

**DOWNWARD SPIRAL, PART 2: “THE LORD STILL DELIVERS”
JUDGES 2:6-3:6**

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 2 of our sermon series called “Downward Spiral,” where we're going through the book of Judges together.

And today's sermon is titled: “The Lord Still Delivers.”

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

Let me begin by telling a story, but I want you to imagine that you're a character in this story.

Imagine that you're a loving and faithful husband, but one day, you find out that your wife has been unfaithful to you. In fact, you're not sure if your second child is really yours, and there's no doubt that you're not the biological father of your third child. And on top of that, your wife basically tells you that she prefers her other lovers compared to you, and then she leaves you.

Yet, even *then*, in the midst of her walking out on you, you still make sure that she has enough provisions and money to take with her.

Later, you find out that her other lovers have ended up abusing, enslaving, and discarding your wife—and that she's being sold in an auction nearby.

You find her there, standing before potential buyers—and yet, nobody wants to purchase her.

How do you respond?

Do you just go home, thinking that she got what she deserved?

Do you buy her back, give her some more provisions, and then wash your hands of her?

<pause>

You may have already figured out that this is actually *not* an imaginary story. This is the story of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer.

And what does Hosea do for his wife Gomer—the one who betrayed him, cheated on him, belittled him, and abandoned him?

He buys her back, covers her shame, brings her home, reaffirms his love for her, and treats her as his wife again.¹

<pause>

As a disclaimer, this story is *not* about what we must do in such circumstances. The Bible has other passages that talk specifically about legitimate grounds for divorce—and Hosea definitely had biblical grounds for divorce.

No, this is the story between the *Lord* and his *people*.

¹ Ed Welch, *When People are Big and God is Small* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 172-175.

It is *ultimately* the story of *our* repeated failures, and yet how the *Lord* still delivers us, covers our shame, brings us home, reaffirms his love for us, and treats us as his treasured possession again.

And that's what we're going to look at more today.

The One Thing

Even amidst repeated failures, the Lord still delivers.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 2:6-3:6.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon.

If you need access to a Bible, you can download the ESV Bible app, or you can just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

Let me begin by helping us understand the big picture of Judges and what it's about.

"Judges" here doesn't refer to judicial or court judges, but these judges were military leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from an oppressor. They were not kings over all of Israel, but they were more like clan or tribal leaders.

And in terms of the structure of the book of Judges, there's a two-part introduction, then the main body of the book tells the narratives of 12 judges (6 major judges and 6 minor judges), and then it ends with a two-part conclusion.

It's also very helpful to know that the book of Judges is *not* chronologically arranged.

The entire book spans over 200-300 years, but some of the events are actually overlapping in different regions, and there are some things that are happening near the *end* of the book that actually happened chronologically *before* some of things in the middle.²

So the book of Judges is *not* meant to be read chronologically, but it's arranged to make the point that God's people need God's appointed king from the tribe of Judah (who is ultimately King Jesus) to lead them to experience God's blessings; and that when they are left to themselves without the right king, they completely fall into sin and ruin.³

So that's the big picture of the book of Judges.

Scripture Reading

Let's now read Judges 2:6-3:6.

^{2:6} When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of

² For example, in Judges 17-18, the Levite priest for hire is the grandson of Moses (Judg. 18:30), who must have lived much earlier *chronologically* than earlier events in the book of Judges, even though it is one of the last narratives presented in the book.

³ The first point is that God's people need God's appointed king from the tribe of Judah to lead them to experience God's blessings (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25; cf. Gen. 49:10; Judg. 1:1-21; Deut. 17:14-20), who we know to be King David and ultimately the Son of David, Jesus Christ himself. The second point is about the total fall of God's people when they are left to themselves without God's appointed king from the tribe of Judah to lead them. The number 12 in the Bible represents totality, fullness, or completeness (Cory Brock, "The Meaning of History," May 10, 2010, <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-meaning-of-history>). And throughout the book of Judges, we see how the 12 tribes of Israel go through a downward spiral of 12 cycles of different judges, where they get worse and worse, so that by the end of the book, the people of Israel look more like the pagan Canaanites than the people of God.

110 years. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² 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. ¹³ They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. ¹⁴ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. 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. ²⁰ 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, ²¹ I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, ²² 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." ²³ So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

^{3:1} 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁶ And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.

This is God's Word.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in three parts.

- I. A new generation (2:6-10)
- II. A downward spiral (2:11-19)
- III. A test failed (2:20-3:6)

I. A new generation (2:6-10)

Look at verses 6-10.

[^{2:6} When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.]

As soon as we start reading, we might be surprised to see that Joshua is seemingly *alive* again. What happened? Didn't he already *die* in chapter 1 verse 1? How is it that he's back again and then he dies again?

This is the author's way of signaling to us that this is the start of another introduction.

Remember, the book of Judges has a *two-part* introduction.

And this is not uncommon in Hebrew narrative, where it will tell you what happened and then it will return to tell you what happened again from a different perspective or focus.

We've seen this before in the creation account in Genesis, where chapter 1 gives us a helicopter view of the days of creation, and then chapter 2 takes us back to the sixth day of creation and describes it in further detail.

So *that's* what's going on here in the book of Judges.

Last time we were in Judges, in the first introduction (Judg. 1:1-2:5), it described what happened from a *military* standpoint of how Israel *failed* to carry out "the ban" against the nations—to completely destroy all the inhabitants and possessions of the seven nations in the Promised Land (Deut. 7:1-6).

And now, in this second introduction (Judg. 2:6-2:6), it's going back and describing what happened from more of a *religious* standpoint of how Israel abandoned faith in the LORD and went after the false gods of the nations.

So, the first introduction was more from a *military* standpoint, and this second introduction is more from a *religious* standpoint.

And this second introduction is probably the more important of the two introductions because *faith* drives *practice*, our *heart* controls our *actions*, who they *trusted* is who they *followed*.

In other words, the second introduction *explains* the first introduction.

And this second introduction will explain the *rest* of the book of Judges, as we'll see later on.

<pause>

Now, if you have your Bibles, I want you to flip back one page to Joshua 24:28-31.

And I want you to notice that those verses at the end of Joshua are almost identical to Judges 2:6-10 here, except they're slightly rearranged and there's one major difference—verse 10.

Here, there's the addition of verse 10, where the author intentionally makes a surprising *contrast* between *Joshua's* generation, who served the Lord and saw all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel (as verse 7 says), and the *new* generation that arose afterwards "who did *not* know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel."

<pause>

But what does that mean?

[If you were in our Parenting Class last Sunday, I said that apparently Joshua's generation didn't *tell* their children about the LORD and what he had done.

But as I've gone back and studied this passage more closely this past week, I want to *correct* that.]

It's *not* that the previous generation failed to *tell* this new generation about the LORD and what he had done because this is what it says later in...

Judges 6:13: And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? **And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?'**"...

So apparently, the previous generation *did* tell this new generation about the LORD and what he had done for Israel.

So if it doesn't mean that they weren't told, what does it mean to say that this new generation "did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel"?

[^{2:6} When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.]

If you look closely at verse 7, that's where the contrast seems to be made. *Joshua's* generation *served* the LORD and had *seen* all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel.

But this *new* generation, while they were told *about* the LORD and *about* all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel, they did not yet *personally* know the LORD and see the work that he had done for Israel.

In other words, they had *heard* the stories of the LORD delivering them out of slavery from Egypt through ten plagues, bringing them across the Red Sea on dry land, drowning the Egyptian armies behind them, sustaining them through the wilderness with manna from heaven, conquering Jericho by having the people march around the city and shout, and fighting for them to conquer other mightier nations to bring them into the Promised Land.

This new generation *knew* the stories, but they did not yet *personally* know (or trust in) the LORD and his work for themselves.

<pause>

So how does this apply to us?

I want to speak to three groups: children, parents, and our church.

First, children.

In the most one-to-one way, *you* are the new generation that is rising up.

And what you should take away from this is the reality that you *cannot* rely on the faith or faithfulness of your parents, but you must have a *personal* faith in the Lord.

Being born to Christian parents and growing up in the church does *not* mean that you're a Christian. It's not enough to know things *about* God; it's not enough to know all the Bible stories and Bible verses. But you must *personally* know God as your Lord and Savior and *personally* trust in the greatest work the Lord has done on the cross.

Kids, it's not enough to know that Christ lived, died, and resurrected for the forgiveness of sins, but you must *personally* trust that he did that for *you*.

It's not enough to know that Christ died for *sinners*, but you must know that *you* are a sinner who needs to be saved from God's punishment.

You must know that all the bad things you do are *not* because you're having a bad day, or that it was just a mistake, or that it's not a big deal because nobody's perfect. No, we do and think all those bad things because we are *sinful* to the core.

You *must* believe that to be true about *yourself*—and that sin is such a big deal that Christ needed to go to the cross to save us from that.

And it's not enough to *know* that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone, but you must personally *live* by grace through faith in Christ alone.

So that's for children, but that's also true for *all* of us who are here as well—knowledge *about* God is not enough, but we must have a *personal* faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as “*my* Lord” and “*my* Savior.”

<pause>

Second, parents.

Our children cannot trust in whom they do not know. Therefore, we still have the primary responsibility to teach our children about the Lord and impress his Word upon them.

A great job description for parents is found in...

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NIV): Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

We *ourselves* are to love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, and strength—and his commands are to be on our *own* hearts.

And *then*, out of the overflow of our own love for the LORD, we are to teach and impress God's Word upon our children. In every circumstance and at all times, we seek opportunities to talk about and help our children to know God, his Word, and how to apply God's Word rightly in their lives—to think biblically.

And as we are faithful in raising our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), we trust that God will use it for his own ordained purposes.

<pause>

Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

That is not a *promise* but a *proverb*, which tells us how things *ordinarily* operate in God's world.

God *ordinarily* works through the *means* of faithful parents to raise godly children.

At the same time, we also know from Judges 2:10 that it doesn't *always* turn out that way.

There's nothing negative that is said about Joshua's generation. They're constantly said to have been obedient to the Lord, presumably obeying Deuteronomy 6:4-9 as well.

And yet, as a whole, their children's generation did not end up *personally* knowing the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.

So may this also be a *comfort* for parents with children who are currently or who perhaps later become wayward from the Lord as adults.

You are *not* a failure if your children end up *not* following Christ as adults. We love our kids, and we faithfully teach them who God is and what he has done in Christ, but we are *not* the Holy Spirit; we do *not* have the power to convert or sanctify our children.

Godly parenting does not guarantee that our children will become believers. We do our best to obey God in training them in the way they should go, but ultimately, each child in each generation must *personally* know and trust in the Lord.

Although we long and pray for our children to know and trust the Lord personally, our primary reason for raising them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord is *not* to somehow guarantee their conversion but, as with all things we do, it's primarily to glorify God through our obedience and trust in him in our everyday faithful parenting.

<pause>

Third, our church.

Like Joshua's generation, our responsibility as a church is to faithfully follow the Lord in *our* generation and to faithfully influence the *next* generation.

Although parents have the primary responsibility in teaching their children who God is and what he has done, the whole assembly also has a responsibility to come alongside parents to support them in doing so (cf. Deut. 31:9-13).

As members in the church, that's part of what we covenant to do as a spiritual family: "We will endeavor to make disciples of those within our influence in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of family, friends, and all those around us."

So as their spiritual uncles and aunts, get to know the kids in our church and seek to do them spiritual good.

<pause>

[When we first started this church ten years ago, most of us were in our 20s and 30s, and now most of us are in our 30s and 40s, but...]

My hope is that we would be a multi-generational church, where we're not just made up of people who are just in "*my* life stage," but those of the silent generation (1928-1945), baby boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), millennials (1981-1996), Gen Z (1997-2012), Gen Alpha (2011-2024), and Gen Beta (starting 2025) in the future.⁴

If you have no idea what those terms mean, that's ok. All it means is that we want to be a church where we befriend those *outside* our own life stage, and we seek to do them spiritual good.

Think of Titus 2 that talks about "older men" and "older women" teaching and training the "younger men" and "younger women" in the church in godliness.

You may not consider yourself as part of the categories of "older men" and "older women," but that's you to *someone* in our church. Intentionally talk to those from a different life stage than you after Sunday Celebration.

And for those who are younger, don't be afraid to get to know those who are older than you. They have more wisdom to offer you than you realize—and they're probably also more fun than you realize too.

⁴ Esther Sun, "From Boomers to Gen Beta: A guide to the generation names," January 9, 2025, <https://www.today.com/parents/teens/generation-names-rcna137457>.

<pause>

As a church, regardless of how the next generation turns out, may we be able to say with a clear conscience that we did our best to guard and proclaim and display the gospel of Jesus Christ in *our* generation, and that we did all we could to influence and help the *next* generation do likewise.

At the end of the day, we cannot *ensure* the faithfulness of the next generation, but like parents, we do what we do as part of our love for God and ultimately to glorify him through our obedience and trust in our everyday faithfulness in the present.

<pause>

So first, a new generation; and second...

II. A downward spiral (2:11-19)

Look at verses 11-19.

[¹¹ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² 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. ¹³ They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. ¹⁴ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. 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.]

Here, we see the general pattern of the downward spiral of the people of Israel that we'll see throughout the rest of the book of Judges.

I'll first go over the general pattern, and then we'll cut these verses in half and highlight two observations in each half.

<pause>

So here's the general pattern of the downward spiral.

- Israel rebels against the Lord by turning to idolatry (verses 11-13),
- the Lord hands them over to their enemies as an act of discipline (verses 14-15),
- the Lord responds to their distress by raising up a judge (or a military leader) to deliver his people from their enemies and give them rest (verses 16-18),
- the judge eventually dies (the beginning of verse 19),
- the people return to their wickedness, but it's even worse than before (the rest of verse 19),
- and then repeat, so that by the end of the book, the people of Israel look more like the pagan Canaanites than the people of God.⁵

So that's the general pattern of the downward spiral.

⁵ Or if I could name each stage of the downward spiral with a word, they might be: idolatry (vv. 11-13), discipline (vv. 14-15), deliverance (vv. 16-18), death (v. 19a), greater sin (v. 19b), and then repeat.

<pause>

Now, let's look specifically at verses 11-15.

[¹¹ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² 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. ¹³ They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. ¹⁴ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. ¹⁵ 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.]

To give us a feel for what's going on in these verses, it's helpful to highlight some of the key phrases. Look down at the text.

- In verse 11, "Israel did what was **evil** in the sight of the LORD,"
- in verse 12, "they **abandoned** the LORD,"
- in verse 13, "[they] **served** the Baals and the Ashtaroth,"
- in verse 14, "the **anger** of the LORD was kindled **against** Israel,"
- and in verse 15, "they were in **terrible distress**."

We get the sense that this is really, really bad.

<pause>

I'll highlight two observations from these verses.

First, **they turned to idols that seemed to "work."**

Look at verse 13.

Why is it that the Israelites "abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth"?

These were idols of the Canaanite fertility gods. They were *supposedly* responsible for providing the rain and the crops and the overall fruitfulness that the inhabitants needed to live and thrive in the Promised Land.

<pause>

Now, we have to remember that while the Israelites lived in Egypt, *Pharaoh* provided food for them. And while they were in the wilderness, the *Lord* provided manna for them from heaven.

But now that they were in the Promised Land, how were they to be provided for? They hadn't been in this situation before, and what they wanted was some *assurance* that they would be provided for.

So what seemed to make the most sense for them was to learn from the Canaanite inhabitants of the land. After all, they had been living there for centuries—*surely*, they knew something about what "works."

And what seemed to "work" for the Canaanites—what seemed to make the rain come and the ground fertile and the crops abundant—was the worship of these Canaanite fertility gods.

Perhaps that's part of the reason the Israelites kept them around for forced labor. They seemed to know what "worked."

But in doing so, they were *disobeying* what God had said—to carry out "the ban" and devote those nations and their possessions to complete destruction.

In short, they didn't think they could trust God to provide for them, so they looked at what other people were doing and what seemed to "work" for them, and they began to adopt those practices.

This is a constant problem that we see repeated over and over again in Scripture and in history. The people of God don't think they can trust what God has said, so they use *worldly* wisdom, they take matters into their *own* hands, and they end up *disobeying* God and experiencing *terrible* consequences and being left in "*terrible* distress" as verse 15 says.

<pause>

So how about us? What is it that *you* want? A spouse, children, parents, good health, success at work, wealth, pleasure, comfort, a feeling of happiness?

And if you feel that obedience to God is *not* getting you what you want, are you willing to forsake God and his Word to turn to what *other* people are doing—what seems to "work"—to get what you want?

<pause>

And what about our *church*? What is it that *we* want? Large attendance, baptism numbers, emotional highs, a sense of community, or even being a multi-generational church, or something else?

And if we feel that obedience to God is *not* getting us what we want, are we willing to forsake God and his Word to turn to what *other* people are doing—what seems to "work"—to get what we want?

<pause>

Brothers and sisters, *beware* this kind of warped thinking. This is the logic of *idolatry*—and it does *not* end well.

So they turned to idols that seemed to "work."

<pause>

Second, **their sin *first* provoked God's anger—not his grace.**

Because we know that God is merciful and gracious, and because we know that we can be forgiven of our sins through faith in Christ, I think there's a subtle tendency for us to think that God's *first* response to our sin is *grace*.

But that's *not* the case. Our sin and idolatry provoke the Lord to *anger* (verse 12); they kindle his *anger* against us (verse 14); they turn his hand *against* us (verse 15).

<pause>

In my family, we'll periodically go back to singing songs from the New City Catechism as part of our family worship—and this is what question 18 asks:

New City Catechism Question 18

Q: Will God Allow Our Disobedience and Idolatry To Go Unpunished?

And here is the answer that we sing in response:

A: No, God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them both in this life, and in the life to come.

I want my kids to know this because not only is it *true*, but also because it's only when they understand God's *anger* against our sin will they even begin to understand *grace*.

It was the *angry* wrath against *our* sin that fell upon Jesus Christ, so that forgiveness could be obtained by *grace*.

If we fail to recognize God's *anger* against our sin and idolatry, we will think lightly of his *grace* and we will think lightly of *sin*.

And when that happens, we often go headfirst back into sin and idolatry—as we see throughout the book of Judges.

You cannot truly understand nor be transformed by the gospel unless you know that our sin *first* provokes God's *anger*—not his *grace*.

So those are two observations from verses 11-15.

<pause>

Now, let's look at verses 16-19.

[¹⁶ Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. 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.]

Let's make another two observations from these verses.

First, **the Lord's salvation is entirely gracious.**

Verse 16 seems to come out of nowhere.

There's no lifting up their voices or weeping (2:4). There's no crying out to God for help, as they *sometimes* will do later in the book (3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10). Here, there's no evidence of repentance stated at all.

And yet, "the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them."

And then, in verse 17, we see how *poorly* the people responded to the Lord's deliverance: "they did not listen to their judges, for they *whored* after other gods and bowed down to them."

Note the imagery of *whoredom* or *prostitution*. This was *not* human trafficking. The people of Israel were *not* forced into it, but they willfully desired to be violated by others who were not their faithful husband. This is the imagery of spiritual adultery.

And yet, verse 18 says, "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."

Basically, he does it over and over again with *multiple* judges.

The Lord *graciously* saved his people, the people respond by *repeatedly* prostituting themselves to idols, and the Lord responds again by *graciously* saving his people.

The people were completely *undeserving* of deliverance, and yet the Lord saved them again and again.

<pause>

What would cause the Lord to do this, especially when we understand that he is righteously *angry* with our sins against him?

Look at verse 18: “For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.”

The “groaning” here is *not* a cry for mercy or a sign of repentance. It’s simply groaning in pain and despair amidst affliction and oppression.

But the Lord sees the pain of his people, and even though there’s no repentance or even crying out for his help, he graciously acts to save them.

<pause>

If you’re going through pain and suffering right now, take comfort in knowing that this is the fatherly disposition of our God. When he sees his children suffer, even when it’s fully *deserved*, he will *not* leave us in our groaning forever, but he will act to *deliver* us.

<pause>

But this should also be profoundly *humbling* for all of us. God does *not* save us because of anything we do or don’t do, but in *spite* of all the sinful things that we do, he saves us because he is *compassionate* and *gracious*.

And *he* does all the work.

Look at verse 18: “*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....”

The people contributed nothing but their sin to their deliverance. The *Lord* did all the work. It was all a work of his *grace*.

The Lord’s salvation is entirely gracious.

<pause>

Second, **their stubborn sinfulness kept them in a downward spiral.**

Look again at how the people respond to the Lord’s gracious salvation.

- In verse 17, “they did not *listen* to their judges, but they whored after other gods and bowed down to them.”
- In verse 19, “they turned back and were *more* corrupt than their fathers.... They did not drop any of their *practices* or their *stubborn* ways.”

Why did the Israelites continue to spiral downward into further and further corruption? Their stubborn sin, their stubborn practices, their stubborn ways.

They should have thrown away and burned their idols and never looked back.

<pause>

Perhaps for *some* of us, we’re reading the Bible and praying and coming to church, but we still feel spiritually dry.

There could be many contributing factors to that, but could it be that there’s some stubborn sin in an area of your life?

Is there a sinful habit that you keep going back to? Is there some escape that you feel entitled to?

Is there something that's been pointed out to you as being misaligned with Scripture, and yet you don't want to listen?

Is there something in your life that you feel like you *must* have that's not Jesus—and if you don't have it—then all the joy and worthwhileness of life is sucked out of you?

The harder we try to hold on to those things, the deeper we drive ourselves down a downward spiral.

The only way *out* of that downward spiral is true repentance. It's cutting down those idols and burning them and never looking back (cf. Acts 19:19; 1 Thes. 1:9).

Their stubborn sinfulness kept them in a downward spiral.

<pause>

So a new generation, a downward spiral, and third...

III. A test failed (2:20-3:6)

Look at chapter 2 verse 20 to chapter 3 verse 6.

[²⁰ 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, ²¹ I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, ²² 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." ²³ So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

^{3:1} 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁶ And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.]

In the midst of the Lord's anger against Israel joining the sin and idolatry of the nations, he mentions *why* he left those remaining nations in the Promised Land after Joshua to begin with.

So, in a sense, this is going backwards again.

Joshua and his generation had already broken the backs of the Canaanites (Josh. 1-12), but the Lord did *not* allow them to conquer all the nations in the Promised Land right away.

In Exodus 23:29-30 and Deuteronomy 7:22-23, we're told one reason is so that the people of Israel do not accumulate more land than they can inhabit at once, where the land would become desolate and wild animals would grow too numerous for them.

But *another* reason the Lord did not allow Joshua's generation to conquer all the nations but left some there for the generation *after* Joshua was to *test* that next generation.

Three times, the text mentions that the Lord put Israel to the *test*.

So what was that test?

Look at chapter 2 verse 22: "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."

And look at chapter 3 verse 4: “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 test was to see whether this next generation would “walk in the way of the LORD” or “obey the commandments of the LORD” as their fathers did. Essentially, they were not to *assimilate* into (or become like) the other nations, but they were to remain a *holy* people, *set apart* by God and *distinct* from all the other nations.

<pause>

But then, chapter 3 verses 1-2 seem to talk about this test in a slightly different way: “Now these are the nations that the LORD left, to test Israel by them... that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before.”

It’s important to understand that this is *not* referring to merely teaching Israel *combat skills* for war, but this is about teaching them a specific *kind* of war, where they trust the Lord to lead them and fight for them.

Remember how the city of Jericho was defeated by Joshua’s generation. Was it merely through combat skills?

No, they needed to trust the Lord and follow his lead, even if it meant marching around the wall of Jericho for seven days and then shouting (Josh. 6).

That’s the specific *kind* of war they were to learn.

<pause>

But not only that. They were also to carry out “the ban,” devoting to complete destruction the inhabitants and possessions of the sinful nations in the Promised Land.

If you want to hear more about the rationale for that, I’d encourage you to go back to our previous sermon on the first introduction of the book of Judges.

<pause>

So how do the generations *after* Joshua do with the test?

Did they remain holy and distinct from the nations? Did they trust the Lord to fight for them and lead them to victory? Did they carry out “the ban” against the nations?

Look at chapter 3 verse 5: “So the people of Israel lived among the [nations].”

Note that it doesn’t say that the *nations* lived among the people of *Israel*, but that the people of *Israel* lived among the *nations*. Israel does not seem victorious in taking possession over the land, but the nations still seem to be very much in control of it and in a position of influence over the Israelites.

And look at verse 6.

Rather than carrying out “the ban,” the Israelites do exactly what the Lord forbids in...

Deuteronomy 7:3-4: You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

The Lord says, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons,” and what do they do? “Their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons.”

The Lord says, “they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods,” and what happens? “And they served their gods.”

<pause>

Of *all* things, why does this second introduction end with *this* issue of intermarriage with unbelievers?

Because this played a *big* part in Israel going down the path of sin and idolatry and abandoning the Lord.

And this gets repeated many times over. For example, listen to what God’s Word says in...

1 Kings 11:4-8: For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

If even the *wisest* man in the world could act so *foolishly*, then *we* are not exempt from this temptation.

We talked about this more extensively last time we were in the book of Judges, but this issue of intermarriage had nothing to do with *race* but had everything to do with true *faith* and *worship*.

<pause>

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are not dealing with the *same* scenario as that generation of Israelites, but we do face *similar* tests of our faith (James 1:2-4, 12).

We’re called to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. But the world will never be satisfied with us *not* becoming more and more like them.

And if we’re honest with ourselves, there’s something in us—the remnant of our own sinful worldliness—that *wants* to be like the rest of the world.

We don’t *want* to stand out. Life is already hard enough; we don’t want to *add* to our suffering the kind of consequences we’ll experience from the world for doing what *God* wants rather than what *others* want.

Or perhaps the grass *seems* greener on the other side. Those who don’t know God can look like they’re more joyful, more successful, more carefree, more satisfied. And we can be *deceived* into thinking that Christ is not enough—that God himself is not enough for us—and that some temporal and fleeting comfort of this world can be more satisfying than the One *from whom* all things draw their existence.

But “what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).

It is a *terrible* exchange, which leaves you only in “*terrible* distress” (Judg. 2:15).

<pause>

Still, even though we know this, the *allure* to assimilate into (or be like) the world is strong, and we face such tests of our faith on a *regular* basis. And left to *ourselves*, the pull of this world would be too much for us.

But praise God that he did not leave us alone, but he gave us the Holy Spirit to convict and empower us, he gave us brothers and sisters in the local church to rebuke and encourage us, and he gave us his Word to constantly correct and reorient us back to see who our Lord is and who we are in Christ.

<pause>

Left to *ourselves*, assimilation seems almost inevitable.

But the great hope that we have is that **even amidst repeated failures, the Lord still delivers.**

Or as Scripture says elsewhere: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:57-58).

In the end, *Christ* is the One who has made us holy, set apart, and distinct from the world—and we are simply called to be who we truly are *in Christ*.

Conclusion

As we close, I want to draw our attention back to chapter 2.

[¹⁸ 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. 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.]

Ultimately, the Israelites needed a judge who would *never* die to lead them into *eternal* salvation and rest.

Look at verse 18: “[the LORD] saved them from the hand of their enemies *all the days* of the judge.”

And look at verse 19: “But whenever the judge *died*, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers.”

Throughout the book, the Lord raises up a judge, he saves the people from their enemies, and they have rest. But it's only a *temporary* salvation and rest—because once the judge *dies*, they're back in their *sin* and oppressed by their *enemies* again.

<pause>

In the original language, the word “judge” literally means something more like “redeemer.”⁶

So the entire book of Judges is looking forward to a perfect judge-redeemer who *never* dies and who would lead his people into *eternal* salvation and rest.

And who is that judge-redeemer that they have been waiting for?

It's the God-man, Jesus Christ, who the Lord raised up for the purpose of dying a horrific death on a cross to bear the sins of his people, but also for the purpose of resurrecting three days later—*never* to die again.

So now, all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as their perfect judge-redeemer don't have *temporary* salvation and rest that can be *lost* but salvation that is *eternal* and *sure*, for the ascended Jesus himself reigns at the right hand of the Father now and *forever*.

⁶ Cory Brock (“The Meaning of History,” May 10, 2010, <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-meaning-of-history>) writes that the word “judge” is “the Hebrew word, ‘shofet.’ And the literal meaning of that term is something like ‘one who removes people from a land and puts them in another land.’ And so when you read the word ‘judge,’ literally the word is almost identical to the definition of redeemer – one who pulls out of bondage and puts into freedom. These are judge-redeemers.”

<pause>

And what's more is that the salvation that *Jesus* provides includes our *sanctification*, which is an *upward* spiral of deeper love and conformity to the Lord.

The Israelites spiraled *down*, so that they looked *less* distinct from the nations who didn't know the Lord.

But for those who trust in Jesus Christ as their perfect judge-redeemer spiral *up*, so that we look *more* distinct from the nations who don't know the Lord.

<pause>

So let's go to him now in steadfast faith, knowing that *he* is the One we truly *need* and that *he* is the One who truly *delivers*.

Let's pray.