Christ has sacrificed to save us. It's when we forget or neglect this great salvation that we're prone to disbelief and prone to chase after the Baals of this world. That's why we're called to exhort each other every day with the truths of the gospel, so that we don't get hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13).

### Stage 3: Apathy

- ❖ This is important because **spiritual amnesia usually leads to spiritual apathy where we fail to know God experientially.** That's the third stage we see here. It makes sense. The less you remember about God and his saving deeds, the less you care about him. And the less you truly know him.

- ❖ Look back at v10. When it says, "*there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD*", it obviously doesn't mean they never heard of him. They knew who Yahweh was. The first generation may not have kept the memory of God alive, but it wasn't completely absent. **But there's a big difference between knowing about the LORD and knowing the LORD – personally, experientially.**
  - ▶ It's like how you can know extensive details about your favorite athlete, actor, pop star, or famous figure in history. You can read a biography on them or follow them on social media. You can know all about their childhood, their career, their love life – more details than you know about some of your own friends or small group members.
- ❖ But you don't know them. You know a lot *about* them. But you don't know them. And sadly the same could be said of many of us in relation to God. **We know a lot about him because we grew up in churches and families that taught us things about God, but we don't know him personally.** And that lack of experiential knowledge typically translates into an apathetic attitude towards God and the things of God.
- ❖ What do you do? **How do you experience God? How do you gain a personal knowledge of him?** Think of a living celebrity that you know a lot about but you don't know personally. Now imagine if that person wrote you a letter where he revealed his character, his deepest loves, his greatest passions. And imagine he made a way for you to personally contact him, a number to call to privately communicate with him. Do you really need to ask how to gain personal knowledge of this celebrity? Have you read the letter? Have you dialed the number?
  - ▶ **I know some of you are just waiting to experience God, to gain experiential knowledge of him.** And I just wonder: Have you read his letter to you? Have you been privately communicating with him? Don't wait for him to appear in your dreams. Don't expect him to send you messages in your alphabet soup. You already know how you can know him. It's a question of whether you honestly want to.

#### Stage 4: Anger

- ❖ So because of Israel's accommodation, which led to amnesia, which led to apathy, **God responds with righteous anger by giving them over to their idolatry.** This is the fourth stage. We read this in vv14-15, "*14So 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. 15Whenever 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.*"
- ❖ I realize these verses might trouble you. **The idea of God being angry is unsettling.** Isn't God a God of love? Then how is it that he's being described here as having his anger kindled, as the one who gives his people over to plunderers, who sells them into the hand of enemies, whose hand was against Israel *for their harm*. He's causing harm?!?

- ❖ If your conception of the God of the Bible doesn't include this kind of anger. **If your God would never (and could never) do someone harm, then you certainly don't know the LORD.** You have a God who's made in your own image and not the God who's revealed to us in Holy Scripture.
- ❖ **And besides, there's no contradiction between love and anger. They're not mutually exclusive emotions.** Ask any parent. Parents know that you can love your kids deeply, and yet those same objects of your unconditional love are really good at kindling your anger. Just think about it. **Anger is not the opposite of love. Indifference is.**
  - ▶ The angry parent who sees her kids foolishly choosing to engage in a dangerous, harmful behavior is reacting out of love. It's the indifferent parent who could care less about what her kids do or how they behave – who we'd say is unloving.
- ❖ Love cares too much. **God is far too loving towards his people to let us sin successfully without consequences.** He'll do harm if necessary. He'll cause us terrible distress. But it's not because he's changed his mind or attitude towards us. He's still a loving God.

### Stage 5: Deliverance

- ❖ It's even more evident in our fifth stage. **What we see is that God's anger is typically followed by God's deliverance where he sends a deliverer to save his people.** Look with me at v16, "*Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.*" And then skip over to v18, "*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.*"
- ❖ Notice in v16 how it parallels but contrasts with v14. In v14, it says the LORD gave them over to plunderers. But now in v16, the same LORD saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. So essentially God saved them from his own righteous anger.
  - ▶ In fact, that's always the case. **When God saves his people, it's from his own just wrath, from his own righteous anger.** It's not as if he has to appease the devil or to satisfy some sort of cosmic law external to himself.
- ❖ **Have you ever thought about what it means when we speak of God saving us?** Saved us from what? From our sins? From the penalty of our sins? From going to hell? But don't you realize that the only reason there is a penalty for sin is because God is holy. And the only reason there is a hell is because that's where God's holy wrath justly burns against sin. **So in the end, salvation is salvation from God.**
  - ▶ But this is where Christianity stands in sharp contrast to pagan religions like Baal worship. In pagan worship, humans are trying to appease bad-tempered gods and goddesses with their sacrifices of crops, animals, or even other humans.

- ❖ But according to the Christian Gospel, God the Father, in his own great love, appeases his own holy wrath through the gift of God the Son who died in our place on the cross. **John Stott** says the beauty of the Christian faith is that at his heart is the message that “**God himself gave himself to save us from himself.**”
  - ▶ That's exactly what we see happening here in Judges. God delivered his people from the very plunderers that he had sent. Apparently God's righteous anger and merciful deliverance are never at odds with each other. He always finds a way to express both.

### Stage 6: Testing

- ❖ Now the sixth stage that follows deliverance is **the stage of testing where God doesn't completely eradicate temptation from our lives.** You may have wondered that yourself. God's saved you. Given you new life. Filled you with his Spirit. And yet you're still tempted by sin, often the same ones, day by day. Why would he do that? If he wants me to be holy, then why doesn't he make it easier? **Why doesn't he just remove all temptation, and I'll be pure and holy?** Isn't that what he wants?
  - ▶ The Israelites probably wondered the same. "Okay God, we learned our lesson. Thanks for raising up a deliverer to free us from bondage to our enemies. Now could you please drive them out completely, so they won't tempt us anymore?"
    - ▶ But listen to what the LORD says in v21, “<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.*” <sup>23</sup>*So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.*”
- ❖ Like I said, this is a stage of testing. Keep reading in chapter 3:1, “<sup>1</sup>*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. <sup>2</sup>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. . . . <sup>4</sup>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.*”
- ❖ Remember, this second generation never had to fight to settle the land. Their parents took care of that (albeit not perfectly), but still their kids never knew war. So the LORD says another reason I'm going to leave enemies in your midst is to teach you war. To teach you that keeping covenant with me is no cake walk. **Following me in faithfulness is not a leisurely stroll.** It's going to be a struggle, a good fight of faith.
  - ▶ **That's why God leaves temptation in our lives – to teach us to keep making war against our flesh and the sin that so easily entangles.** So it's actually mercy. It's because God desires to see you mature in faith that he leaves temptations in your life to test you. In a strange way, you should be thankful.

- ❖ And you should keep up the good fight. **Are you tempted to make peace with your sin? To come to a truce?** Are you thinking of allocating a little territory in your life where sin can settle in? Are you thinking about giving it a little corner in your heart? No, you can't let up. You can't stop fighting. So to keep you in that frame of mind, God wills for you to wake up to face temptation every single day.

### Stage 7: Recurrence

- ❖ So that's the sixth stage of testing. And now the final stage that explains why Israel could not escape this vicious cycle, why they continued down this destructive spiral – the seventh stage is recurrence. **Time and time again, once the deliverer God raised up was laid to rest, the depravity in human hearts was immediately laid bare and the people returned to their idols and the cycle restarted.**
  - ▶ That's what it says in chapter 2:19, "*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.*" Don't get me wrong. These judges were a gift, a godsend. But as good as they were and as much good as they accomplished, they were inadequate deliverers.
- ❖ **Because once the judge was removed from the scene, in every case, the corruption still found in human hearts reared its ugly head.** When the authoritative leader is gone, when the external constraints are removed, sinners show their true colors. Their true bondage to sin. The fundamental problem is not in our circumstances, our enemies, our oppressors. The fundamental problem is in us. It's our sinful depravity.
  - ▶ And the point being driven home in every story of every judge in this book is that once the deliverer dies, we're back to square one. Sin and idolatry take over once again. **If only these judges would stop dying. If only one of these deliverers could just live forever, then we could break this cycle and finally be free from the bondage of sin.**
    - Thanks be to God! We have such a deliverer in Jesus Christ our Lord. Who defeated death by his own death. Who rose victorious from the grave. Who will never die. He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:25).
- ❖ Jesus is the Deliverer you really need. Please don't leave this place without asking him to rescue you. Don't go without asking him to break you free from the cycle of sin and idolatry that you find yourself in. Jesus is the LORD. He's the King you really need.