

Introduction

The Baptist Church of Grand Rapids was launched in 1842, with an original membership of eighteen adults. This church was thoroughly orthodox and grew quickly. By 1857 its membership had grown to 130. Sadly, in 1857 it experienced a split, which appears to have been personality-driven rather than a theological conflict. Part of the ensuing conflict had to do with which group should keep the original pulpit Bible—you know, one of those great theological debates in church history.

Two years later, the rift was healed and the two churches rejoined. After another two years, however, a second split occurred. This one also lasted just two years before the churches rejoined. As the Baptist Church of Grand Rapids grew they built a large building downtown with sufficient seating for substantial growth. By 1885 this church had grown to 800 members. The lead elder of that church, a man named Samuel Graves, was thoroughly orthodox. The church observed the sacraments and practiced discipline. Sadly, he left the church over a salary dispute that same year.

In 1890 the church called a man named John Jackson to serve as pastor. He had been trained in a theologically liberal seminary. In a message he said this:

We ought not to give the impression to young men entering the Baptist ministry that our position upon any of the great doctrines has been finally stated, and that hereafter there could be no appeal from the decisions of the past.

John L. Jackson, 1894, to the Baptist Theological Union at the University of Chicago

He's saying there is no absolute truth that defines Christianity. The creeds and the councils are not final. They are not authoritative. This was a sudden shift from orthodoxy, but it was not the biggest shift. After Jackson left the church in 1896, the church called a man named J. Herman Randall. Randall convinced the church that orthodoxy was a thing of the past. Science and human reason determined that, quote, "there are no final statements in theology". In other words, you do you, boo. Believe what you will.

That "church" still exists today as Fountain Street Church, though it makes no claims whatsoever to be Christian. Their website states:

We, the congregation of Fountain Street Church, create a community that is intentionally welcoming to all. We do this without requiring adherence to any religious belief or creed.

<https://www.fountainstreet.org/vision-and-mission>, "Inclusion"

How does an orthodox church leave the orthodox faith in *just six years*? The answer is simple: they forgot. In their case, they willingly forgot. They intentionally forgot. They,

with purpose, chose to not remember God as he has revealed himself and chose to believe what they want to believe. The truth is any Christian church is only a generation away from complete apostasy—but *there's hope*. We're in Judges 2.

Jdgs 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.

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.

Judges 2:6–23

Flashback

The book of Judges is not written in strictly chronological order. If you read it in a linear fashion and simply add up the years, there is no way the events can fit into known history. For example, Othniel is the first named judge and he was a judge for 40 years. Then Ehud was a judge and chapter 3 says “the land had rest for 80 years”. This is not a period of 120 years. There is significant overlap and the judges were local or even regional, not national.

Our text this morning is a flashback. The book begins with the words, “After the death of Joshua” and then recounts the various tribes’ failure to subdue the territories they were given. Then chapter 2 begins with a word from the Lord: because of Israel’s refusal to obey him he will not drive out the Canaanites. Any astute reader would immediately begin asking questions. In Joshua 21 we read a very triumphant description of the conquest of Canaan.

Josh 21:43 Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. ⁴⁴ And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵ Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

Joshua 21:43–45

How do we get from “not one of their enemies had withstood them” to Judges 1 with its apparent failures all across the land? The author recognizes the seeming disconnect so in verses 6–10 he says, essentially, “Okay, so how did we get here?” At the end of verse 5 God has told Israel he will not drive out the Canaanites. Because Israel disobeyed him by making treaties with the Canaanites and refusing to tear down their altars and burn their carved images, God would allow them to remain in the land. This is actually an opportunity for Israel to prove its faithfulness by doing what they should have done all along. Instead they weep and wail.

Flashback. *How did we even get here?* When Joshua was still alive and dismissed the people, each tribe went to its inheritance. The book of Joshua details two major campaigns. They entered the land and defeated the fortress at Jericho, then got whooped at Ai before being given victory over that smaller fortress. Then the entire nation—all twelve tribes—embark on a campaign through Southern Canaan. They had overwhelming victory for the Lord was fighting for them. Then they returned to their base of operations at Gilgal.

In Joshua 11 Jabin, king of Hazor, heard of Israel’s victory in the south and gathered together a massive coalition of armies. The Lord told Joshua to not be afraid of this massive army—described by Joshua as “a great horde, in number like the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots”. This was a sophisticated and technologically superior army. There is no way on earth Israel could defeat them. Fortunately, God is not limited to what is on earth. He gave Israel overwhelming victory over this northern coalition.

Essentially, Joshua’s claim that the Lord had given Israel victory over all its enemies was true, for he was referring to the major kings and major armies in the land. After defeating the major forces in the south they defeated the major forces in the north. After this the Lord tells Joshua there is still land to claim and enemies to defeat, but he must divide the

land and grant to the tribes their inheritances. God acknowledges there are still battles to be fought but assures Joshua, “I myself will drive them out from before the people of Israel” (Joshua 13:6). The rest of the book of Joshua is about dividing the land among the tribes, knowing they will have to go to their new tribal lands and fight the battles placed before them.

End of flashback. Remember how Judges begins. After the death of Joshua the people inquire of the Lord asking who should lead them in battle. Verse 6 is a flashback to the time Joshua sent them to their allotted territories. Joshua dies and we get to Judges 1 with Israel’s constant failure to obey the Lord fully.

It’s important to see that during Joshua’s lifetime and the handful of years after his death the people of Israel remain generally faithful to the Lord. That is, they do not worship false gods. However, Verse 10 is striking. The author says a new generation arose that did not know the Lord or the work he had done for them.

How is it that a generation arises so quickly that does not know the Lord? When the author says they didn’t know “the work that he had done for Israel” he doesn’t mean they don’t know the facts. They know their history. Their parents and grandparents *lived* that history. That new generation had known people who walked through the Dead Sea on dry ground and ate manna in the wilderness and saw the overwhelming victories under Joshua. That generation, however, practiced incomplete obedience. As we will see, the move from incomplete obedience to complete disobedience is not that large.

The People Did Evil

Whereas Joshua’s generation practiced incomplete obedience, the next generation made that small move. In verse 11 the author says “the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals”. It’s interesting what God thinks is evil. There are many who often ask why God, if he is all-powerful, does not stop evil in the world. What they mean by this is evil such as war and natural disasters and human trafficking. They mean the larger, national and international evils that bring great destruction. While these physical and moral evils are truly evil, rarely do people ask why God doesn’t destroy the evil that is idolatry.

The evil committed by the people of Israel is this: they served the Baals. There weren’t multiple gods named Baal. This is a title for the storm god. The Baals simply refers to various cultures’ iteration of the storm god. The storm god was believed to be responsible for the rain, and therefore bountiful crops and lush pasture for flocks and herds. If you appeased Baal, he would send the rain and the land would soon *flow with milk and honey*. Further, they worshiped Ashtoreth, the fertility goddess who was often worshiped with Baal.

Think of the evil this is. It is a complete and wholesale rejection of the Lord. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtoroth, which is the plural form of Ashtoreth. Baal and Ashtoreth were fertility gods, but remember what the LORD had promised Israel! He told them in Deuteronomy 7 if they will keep his rules and obey him, he would bless them and bless their wombs and cause their crops and flocks and herds to overflow. He would drive away sickness from the land.

The Lord offers to them all things they desire most. The problem is they were supposed to desire him the most. When they enter the land and God begins giving these things, the

new generation abandons him and seeks these very things from the Baals and the Ashtoroth. God calls this what it is: evil. They abandoned the one who brought them out of Egypt. They abandoned the one who gave them the land. They abandoned the one who would give them their hearts' desires.

The outcome is surprising, but not entirely unexpected. God's blessings for Israel were contingent on their faithfulness to him. He said, "*Because* you listen to these rules and keep and do them" he will bring about these blessings. In verse 14 we read a surprising and shocking, but again, not unexpected, reversal: the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel and he gave them over to plunderers.

Israel had been enslaved in Egypt. When they left Egypt, they asked the Egyptians for things and they received gold and silver and clothing. They left Egypt incredibly wealthy. When God blesses them further and they take the land of Canaan, rather than live faithfully for him and to him, they seek more of the very things God offered to give them, but through themselves and their efforts rather than through the Lord and his faithfulness.

A God like YHWH God of Israel cannot be controlled or manipulated. The Baals and the Ashtoroth could be—or at least, the people believed they could be. The truth is Baal didn't demand a whole lot. Just offer the right sacrifice and boom! You get rain. Rain causes the grass and flowers to grow. Flocks and herds eat the grass, causing them to flow with milk. The flowers feed bees which causes the honey to flow. Just like that you, through *your* actions, *you* have caused the land "to flow with milk and honey". Go you!

Rather than receive these gifts from the Lord's hand, they reject him, showing the repentance on display in verses 4-5 was not genuine. Daniel Block explains.

Indeed, if their remorse over their sin and been genuine, Israelite history would have taken a completely different course, the events described in the rest of the book would never have happened, and the Book of Judges would never have been written.

Daniel I. Block, NAC

The outcome of their rebellion against God is a complete reversal. Those who once plundered Egypt were now being plundered. While God offered them material prosperity, they sought that same material prosperity through disobedience to God and then God took it back from them. Israel's power was being stripped away, and that power was never their power. It was the Lord who fought for them, as he had promised.

In verse 15 we read that when they did engage in battle, not only did the Lord not fight *for* them, he actively fought *against* them. "The hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them."

Judges

It's not hard to see why so many find this book depressing. How quickly the people moved from incomplete obedience to complete disobedience. How quickly they moved from serving the Lord to serving the Baals. How quickly they turned from being the oppressed who received reparations in the form of payment for many years of slavery to being the oppressors who exacted a heavy tax and then back to being the oppressed. Israel began with God

fighting for them and now we find God fighting against them. And yet...Judges is a book filled with hope.

You are probably wondering what in the world I'm talking about! In response to this ugliness, this rebellion, this turning away from the Lord and a wholesale embrace of idolatry, God acts. In response to Israel's active betrayal and abandonment, we come to verse 16.

Jdgs 2:16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.
Judges 2:16

The question that immediately comes to mind is why. Why would God raise up judges to rescue Israel from their self-imposed suffering? All they had to do was faithfully obey the Lord. It is their refusal to do so that has led them into this mess. Why would God rescue them? The answer is quite simple: God remains true to his word, even when no one else will.

To rescue them he raises up "judges". These judges did not have judicial functions. Rather, a judge is one who imposes justice, who enforces what is good and right. Do you see God's mercy in this? Do you see his grace? Do you see his gospel, the good news of who he is and what he does? When we see the evil they commit, we don't tend to think justice is rescuing them, but we're not God. God made a promise to Abraham and to keep his promise God must act, for "his people" cannot be relied on to do the right thing.

These judges are military leaders who lead citizen-warriors into battle and defeat those who oppress Israel. This oppression is local and regional—not national. A judge rescues a part of the land. Another judge rescues another part of the land. In verse 18 we read whenever the Lord raised up a judge, *he was with the judge* and the judge, acting on behalf of Israel, was given victory and he brings justice to the land by restoring Israel.

This was only a temporary restoration, for the Lord remains true to his word, even when no one else will. God told them what would happen if there were not careful to obey him. Verse 19 says whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than those who came before. In verse 17 the author calls this whoring. Israel would not listen to their judges, their rescuers, "for they whored after other gods". They prostituted themselves. God claimed them as his people and they immediately strayed from their covenant obligations. When God keeps his word and allows them to be plundered and made subject to the Canaanites, he nevertheless has pity when he hears their groaning. When he acts on their behalf, "They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways." Israel was a married prostitute.

What we see in this is the judges pointed the people to the Lord. They were from within the people of Israel yet they showed Israel's need for a real deliverer, a rescuer, a *Savior*. Israel needed a King who would do for them what they would not and could not do. They needed someone to be faithful for them. The judges were to be those people. God was with the judge and while his hand was against the nation his hand was with the judge and through the judge, the one acting on Israel's behalf, God rescued Israel. As we'll see, the judges were to be those who reflected the glory of the coming King, yet were, at best, mere shadows of the King.

The act of raising up judges to rescue Israel was a great mercy from God, not only for the rescue they provided. Not a single generation was left without a witness to God's

faithfulness. Every time God raised up a judge he was telling Israel, “I will remain true to my word, even when no one else will”. Part of being true to his word was to allow the nations to oppress them, for the promises of blessing were contingent on their obedience. He warned them repeatedly about the consequences of breaking the covenant, and he demonstrated his own faithfulness to that same covenant.

Each judge he raised up was a witness to his faithfulness. When they abandoned the Lord, he gave them over to plunderers. When they cried out for rescue, he raised up a rescuer. When the judge died, they returned to their old ways, the very ways that led to their distress. When they cried out again, God was faithful. *Again*. Even though verse 19 says, “They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways”, God showed again and again that he would not cease to be faithful.

Memory Loss

The question that keeps swirling around my mind is how this could happen, and happen so quickly. How can the people with such a profound experience of God’s power so quickly turn from the Lord to bow down to idols carved out of wood and stone? How could they so quickly turn away from the blessings and promises to seek those same things on their own and therefore without the one who so clearly demonstrated his power and willingness to give them? Israel experienced a profound memory loss. African scholar Tokunboh Adeyemo explains.

After presenting the visit from the angel of the Lord, the author steps back in history in order to sketch the spiritual point of departure from the covenant. He identifies the problem as stemming from a failure to pass the faith on from one generation to the next. Joshua’s generation knew God, saw his mighty acts both in Egypt and in the wilderness and, though not perfect, they generally served him. The next generation was the exact opposite. It was characterized by ignorance of God and of what he had done for Israel in the past. Clearly Joshua’s generation had failed to discipline and mentor their children as commanded by the Lord.

Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*

In the wilderness prior to entering the land, Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy, which was largely a restatement of the law. In it he gave them instructions—and warnings—about being the people of God. He told them they were to teach their children about the Lord. He wrote this:

Deut 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Deuteronomy 6:4–7

Moses does not have in mind here a formal class, teaching them history and theology. His concern is not the passing on of *information*, as if having the right knowledge equaled faithfulness. The entire point about speaking of the things of the Lord “when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” is that they were living out their faith. To love the Lord your God is to walk faithfully with him. Yes, you should teach your children the truth of God, but even more, you should demonstrate what faithfulness to him looks like.

That is, your life—whether you’re a parent or not—must be one of faithfulness, thus passing on the faith to the next generation. If your life is one of incomplete obedience to the Lord, there’s only a small step to complete disobedience. They are not that far apart. The sort of teaching Moses has in mind here is that of faithful obedience. *Demonstrate* the truth of God to those around you. *Show them* God is worthy of worship. *Illustrate* for them what life under God’s reign is like.

Notice closely Moses declares who God is. Israel’s central confession of faith is known as the “Shema”, from the Hebrew word for “hear”: “Hear O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH is one”. The central claim of the faith of the people of Israel is there is only one God, and he has revealed himself to his people. This is implicitly a claim *against* all other gods. If YHWH is God, and YHWH is one, Baal cannot be. If YHWH is God, Ashtoreth cannot be. If YHWH is God, Molech cannot be. If YHWH is God, Asherah cannot be. If YHWH is God, Anath and Dagon and Mot and Baal-zebub and Ra and all the other gods cannot be.

What flows out of this central claim is what Israel forgot: they were to love YHWH their God with all their heart and soul and might. This is what they were to teach their children! Love is seen in action, not merely in words. Last week we saw that repentance is a change in behavior, not a change in demeanor. You can say all day long that you love the Lord, but if your *life* doesn’t show this, your words are meaningless.

Application

When we consider a text like this, the hope it offers may not be readily apparent. It’s far too easy to see the unfaithfulness of the Israelites and spiral into a spiritual depression, yet this text is filled with hope. Despite Israel’s evil, God raised up judges to rescue them. Despite Israel whoring after other gods, the Lord remained faithful to them. Despite Israel abandoning the Lord, he remembered his covenant *and disciplined* his people.

It seems pretty apparent to us that the Lord should have abandoned Israel. He should have just started over. The author of the book of Hebrews, however, tells us the Lord disciplines those he loves.

Heb 12:6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Hebrews 12:6–8

If God had not given them over to plunderers, if he had not given them into the hand of their enemies, if he had not set his hand against them in battle, he would not have treated his people as his sons, and he would have been unfaithful to his covenant! It is because he is true to his word that he did these things, for God disciplines those he loves.

Hear the hope in this. Hear the promise in this. God's discipline is the very same discipline a father gives—it is a gift!—to his children. This discipline was meant to teach Israel a profound truth: bowing to the idols of the people would not make the people their friends.

Israel embraced the gods of the Canaanites, yet the Canaanites still hated them. Though Israel worshiped the same gods, the people still sought to oppress them and plunder them and devour them. Bowing to the idols of the culture will not make the culture love you. It is precisely because Israel's primary confession denied all other gods that the nations hated them, even when Israel strayed from the truth of its confession.

There is only one God. This means all other gods are false. To confess YHWH is God and YHWH is one is to deny the existence of all other gods. To also bow down to those other gods does not erase the offense. The nations recognized the hypocrisy in this and still hated the Israelites.

As Christians—those who worship the God of Israel—our central confession is “Jesus is Lord”. The Jews in the first century mostly read the Greek Old Testament. In the Septuagint the Shema was translated with “Lord” rather than “YHWH”. Hear O Israel, *the Lord our God*, the Lord is one. The word order in Greek is “Lord is Jesus”—YHWH is Jesus.

Jesus is Lord—and therefore Caesar is not. If Jesus is Lord then a political party is not. If Jesus is Lord then a political candidate is not. If Jesus is Lord then money and pleasure and reputation and possessions cannot be. Our confession that Jesus is Lord is an implicit claim against all other gods, all other idols, all other things that capture our hearts and desires.

This is the faith we must pass on to others. This is the faith we must pass on to the next generation. We do not pass it on merely by teaching doctrine and theology and history. We pass on the faith we received by living it. God is calling each one of us to take the land he has given us, to take every square inch of our lives and devote that land to him and to his glory. If we refuse to confront our sins and live in faithful repentance, living so as to show Jesus is Lord, a new generation will arise that does not know the Lord or all that he has done for us. By living in repentance and faithful obedience we will remind ourselves again and again of God's faithfulness to us. Daniel Block said it well.

When people lose sight of God's grace, they lose sight of God and the sense of any obligation to him. All that follows in the book is a consequence of Israel's loss of memory.

Daniel I. Block, NAC

Each one of us has idols we bow down to. We may not know what they are, and God may well discipline us, but remember, this is God's mercy and grace! When I'm at Meijer and see a six-year-old melt down because Mama said no to a candy bar, I don't intervene and discipline that child: he's not my kid! God disciplines those he loves, and it is this discipline that gives us hope, for if we are his children, he will never abandon us. It is this grace we must never lose sight of, for it is this grace that enables us to walk with him.

Let us remember the gap between incomplete obedience and complete disobedience is not that large. Church, let us never forget. Let us never fail to understand we need someone to be faithful for us. We need someone to go before us in battle, one who will do for us what we would not and cannot do. We need Jesus. When we remember him and look to him and trust him, he is right there in the thick of it with us, being faithful enough for both of us, and it is his divine power at work in us that causes us to become faithful as well.