

## Introduction

Four years ago comedian and talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres went on air to apologize for her abusive treatment of her staff. During her apology, which came in the form of an opening monologue filled with jokes, she claimed she is not the person she is said to be, completely missing the fact she was actually abusive with her 270 employees. Her apology was all about her rather than those she hurt.

A couple years ago actor Will Smith slapped comedian Chris Rock at the Academy Awards. He later recorded an apology. In it he said Chris Rock was unwilling to meet with him at that time and in a strange way to apologize said whenever Chris was ready to talk, he would be waiting, which put the pressure on Chris, as if Chris were in the wrong.

Back in 2006 comedian Michael Richards—Kramer from the show “Seinfeld”—flew into a rage during his comedy routine and blasted multiple people in the audience with the N-word. To issue a public apology for this, he thought it best to do so on “The Late Show” with David Letterman and Jerry Seinfeld. The audience kept laughing while Jerry expressed surprise that they did so. What a strange place and strange way to issue an apology. It was hard to tell if it were meant to be an actual apology or just another bit of his oddball comedy.

It’s easy to point to such absurd and even ridiculous apologies and even easier to overlook our own. How many times have you uttered an “I’m-sorry-if-I-hurt-you” apology? By the way, that’s not actually an apology. That’s a way to dodge the fact that you did, in fact, hurt someone. How many times have you received such an “apology”? When you’re on the receiving end of one you recognize just how noncommittal it really is. The problem with these celebrity apologies and even our own attempts at them is there is a crucial piece missing, and that piece is actually central to the Christian life.

We’re in Judges 2.

Jdgs 2:1 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, <sup>2</sup> 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? <sup>3</sup> 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.” <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.

Judges 2:1–5

## The Angel of the Lord

In verse 1 we read “the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim”. This seems a very straightforward historical statement. However, the author signals something profound. To understand what he’s saying we have to break down this sentence.

First, who is the angel of the LORD? When we hear the word “angel” we tend to think of tall dudes in dresses with wings, or fat babies with wings shooting heart-shaped arrows, or maybe John Travolta eating a bowl of cereal. The word angel simply means “messenger”, and there are all kinds of angels in Scripture.

When we encounter the angel of the LORD we often see this “Messenger” speaking not merely on God’s behalf, but *as God himself*. For example, when God told Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham proceeded to do so, believing that God could raise the dead. If Abraham were obedient, God must be able to raise the dead since his son Isaac was the one through whom the promises would be fulfilled. When God stopped him from doing so and provided a ram for sacrifice, the angel of the LORD appeared to him and spoke directly to him:

Gen 22:15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven <sup>16</sup> and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son...

Genesis 22:15–16

Who is speaking here? The angel of the LORD. *Who* is speaking here? YHWH, God of Israel. In the exodus from Egypt Moses tells us in Exodus 13 that the Lord himself went before them in the pillar of fire and smoke. When Pharaoh was chasing him, the pillar moved behind them, in between Israel and Pharaoh’s army, and Moses called the pillar “the angel of God” (Exodus 14:19). The angel of the Lord is God made visible to humans. We know the Spirit of God is spirit and therefore cannot be seen by human eyes. Jesus told us no human has ever seen the Father, save for Jesus. If the angel of the Lord is God himself, he must be the Son of God making himself visible before he became one of us and lived among us.

It should come as no surprise that God would appear like this to them. The entire point of the exodus from Egypt was the tabernacle, where God would dwell among his people. You might recall this quote from my sermon on Pentecost earlier this year. John Oswalt asks what the *structure* of the book of Exodus suggests the *purpose* of the exodus was:

The purpose of the exodus and of the Sinai covenant was the tabernacle! The purpose was that God might come down off the mountain and take up his residence in the Holy Place in the middle of the camp. This was what he had been aiming for ever since the sin of Adam and Eve had forced them from his presence in the Garden. The truth is that he does not so much want to walk with us as to walk within us.

John N. Oswalt, “Holiness: God’s Goal For Human Life”, JETS 66.2 (2023): 267–78

From the very beginning of human history God has desired to walk among his people. He has desired to be close to them—to dwell *within* them! He gave the law to Israel that they might be purified and made into a dwelling fit for a holy God. God knew he would have to remain at a distance, hence the tabernacle. They could experience his presence in the tabernacle while being protected from his holiness through the purification rituals in the law.

The Lord led them out of Egypt. He led them through the wilderness for 40 years. Under Joshua he led them into the land where Joshua took them on a whirlwind tour of it, defeating the major coalition forces everywhere they encountered them. Then, as we'll see next week, after defeating the central powers and authorities, each tribe was sent to its inheritance to occupy that land and to purify it of the altars and carved images the Canaanites possessed.

This removal of the religious furniture is what God meant by “devote them to destruction”. The Canaanites were to be in submission to the God of Israel in one particular way: they were to have their carved images and Asherah poles and their altars destroyed. They must not worship any other gods in the land YHWH God of Israel claimed for himself. This was never about the slaughter of people groups, but about ending idolatry in the land of YHWH. For this reason the angel of the LORD was with them. It was always about the presence and activity of God among his people.

In verse 1 the author says the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. Bochim is almost certainly Bethel. In the Septuagint—the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament—Bochim is identified as Bethel. The author is here making a significant statement. Israel began calling Bethel “Bochim” in verse 5. Bochim means “the place of weeping”. Hear what the author says: the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to the Place of Weeping.

What was Gilgal? Gilgal had been Joshua's base of operations. When Israel entered the land they initially set up at Gilgal, where the tabernacle was before being moved to Shiloh. At Gilgal Israel worshiped after entering into the land God promised them. At Gilgal Israel celebrate its very first Passover *in the land*. At Gilgal Israel set up twelve memorial stones indicating they renewed the covenant with God. The angel of the LORD left Gilgal to go to Bochim. The Lord left the place of Israel's covenant renewal and Israel's covenant faithfulness to go to the Place of Weeping.

## **You Shall Make No Covenants With Them**

At Bochim—at the Place of Weeping—the Lord speaks to the people of Israel. He reminds them what *he* did for them. *He* brought Israel up out of Egypt. *He* brought Israel into the land *he* promised them. *He* promised *he* would never break the covenant *he* made with them. God understood the entire time if he were to have a relationship with Israel, if he were to dwell among them—even at a distance in the tabernacle—he himself would have to make it happen. He did all these things in order to dwell among them as his people.

Because God is holy the land must be purified. This is why they were to eliminate idolatry from the land. In response to all that God had already done for Israel, he placed on them a requirement. They were to make no covenant with the people of the land. Instead, those people were to be declared *herem*. Israel would have no dealings with them. If a Canaanite would worship the Lord, he or she would be free to join Israel, and therefore

no longer be under the ban. Such converts would instead be full members of the covenant people. Apart from this Israel could not even engage in commerce with the people.

Further, they were to break down their altars. This was the purpose of *herem*. This is what it means to devote the people to destruction. It wasn't about destroying them as a people; it was about destroying their false religion. It was about removing idolatry from the land where God would dwell. All that God had done prior to this had been to dwell there with his people.

As we've seen, Israel struggled to drive them out of the land, whether it was Judah with the iron chariots or Manasseh with the persistent inhabitants of the land or Dan who was prevented from coming down to the plain by the Amorites. The people of Israel struggled with their more powerful enemies. But notice, this isn't why God is angry. He isn't angry that his people were too weak to deal with the Canaanites on their own. They were never going to be powerful enough on their own, which is why God said *he* would drive them out.

Further, he said very clearly he would not drive them out all at once. If he did, the land Israel couldn't occupy—simply due to numbers—would become overgrown with weeds and wild animals. Instead, God would drive them out little by little. God isn't angry that he has not yet driven them out. Had Israel engaged in battle in faith, he would have, for at this time they were simply trying to occupy their land. See carefully why God goes up from the place of covenant faithfulness to the Place of Weeping.

God said he would never break his covenant, and he said, "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?" God knew he had to take care of driving out of the people. Israel would not be able to do this. Israel was to respond to this in faith and refuse to make covenants with those who were still in the land and destroy their altars.

Again, the problem was not that they failed to fully defeat the Canaanites; God had already said he would drive them out slowly. That they were not able to do so quickly isn't the issue. The issue is they made covenants with them and allowed their altars to remain. Israel's response to God's covenant faithfulness was to be their own faithfulness to the covenant. This entailed not making further covenants with the Canaanites. This entailed destroying their altars.

We saw last week this was entirely within their power to do so, for they put the Canaanites to forced labor, which amounts to a treaty: "We'll allow you to remain as you are, so long as you provide the following goods and services". God is not angry because of what they could not do; God is angry with his people because they did not do what they were able to do. God is angry because they did not obey him in faith.

God's instructions were for their good. Through their obedience Israel would be protected. Through their faith God would keep them faithful. They refused to obey in this very simple matter, however. God declares they have not obeyed his voice and then asks, "What is this you have done?" God offered them what they wanted and they rejected him and sought his blessings elsewhere. Hear in this a rejection of God himself: "I'll take your stuff, but not you." How often do we want the blessings of God but not God himself?

The outcome of this is a change in God's approach. He says in verse 3 he will no longer drive out the Canaanites. Rather than push them out of the land, he will allow them to remain. Remember: driving them out was also his responsibility, even as it was Israel's responsibility to meet them in battle. God would take care of the outcome. Now, he says,

he will not drive them out. See the warning: “they shall become thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you”.

God knows the human propensity for idolatry. The nations around them worship false gods; Israel will be tempted to worship them as well. God is allowing that temptation to remain. The foundation of their relationship was always what God had done for them in rescuing them from Egypt and bringing them into the land. The ongoing nature of this relationship, however, is one in which the temptation to idolatry will define Israel.

## Repentance

Verse 4 tells us as soon as the angel—the Son of God—spoke these words to Israel, they lifted up their voices and wept. They called the name of that place “Bochim”—the Place of Weeping. It is clear they understood what the Lord was saying. They knew the victories would never be easy again. Life was about to become difficult. And yet, God would be with them! He promised this! But the road before them was about to get more difficult, for they refused to faithfully do the things he instructed them to do.

Hear this: they could still faithfully obey him. The Canaanites all across the land were still subject to forced labor. All Israel had to do was end their mistaken agreements and destroy their altars and chop down their Asherah poles and burn their carved images. That’s it. If they would do this, they would be faithful to the Lord. They could have committed right then and there to do the right thing. They could have resolved to renew the covenant and to enter into those now more difficult battles and destroy the religious furniture of the Canaanites. They had the power and authority over them to do this. What is it that they do, however?

Verse 5 says, “And they sacrificed there to the Lord.” This sounds like an appropriate response. Worship is always the right response to the Lord. He is always worthy of worship, regardless of the road we must travel, regardless of the hardships we must face, regardless of the level of material blessings we receive—or *don’t* receive.

I would suggest, however, Israel is not really worshiping. They are performing a religious ritual in order to secure blessings from God. In the ancient world, worship was about performing the right rituals in order to secure the desired outcome. Offering a sacrifice was a fairly non-committal way to *appease* God, not to *please* him. It’s as if Israel says collectively, “Okay, fine...just give him what he wants. Let’s sacrifice some animals. Whatever.” Remember: the only currency God accepts is faith—not religious rituals.

You might wonder why I say this about Israel. What gives me the idea their repentance was not true repentance? After all, there were tears and a sacrifice! When did tears and religious ritual ever indicate genuine repentance? Tears often come with genuine repentance but *the presence of tears* is not an indicator of godly sorrow for sin. After all Hebrews tells us about Esau giving away his birthright:

Heb 12:17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing,  
he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.  
Hebrews 12:17

Hebrews says Esau wept, seeking real, genuine repentance, yet could not find it. This is because his sorrow was for losing his birthright, not for his sin. So it is with Israel. They weep

and they sacrifice, but this is no genuine repentance. They call that place “Bochim”—the Place of Weeping—as if they were drawing attention to what they’re doing there: “Look at us! We’re *weeping!* See how genuine we are!” In the very next scene we’re told Israel abandons the Lord and served the Baals. If their tears were tears of genuine repentance, they would not have served the Baals so quickly after this.

When God led Israel into the land of Canaan under Joshua’s leadership, the purpose was to establish Israel in the land under the authority of YHWH God of Israel. As we’ve seen, the conquest was not about genocide. Israel did not slaughter entire people groups. Ancient Near Eastern warfare rhetoric was used to indicate overwhelming victory, but as we see in Deuteronomy 7, devoting the people to destruction was about destroying their altars and carved images. It was about eliminating idolatry in the land.

Israel were to establish themselves in the land with their own material culture. They were to build and plow and create. They were to get married and have children and do all the things people do, only they were to live in such a way that the God of Israel was honored and worshiped and glorified—and that no other god would be.

Israel failed to do this. They failed in the most basic premise of all: they were to trust in the Lord and were to avoid making covenants with those who worshiped other gods. They were to tear down their altars. If Israel’s tears and sacrifices at Bochim were real tears of repentance, they would have immediately begun tearing down the altars.

Genuine repentance is a change in behavior, not a change in demeanor. Real repentance is a change of behavior, not visible outward signs of contrition. Real repentance is not saying, “I’m sorry” but correcting the behavior for which you must repent. If you apologize to a person for something you said about him or her, real, genuine repentance is not doing it again. If you keep doing it, there is no real repentance. When you repent of idolatry, you stop bowing before idols. When you repent of immorality, you stop engaging in immoral behavior. When you repent of pride, you walk in humility. When you repent of lying or cheating or stealing, you stop doing those things and you make it right.

If a person “repents” but doesn’t change his or her behavior, that person is just Esau, whining because he lost his birthright. The sorrow is over what was lost, not who was offended. The concern is for himself, not for the Lord. That is not repentance. In both Hebrew and Greek the words for “repentance” means a turning, a change, a shift in direction. The idea is you were headed one way then changed to go another way. If there is no change in direction, no change in behavior, no change in outlook, there is no repentance. It doesn’t matter how many tears you cry. Real, genuine repentance is seen in a change in behavior.

## **The Place of Weeping**

Sometimes God changes his behavior. God himself never changes. He is the eternal, changeless One, the Unmoved Mover. He is who he is. How he interacts with people changes, but never without cause and never without warning. Just a few years prior to this when Joshua was still alive he gave them a warning about refusing to devote the people to destruction—that is, a warning about engaging in treaties and covenants with them and allowing their altars and carved images to remain.

Josh 23:12 For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, <sup>13</sup> 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.

Joshua 23:12–13

The people of Israel did not listen to Joshua’s warning. They did not heed his word. They began to associate with the Canaanites and made treaties with them as seen in the “forced labor” arrangements they enacted all over the land. They did not devote them to destruction but gladly participated with them. When God says he will no longer drive out the Canaanites, God hasn’t changed. The circumstances have changed, which means the way in which God interacts with his people has changed, but God remains true to his word—even when no one else will.

In this text God is clear: he will not drive out the Canaanites from the land. They will remain, which means their idolatry will remain. The purpose of the conquest was the removal of idolatry from the land, yet God now says he will no longer drive them out. Israel has refused to engage in the work of tearing down their altars and burning their carved images, though they were in a position to do so. Because of their unfaithfulness, God will allow the people of the land to remain in the land.

Quite often the worst thing God can do for you is give you what you want. Israel wanted what the Canaanites offered, rather than what God offered. Through these forced labor treaties they would receive material prosperity—the very material prosperity God offered them! Rather than receive it from God, they chose to seek it from the Canaanites, and God relented. You want life with the Canaanites? Fine. Live with the Canaanites!

This scene begins with the author declaring the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. It’s not until verse 5 that Israel calls Bethel Bochim. The author is indicating something more. The Lord went from the place of covenant faithfulness—that’s Gilgal—to the Place of Weeping. The Lord moves from the place where Israel declared *its own* covenant faithfulness to the Place of Weeping. At Gilgal Joshua led the people in the Passover celebration. This was Israel’s covenant-renewal meal. They built a memorial there with twelve stones. Each tribe gathered a stone from the Jordan River when they crossed over on dry ground into the land God promised them. The Lord moves from the place where Israel declares their faithfulness to the Place of Weeping.

This was the place Israel wept in a feigned display of repentance. They were truly filled with sorrow for God’s declaration that he would no longer give them overwhelming military victory. A measure of his blessing was being withheld from them, so they wept. They were not the only ones weeping, however, nor is this the only time the Lord would weep over his people.

Many years after this “the angel of the LORD” would come as one of his own people. The Son of God took on human form and walked the earth. In Luke 13 some Pharisees came to Jesus and warned him that Herod was angry and wanted to kill him. His reply basically meant, “Nah...I have a little more time yet.” He knew Herod was not ultimately in control of his life. He reminded them of the many prophets sent from God who were killed in or near

Jerusalem. Then he said this:

Lk 13:34 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Luke 13:34

Notice he says, “How *often* would I have gathered your children together”. He means this is not the first time he lamented over their sin and rebellion, their steadfast refusal to trust in him! Remember, “the angel of the Lord” is the Son of God before he took on human form. Jesus—the Son of God—is speaking to his people in Luke 13 *and* in Judges 2! Jesus went from Gilgal, where the people declared their covenant faithfulness, to the Place of Weeping. In Luke 13 he’s weeping over his people once again.

He longs to care for them and to protect them. He longs to drive out the idolatry from their hearts. He longs to purify for himself a people fit for his dwelling, but they were not willing, so he weeps. *Again*.

## God’s Faithfulness

I am struck by what is not in our text. There is something that is not said. God does not tell them he’s leaving them. He does not tell them his presence would be removed from them. Instead, the Canaanites would be allowed to remain in the land as a temptation for Israel—a snare for them. Their idolatry would remain in the land. Their altars and carved images they bow down to would remain in the land. And God himself would remain among his people.

Isn’t this remarkable? If God is going to dwell among his people, God himself must act to make it possible. Psalm 106 is interesting because it gives an account of Israel’s history, which is largely the history of its unfaithfulness. In verse 34 it gets to the point in which the people entered the land and covers the cycles of the time of the judges, but it quickly moves to how God remained among them.

Ps 106:34 They did not destroy the peoples, as the LORD commanded them,  
<sup>35</sup> but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did. <sup>36</sup> They served their idols, which became a snare to them. <sup>37</sup> They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; <sup>38</sup> they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood. <sup>39</sup> Thus they became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds.

<sup>40</sup> Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he abhorred his heritage; <sup>41</sup> he gave them into the hand of the nations, so that those who hated them ruled over them. <sup>42</sup> Their enemies oppressed them, and they were brought into subjection under their power. <sup>43</sup> Many times he delivered them, but they were rebellious in their purposes and were brought low through their iniquity.



<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress, when he heard their cry. <sup>45</sup> For their sake he remembered his covenant, and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

Psalm 106:34–44

If God is going to rescue Israel and if he is going to save his people, then God must be faithful for them, for on their own they will never be faithful. When he says he will never leave us nor forsake us, this promise must be rooted in himself, for his people will give him all the reasons in the world to leave them and forsake them. It is when he remembers *his covenant faithfulness* and he remembers *his promises* that he is motivated to act on their behalf. It is when he remembers the abundance of *his steadfast love* that he saves. In this we see the shadows of the King who is to come, the one who would save his people. We see the truth declared by the apostle Paul:

<sup>2</sup> Tim 2:13 ...if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

2 Timothy 2:13

God knew if his promises and his covenant were based on Israel and Israel's faithfulness, it would all fail. So instead God's promises are rooted in his character. They are rooted in who he is and what he does. How he interacts with them is affected by their behavior, yet God himself remains unchanged. This essential characteristic of God—his immutability—is what makes him reliable. There are four things Scripture says God cannot do.

The first is change. God cannot change. He is the Unmoved Mover. No one and no thing can move him—or stop him from moving. His essential nature never changes. Because of this God cannot grow weary. God is never tired. He is never worn out. He never gives up. This is why he is so reliable, so trustworthy. Third, Scripture says God cannot be tempted by evil. Because this is so, God cannot lie. These four things are not weaknesses in him, but instead reflect who he is.

God knows if he is going to save *you* and if he is going to save *me* he will have to do it—all of it. He knows what he is saving. He knows exactly what he's getting. The words of the apostle are still true:

Rom 5:6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—<sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6–8

While we were still sinners, still in open rebellion against him even if our actions were curtailed by our parents or society or even peer pressure, Christ died for us. That is, he did everything necessary for our life and salvation at the point in which we least deserved it. As Paul said two chapters prior to this in Romans, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for there is no one who is righteous. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, so Jesus steps in and lives for us and dies for us and through his resurrection saves us.

All of this is based entirely on God's faithfulness. As the apostle John wrote, if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us. He is faithful to forgive for he remains true to

his word, even when no one else will. Further, he is *just* to forgive us. That is, he is good and right in forgiving us for if you are in Christ, that sin has been fully satisfied at the cross. It is good and right for God to not hold it against you.

Five-hundred years ago Martin Luther wrote of a central part of the Christian life. It is actually Thesis 1 in his “Ninety-Five Theses”.

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed  
the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.  
Martin Luther, Thesis 1, “Ninety-Five Theses”

The reality of following Jesus is we will never grow past the point of needing to repent. It’s easy to think that if you’ve “conquered” the big ones, you know, sexual immorality and violence and such, that you’re now past the point of repentance. We overlook the lack of self-control when we cuss or the spirit of judgment we have or the constant grumbling, J-T, or the never-ending worry. Even when our lives look good on the outside, we know what is in our heart and what is in our heart demands a life of repentance.

The truth is the Christian life is a life of movement, only we must move from Bochim to Gilgal. We must move from the place where we weep over *consequences* to the place of true, covenant renewal. We must follow the Lord from Bochim back to faithfulness. Let’s commit to changing direction in order to follow Jesus.