

“They Abandoned the LORD”

The ninety-first in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 2:1-15; Galatians 1:6-10

As the old hymn puts it, “prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the Lord I love.” We see this sad but very real truth on display during the days of the judges when many in Israel, sadly, turned their backs upon YHWH, the true and living God. Instead of worshiping YHWH who had graciously made a covenant with them, the Israelites worshiped and served other gods, all the while indulging their own sinful appetites. The temptation to become like the Canaanites and to do what is right in their own eyes—even if that meant breaking the terms of the covenant—was simply too great. And yet, when the people of Israel discover that the grass is not greener on the Canaanite side, they are soon calling out for YHWH to come rescue them from one disaster of their own making after another. In all of this, we see that God is faithful when his people are not.

As we resume our series on the Book of Judges, we take up the first fifteen verses of Judges chapter two, a section which ties the era of the Conquest to that era in biblical history which follows and which is depicted in the rest of the book. Judges is a difficult and perplexing portion of Scripture—given its structure and the surprising depths of sin into which the people of God repeatedly fall. The reoccurring theme of Judges is that the people of Israel fall away from the Lord and then come under the covenant curse (usually in the form of an attack from one of the neighboring Canaanite tribes). In desperation, they cry out to YHWH seeking help, before YHWH graciously sends his people a deliverer in the form of the “judges”—men who are more like tribal chieftains than modern jurists presiding over a court of law. This is indeed a remarkable period in Israel’s history, extending from the death of Joshua until the time of the monarchy when David becomes Israel’s first king. Judges describes a time in Israel’s history when God’s people are constantly confronted by pagan influences, making this period of time very much like our own day and age.

As we saw last time, the people of Israel knew full that God had commanded them through Joshua to drive the remaining Canaanites from the land. While the Canaanite armies had been completely defeated and then Israel occupied the land of Canaan, there was still much mopping up to do. Not only were there isolated pockets of Canaanites to be driven out, but many Canaanites who had fled when Israel entered the land were now making their way back into Canaan and re-settling. Not only were the Israelites allowing them to remain in the land, but there were a number of Canaanite tribes still on the frontier of Canaan, occupying outlying areas of that land which God promised to Israel. This is why before Joshua died, Israel was commanded to finish-up the conquest of Canaan by casting out all the remaining Canaanites and pushing them off the frontier, providing a buffer of sorts, which would keep the influences of the Canaanites and their false religion away from the people of Israel.

The opening chapter of The Book of Judges is the record of the tribes of Judah and Simeon obeying the Lord’s command and driving most of the Canaanites from the southern portion of the land—although the army from these combined tribes failed to drive the Canaanites out of the lowlands because the Canaanites had superior military technology in the form of chariots reinforced by the use of iron nails and strapping. The fear of superior technology is the first sign that the Canaanization of Israel is already underway. We also read of Israel’s armies capturing the king of Bezek and torturing him by cutting off his thumbs and big toes, just as the Canaanites would have done. Meanwhile to the north, the rest of the twelve tribes failed miserably in their efforts to drive out the Canaanites. They left them scattered

throughout the land, although in many cases the Canaanites who remained were subjected to forced labor, a direct violation of God's command to drive them out, or else kill them out-right.

The consequences of this failure to cast out all the Canaanites from the land will soon become evident. As time goes by, the people of Israel will be far more influenced by their Canaanite neighbors than the Canaanites will be influenced by Israel's faith in YHWH. This sorry condition is described in Judges 2, which serves as the literary bridge between the time of Joshua and the era of the judges which follows.

In Judges 2, the author connects Israel's failure to complete the conquest as recounted in the opening chapter with the grave consequences which follow for the entire nation. We now learn that as the era of the judges opened, the Angel of the LORD, who is none other than the preincarnate Jesus Christ, comes as YHWH's covenant messenger to confront the people of Israel with their failure to drive out all the Canaanites from the land.¹ The Israelites have broken the terms of the covenant which God made with the nation at Mount Sinai—a point emphasized in messenger's address to the nation.² According to verses 1-2, God's word comes to Israel in the form of an oracle of judgment. *“Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, ‘I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?”*

It is interesting to notice that the Angel (or messenger) of the LORD went up from Gilgal to confront the people of Israel. Gilgal is the site where Israel camped after crossing the Jordan. Gilgal is the same place where Israel erected the monument of twelve stones taken from the Jordan River bed. It is where Israel celebrated the first Passover in the land, and where all the men were circumcised after entering into Canaan. Gilgal is also the place where Joshua encountered the commander of the LORD's armies before marching on Jericho. That the messenger of YHWH went up from Gilgal is, no doubt, God's way of reminding the people of Israel of the fact that the campaign to take the land had started at Gilgal and it was at Gilgal that the people realized they could only be victorious if YHWH was with them.³

The precise location where the Angel of the LORD confronted the people of Israel is identified as “Bochim.” The Hebrew word means the “place of weeping.” In other words, the physical location where the Angel spoke to Israel is not specifically identified, but when it happened the people wept and they recalled not the name of the place, but what happened there.⁴ The reason for the heart-felt tears is the word of judgment spoken to Israel by the Angel. The Angel briefly recounts the history of the covenant (which is the history of Israel). God brought Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness of the Sinai and then into the land which God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. God swore on his oath that he would do this. YHWH did not break covenant with his people. He remains faithful to his promise, even though Israel did not fulfill their mandate of removing the Canaanites from the land.

¹ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 110-111.

² Cundall, *Judges & Ruth*, 64.

³ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 111.

⁴ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 112.

After the failure of the twelve tribes as recounted in chapter 1, it is clear that the people of Israel have broken covenant with YHWH. The Israelites have not only allowed the Canaanites to remain in their midst (which is, in effect, to make covenant with them instead of YHWH), but the Israelites have not destroyed all of the Canaanites religious shrines scattered throughout the land as commanded by God. According to the Angel of the LORD, this failure to complete the conquest is the clearest sign yet that Israel has not obeyed the LORD's voice (i.e., the terms of the covenant). The language spoken here by the Angel echoes YHWH's questioning of Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:13) when she was deceived by the serpent after Adam failed to cast Satan from the garden. "*What is this you have done?*" Just as the first couple failed to cast Satan from the Garden of Eden, so too Israel has allowed the serpent (the Canaanites) to remain in Canaan. This will lead to nothing but trouble and to the nation's fall.

When the Angel announces that Israel has made covenant with the Canaanites, this means that the covenant curses will now come down upon Israel. This word of judgment is announced in verse 3. "*So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.*" Since Israel had already broken God's covenant, God has stopped driving the Canaanites out. He has ceased putting fear into the hearts of Israel's enemies. In effect, YHWH will allow the sins of his people to reap the appropriate consequences. If his people are tolerating paganism in their midst, then YHWH will allow the people of Israel to fall under the sway of the Canaanites and their false religion. In other words, YHWH is saying to Israel "since you have failed to cast out the pagan `gods' then pagan `gods' you shall have."

Joshua had already warned the people about this (Joshua 23:13). "*Know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the Lord your God has given you.*" The messenger now tells Israel that this is already the case. "You have broken the covenant. I have stopped fighting against the Canaanites, and their `gods' will now be yours." In fact, as soon as the Canaanites lose their fear of Israel's armies, Israel will find itself under almost constant attack by those who want to reclaim that land on which they had been living before Israel took it from them. Hence the Canaanites are already returning to Canaan in greater and greater numbers, and they are bringing all of their false religion and pagan practices with them.

The people of Israel's response to this oracle of judgment from the Angel is one of sorrow and repentance. As we read in verses 4-5, "*as soon as the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the Lord.*" The messenger's words cut to the heart. The people cry out to the LORD. They weep bitterly upon hearing his verdict. The Israelites are so moved that the unknown location where this occurred is memorialized as "the place of weeping" (Bochim). Realizing their sin, the people and offer sacrifices to the LORD, which certainly seems to indicate that their repentance is genuine. And yet, sadly, this is the last time in the Book of Judges when the people of Israel respond like this when confronted with their sin. At this point, the people were truly sorry for their sins and they repent. But the nation is so far down the road to Canaanization that their sorrow does not last long. Soon the Israelites will be far more like Canaanites than they can imagine.

In verses 6-15, the author summarizes for us the situation of Israel when the period of the judges opens, and the nation's spiritual health is not good.

That Israel's repentance, however sincere, was very short-lived soon becomes evident in the next section of Judges. We also see the contrast between Israel's faithfulness under the leadership of Joshua and the

unbelief which arises in Israel in the next and following generations as told in the balance of this book. In verses 6-10, the author of Judges now gives us his perspective on this current era in Israel's history, laying out the root of Israel's troubles, before describing the nature of Israel's problem in verses 11-13. The author does not mention specific tribes (but refers to the nation as a whole—"the people of Israel," "that generation"), nor does he give us any of the specifics about which Canaanite tribes are involved ("the peoples who were around them"). This tells us that the author is not really interested in the history of this period for history's sake. He is clearly interested in the theological reasons underlying Israel's current troubles and sees Israel's apostasy as the reason for all the calamities that follow.⁵

In verses 6-10, the author explains the reasons for Israel's current spiritual condition. He begins by recounting the death of Joshua, which indicates that shortly after the conquest, the people of Israel are already falling away from YHWH. *"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-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. 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."*

While in many ways this section recapitulates Joshua 24:28-31, the author makes a number of important points. That generation which was born in the wilderness and which entered Canaan under Joshua was faithful. Joshua lived to 110, some twenty-five years after the land Israel has conquered was distributed among the twelve tribes. During this time, the people served the LORD. In fact, the people of Israel continued to serve the LORD until those elders died who had served with Joshua and who had seen all of the great things that YHWH had done for Israel. We are told that when this generation died, they were gathered to their fathers. This assertion stands in marked contrast to verse 10—*And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel*. The author's point is that the problems arose with that next generation which was born in Canaan, and who had not wandered through the wilderness, nor had they witnessed all of the things YHWH had done. Some of their parents had only "heard" about the things YHWH had done, but they did not hear about these things, hence they knew not YHWH. Furthermore, this generation, which was raised in Canaan, had never participated in any of the national covenant renewal ceremonies conducted by Joshua.

In this, we see that the theological slide toward full apostasy was well underway. The generation of Joshua saw YHWH's mighty deeds first hand, obeyed the covenant and enjoyed all of the blessings promised for such obedience. But during the days of the elders who out-lived Joshua, Israel lived in light of the memory of YHWH's mighty deeds. Because of this, the people still (more or less) were obedient to the covenant and served the LORD. But by time the first generation born in Canaan comes to prominence, the author tells us that they did not know about YHWH's mighty deeds and so they broke covenant with YHWH by allowing Canaanites back into the land. They also allowed Canaanite religious shrines to remain intact. Even worse, the Israelites began to worship Canaanite gods.⁶ And all of this with a single generation. It doesn't take long.

⁵ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 118-119.

⁶ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 122.

The sad fact is that Israel's tribal leaders, elders, judges and officials failed to pass down the biblical faith to the next generation. No one taught the younger generation about what YHWH did, and no one taught them what would happen should the nation turn its back upon YHWH. If this is not a lesson (and a warning for us), I don't know what is. It is surely one of the most important duties given to parents and grandparents to catechize their children by telling them of God's mighty deeds in Jesus Christ. It is our duty to explain to them those things they need to know so that they not only have comfort in life and in death, but so that they can live lives of gratitude before God and as a witness to their neighbor. Our children must be warned of the great strength of the pull toward paganism. You can also see a similar pattern in churches and denominations. The founders and first members are zealots. Their children remember the reason why their church or movement was founded, but by the time their children grow up, all of the history of what and why is just assumed. It happened to Israel. It happens to churches around us. And given sinful human nature, it could easily happen here. Where will we be in three generations?

In verse 11, we come to the author's sad description of Israel's fundamental problem—a statement which sets everything which follows in this book in its proper context. *“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.”* This is why Israel is in the shape that they are in. This is why the people of Israel do what they do. As we read in verses 12-13, *“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.”* The people of Israel abandoned YHWH and began worshipping Baal and the Ashtaroth.

While the declaration of such wholesale apostasy is itself shocking, it becomes even more so when we consider just what the worship of Baal and the Ashtaroths actually involved. The Hebrew word *ba'al* means something like Lord, master, or even husband. When used in this context as a title it means something like “divine master” and refers to the storm/weather god of the Canaanites who they called *Hadad*. According to Canaanite mythology Baal was the offspring of El (the almighty one) and Asherah (the goddess of love and war). The other so-called “gods” from this union were Mot (the god of death and the underworld) and Yam, the god of the sea. When the author uses the plural and speaks of Baals, he's referring to the various manifestations of the weather god, who, it was thought blessed the land with fertility.⁷ To worship and serve the Baals was to reply upon Baal to provide bounty of the land. To do so is to completely reject God's covenant promise to provide for his people.

The Canaanites believed that Ashtaroth was Baal's female companion. Baal and Ashtaroth were represented at altars devoted to them by stone carvings with grossly exaggerated genitalia. While the first generation of Israel saw God provide for their needs (manna, military victory and so on), the first generation raised in Canaan simply followed the Canaanite practice of bowing down before the statues of Baal and Ashtaroth at the various shrines built to them in the hope that the weather god and his lover would provide them with lots of kids, good weather, fertile fields and a productive harvest. Whereas Joshua's generation bowed before YHWH and served him, this generation knew nothing about YHWH and his faithfulness. Instead, the Israelites were prostrating themselves before a carved pornographic rock in a pagan shrine.

The consequences of this have been spelled out in the curses spelled out in the Book of Deuteronomy. Thus we read in Judges 2:14-15, *“So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them*

⁷ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 124-125.

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.” No longer would YHWH strike fear in the hearts of Israel’s enemies. No longer would he protect them from those who seek to do them harm. Israel has broken the covenant. The people are bowing down to false gods, counting on them, not YHWH to provide for their needs. And so YHWH will leave Israel in the hands of these false gods, and it will not be long before Israel is in terrible distress. This, then, is the central theme of the Book of Judges. Next time, we will consider what God will do to rescue his people from their despair—he will send them judges.

As we wrap up, there is obviously much application for us.

As we saw last time, when we considered Judges 1, because the Israelites did not cast the Canaanites from their midst, the people of Israel were quickly and easily Canaanized. God has clearly warned his people of the leaven of false doctrine and pagan ideology. This is why Paul directed the Corinthian church to cast out all those who deny the gospel through their teaching or their scandalous conduct before such leaven could make its way throughout the church. If such people are allowed to remain in the church, they will destroy both the church’s witness to outsiders and they will create confusion about the gospel—which is the proclamation of Christ crucified for sinners. In Judges 2, we see the tragic consequences of Israel’s failure to purge the leaven of paganism and unbelief from their midst. It did not take long—a generation—before the people of Israel are bowing down before pornographic statues, seeking pagan and imaginary gods, who can do nothing for them, to provide them with the necessities of life.

But apostasy can come very quickly. In Galatians 1, Paul warns the churches of Asia Minor of a false gospel then wrecking havoc on the churches there. Paul himself marvels at how quickly and easily professing Christians were taken in by those preaching what was obviously not true—that in addition to believing in Christ, one must also be circumcised. With a fair bit of righteous anger Paul writes, *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”* These are strong words and we must heed them. If anyone preaches a different gospel, which adds too, or takes away from the finished work of Christ, they are subject to a divine curse—just as Israel was under the Old Covenant.

The lesson for us is crystal clear. That first generation of Israelites born in Canaan became worshipers of Baal and Ashtroth because they knew not YHWH or what he had done for Israel. Because of this, they did not follow God’s ways nor obey his commandments. They abandoned the Lord. Likewise, those in Galatia who were taken in by the false teachers did not know the difference between true gospel which Paul had preached from the false gospel which was being proclaimed by these false apostles. The common denominator between the first generation born in Canaan and those Christians who were taken in by false teachers in Galatia is a lack of catechesis. This is why we must tell our children and our family about those things which God has done. He has sent Jesus to die for our sins and then raised him from the dead for our justification. We must believe that these things are true so that we don’t abandon Christianity when something more useful or more interesting comes along. Furthermore, we must know and believe these things to be true so that when our head hits the pillow at night, we can say “it is well with our souls.” And if we know and believe these things to be true, we will not abandon the LORD nor

bow down and serve false “gods.” And because these things are true, we must pass them down to our children.

Amen.