

A Damning Report Card

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[0 : 00] While you remain standing, I'll pray, Father, please help us to understand your word today and please be at work in us by your spirit that our lives might be shaped appropriately in response.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, I want to begin this Bible talk with some snippets, actually, from an online article.

And the author had found himself listening randomly to a program discussing interfaith marriage. And during the conversation, one of the religious leaders on the panel made the point that in such marriages it was critical, in fact, he said, undeniably essential that the couple pick one faith into which they will raise their child.

Now, our author was stunned. He looked to others in the panel to perhaps refute all of this, but none did. All agreed. All agreed that you ought not to confuse your kids by trying to raise them in two religions.

Anyway, our author was very offended at this. It provided a springboard for him to talk about faith. And he was of the view that kids ought to be raised across a broad spectrum of religions.

[1 : 18] Then he confessed, I think with a little tongue in cheek, that he's committed to staying with one woman. But he draws the line at drinking one kind of beer, sticking with the same pizza toppings, attending one religious group.

He says to his readers, I'm a spiritual guy who likes variety. And then he claims that most people in the world are willing to grant God a little larger living space than one book or one building.

Friends, I think he represents the spirit of the Western world. We live in a world filled with deities. We live in a world of multiple choice gods and goddesses.

Some look religious. Some don't look religious, but are in fact very deeply religious. And we are supposed to choose from them. None are wrong, we're told.

All are okay. That is our world. Friends, let me tell you that that is also the world of the book of Judges. The deities vying for supremacy there are a lot more evident than some of the world.

[2 : 29] Of ours are today. They were often, you see the Israelites are often, and the people of the world are often mixed and matched their worshippers. Sorry, the gods were often mixed and matched by their worshippers in just the same way as our author suggests.

What's more, the Israelites were often tempted to mix and match deities like everyone in their surrounding culture. And it's that situation that God addresses in Judges.

And what's more, the chapter that we look at today will give some advice from God as to how we too can approach such a context. So I think this chapter is incredibly relevant for our world today.

Not only does it address an ancient world with its ancient problems, but it addresses our world with its very contemporary problems. And through it, God is addressing us. So let's see what he's got to say to us today.

Now, before we get underway, I need to give you some important background information. So please open your Bibles. And there's a little bit of Bible flipping before we finally arrive in Judges chapter 2.

[3 : 36] And if you're looking in your Bibles, I want you to find Exodus chapter 20. I don't have a page number, but it's not rocket science. You start at Genesis, next book's Exodus, and then you just go to chapter 20.

Now, let me set the context for you. God has just rescued his people out of Egypt. And in these chapters, chapters 20 to 24 of Exodus, he makes a covenant with them. In other words, what he does is he formalizes his relationship with Israel.

He will be their God. They will be his people. And as far as Israel is concerned, the guiding principles for them will be God's law.

And that law finds its most fundamental expression in the 10 words, which are outlined in chapter 20. Critical within those 10 words are the first two.

You might like to have a look at them. Chapter 20, the first few verses, in which God says, Israel is to have him exclusively as their God. They are to have no other gods but him.

[4 : 38] What's more, they are not to make any images of him. So that's the first passage. The second passage occurs within that covenant making set of chapters.

And it's in Exodus chapter 23, verses 20 to 33. But it's also taken up again in chapter 34. And it's 34 that I'd like you to have a look at. Have a look at chapter 34.

And I'm going to read for us between verses 10 to 14. So Exodus 34, verses 10 to 14. I want you to listen very carefully to what God says.

For it sets the agenda for God's people in the land that God gives them. In one sense, it sets the agenda for the whole of the books of Joshua and Judges. Here is what is said.

Verse 10. I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people, I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you.

[5 : 39] Obey what I command you today. I will drive out the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you.

Break down their altars. Smash their sacred stones. Cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other God, for the Lord whose name is Jealous is a Jealous God. Can you hear it?

Life in the land is to be one of exclusive relationship with God, and anything that prohibits adherence to God and allegiance to Him is to be got rid of.

When Israel lives like this, God will be for His people, and He will continue to do great wonders just as He did in Egypt. So it's the second set of passages.

Now look at the second set of passages, which is from Joshua 23 to 24. So keep flipping in your Bibles, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua. In Joshua, Israel, at the end of Joshua at least, Israel has taken possession of the land.

[6 : 48] However, there is still some work to do in terms of fulfilling God's charter of ridding the land of the nations who don't worship the Lord. So Joshua therefore charges them to keep the task set by God back in Exodus, and He warns them that if they don't, God's anger will burn against them.

They will quickly perish from the good land that God gave them. And just as Israel signed up in Exodus, so they sign up in Joshua 24.

Look at it, Joshua 24, verse 24. When God gave His law in Exodus, they said, whatever the Lord says, we will do.

Two, three, four times they said it. Now they say something similar. We will serve the Lord our God and obey Him. It's uncategorical. And the final passage we want to look at is the one we looked at last, a couple of weeks ago, Judges 1.

Have a look at it, flip over. Perhaps you remember what happened in Judges 1. We got a summary of what happened after Joshua. And we saw it from a whole land perspective.

[7 : 58] And the first half of chapter 1 looked like a success story. The second half, we noted, wasn't so good. Because the second half of Joshua 1 stressed remaining pockets of Canaanites living in the land and living among the people of God.

Israel, you see, failed to oust the occupants of the land. Therefore, threats to Israel's future as God set apart people, remain in the land. So that done, we're now going to turn to Judges 2.

So please turn to it with me. Judges 2, verses 1-5 provides a hinge between chapter 1 and chapter 2.

And it ties the two chapters together. And you'll see how in a moment. The first thing that happens is we meet someone called the angel of the Lord. Now, the Hebrew word for angel, like the Greek word for angel, is probably best translated messenger.

And this messenger of the Lord is often so closely linked with the Lord himself that you can talk about his messenger in the same way as you talk about him, which explains what's going to happen. Effectively, though, the messenger of the Lord is God's representative bringing God's message.

[9 : 06] So let's see what God has to say. Now, we've already had a hint. You can see a hint in chapter 1 that it's not going to be good. Because in the first half of the verse, we're told that this messenger of God goes up.

Now, if you'd read chapter 1, you know that going up means going up to wage war. And so you get a bit worried when the messenger of the Lord is going up because you think, well, maybe he's got some nasty things to say to the people of God.

So it's probably not a good message. And let me tell you, it's not. Look at what he says. I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land I swore to give your ancestors. I said, I will never break my covenant with you.

And you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars. You remember that from Exodus? Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?

And I have also said, I will not drive them out before you. They will become traps for you and their gods will become snares for you or to you. This, I think, summarizes Exodus through to Joshua.

[10 : 09] God made a covenant. It had obligations on both sides. God didn't break his side. Israel definitely broke their side. Therefore, just as God had said previously, failure would have consequences.

The consequences in this case would be that the Canaanites would be twofold. First, God would cease acting on Israel's behalf against the Canaanites and would not drive them out of the land.

And second, their remaining presence in the land would accomplish what God had warned about in Exodus 34. They would become possible traps and their gods would become snares.

So that's the message. Now look at verses 4 and 5. The people respond to this disastrous proclamation. They weep aloud, thereby indicating their failure, recognizing that what God has said is true.

And then they offer sacrifices to the Lord, indicating they still want to live with him and before him. However, friends, we need to understand what's going on here. Israel had readily signed up to a covenant with God.

[11:18] That covenant explicitly prohibited other gods being the part of Israel's existence. However, when Israel goes out as they have in the previous chapter and they make covenants with other people, what are they doing?

They're accepting those people as they come. And how do they come? They come with their gods. That is totally unacceptable to God.

He will have no competitors for Israel's affections within the land he has given them. And that's the context for our passage. Let's have a quick look at the content. Chapter 2, you see, complements chapter 1.

What happened in chapter 1 is we got concrete examples of what happened after Joshua died. And therefore, chapter 1, and you might remember having mercy, you know, pitying the person who had to read the passage when we read it a couple of weeks ago, because it was filled with names and places, wasn't it?

Complicated names and places. Well, chapter 2 is not like that. Chapter 2 gives us a big picture. It's much more panoramic. And so because of this, I thought, since I've been on holidays recently, I'll give you an example.

[12:26] In our last holidays, in the end of June, beginning of July or end of June, we travelled to the Flinders Ranges. And I had no shortage of advice before we went as to the best places to go.

And anyway, in our first week or so, we travelled up and down the ranges and we looked at the detail. So we saw named rivers and creeks. We saw where specific people had lived and eked out an existence there many, many years ago.

We saw, we looked at rocks with fossils in them. You know, we saw all the detail down on the ground. And that looks like Judges 1, okay, looking at the detail, seeing it at grassroots.

And then just before we left, we decided to climb St. Mary's Peak, the highest peak in the Flinders Ranges. And when we got to the top, we could see 180 degrees.

It was spectacular. It was an incredible view just because of the nature of the Flinders Ranges. And as we looked, all the detail that we'd been travelling through fell into place.

[13:36] We understood where things were, how things functioned, where we had been and how it all hung together. We could see how everything fitted into place. And that is the view from Judges 2.

It is panorama, big picture. So if that's the case, what does chapter 2 say? What is the big picture that is going on in the book of Judges? Well, look at Judges 2, 6 to 10.

Chapter 1 told us Israel's exploits were military. They conquered various groups. They allowed Canaanites to live in the land among them. Those are the details. But verses 6 to 10 tell us that the exploits of Israel in the land weren't just military.

They were idolatrous. Oh, sure. The first generation under Joshua, they looked okay. But look at verse 10. Verse 7 tells us they served the Lord throughout the time of Joshua.

But look at verse 10. It introduces us to the second generation in the land. And here's a summary of that generation. Another generation grew up who neither knew the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

[14:41] This generation, you see, was a totally different kettle of fish. They knew not the Lord. They knew not what he'd done for Israel. And then verses 11 to 15 introduce us to more of this generation.

It conveys, it surveys the exploits they had in idolatry. Look and listen to what's said. Summarises a generation that is going to be the focus of the whole of the book of Judges.

They are a generation, here's a summary of all of Judges, who did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They are a generation who served the Baals. They forsook God, the Lord, the God of their ancestors who brought them out of Egypt.

They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them. I want you to notice there's actually some repetition in these verses. See if you can spot it. Verse 11. We're told that Israel served the Baals and that they forsook the Lord.

Now, look at the end. Verse 13 of this little section. This generation, can you see it? Forsook and served the Baals. You've reversed the order, but you've said the same thing.

[15:46] This is a nation, a generation that is characterized by two things. Forsaking the Lord, serving Baal. And in verses 14 and 15, we see where all of this leads.

It leads to the arousal of God's anger. Instead of giving the land and its people into Israel's hand. Do you know what he does? He gives Israel into the hands of the foreign nations.

And those nations plunder Israel. The Lord sold this generation into the hands of their enemies. At every corner, whenever they went out to fight, this generation met the hand of the Lord against them, where they should have had the hand of the Lord with them.

But because of their idolatry, he was against them. As he had sworn to them, he set himself against them. Exodus said God had warned in Exodus.

That's what he would do. They did evil against him. Verse 11. But he does harm to them. And it's the same Hebrew word in verse 15. So what's the overall result?

[16:56] It's there in verse 15. Can you see it? It is great distress. Friends, these verses open up for us a pattern that we'll observe time and time and time again in Judges.

With a background of God's elective grace. We see the response of sin and apostasy among his people. Here are the elements.

Look at them. Element one. God is gracious. He's rescued them. Israel responds in sin and apostasy. God then delivers Israel into the hands of their enemies.

Israel then responds in great distress. Now look at verses 16 to 18. It introduces a fifth element. The fifth element is that God incredibly responds to Israel's sin with grace.

He's punished them but verse 18 says he relents because of the groaning and suffering of his people. In his mercy and relenting he raises up for them Judges.

[18:02] The sixth element. And through Judges he saves his people. However it avails little. Look at verses 17 and 19. In 17 we're told that the people don't listen to the Judges.

They prostitute themselves to other gods. Verse 19 we're told that when the judge dies they return to ways even more corrupt than they were before the judge. They refuse to give up their evil practices and their stubborn ways.

They become increasingly corrupt. Now look at verses 20 to 23. They tell us why the promise of full possession of the land is not fulfilled. Friends have you ever wondered that?

Have you ever read the book? You know if you started off at Genesis you've worked your way through. And if you've made it through Leviticus and Numbers. Then it gets a little more interesting again. Because you get the narrative resuming.

And you get there and you think hang on a moment. I thought God promised them the land. Why haven't they got full possession of it? And this verse tells us.

[19:01] The reason? Israel broke their side of the covenant. They violated it. God had continued to be for them. He hadn't stopped. But they had not continued to be for him.

And so God leaves his people in the land. This people, the Canaanites, in the land. Both as punishment and test. Punishment because they haven't kept covenant. Test to see if they will keep covenant.

And walk in the way of the Lord. Now let's move to the first six verses of chapter 3. They explain more fully the nature of the test before Israel. First, God lists the nations that are going to be there and reside there.

Second, an additional element is added to the note of punishment and test. These nations, you see, present in the land will provide a little fringe benefit.

They will teach and train future generations for war. However, although it's a fringe benefit, it's not the fundamental purpose for leaving the nations there. Look at verse 4. It gives the fundamental purpose for God's test in leaving the nations.

[20 : 04] They are left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's command, which he'd given to his ancestors through Moses. So, friends, that is the panoramic view offered in Judges 2.

That is the big picture of this second generation and the generations that followed it. It is not pretty. The book of Judges is in many ways an ugly book, a not pretty book.

However, its stories will teach and train us how to serve the Lord. They will also open up to us the character of the God we know and love in and through Jesus.

However, before standing back and reflecting on what we've seen, I want to briefly just look at verse 23 of chapter 2. Let me read it to you again. It reads, the Lord had allowed these nations to remain.

That is prior to what's being said here. He did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua. Now, as you read these verses in the light of the chapter, what do they imply?

[21 : 11] First, they're said in the past tense. The Lord had allowed the nations to remain. And second, the material we've looked at between 2.6 and 3.6 implies the ongoing presence of nations in the land is connected with Israelite sin.

In other words, I myself wonder whether Joshua's generation is really that different to the generation that follows them. After all, why is it, let me ask, that the generation that follows Joshua did not know the Lord?

Why would it be? Why did they not know what he had done for Israel?

Well, at least part of the answer is the parents hadn't done what God had commanded them to do. That they hadn't educated the next generation. A common fault throughout Israel's history.

However, perhaps there's also a little hint here that they really were made of the same stuff as the generations that preceded them and that will succeed them. Perhaps they too were sinful.

[22 : 17] Perhaps they too were made of the same stuff. Let's briefly tie all of this together just to wrap things up. I want to pick out some big ideas from this passage. The first big idea is that of no other gods.

Friends, our author is at the beginning. Sorry, it is. Sorry, our author right at the beginning of that article, that online article I wrote is, I think, an ancient Israelite in disguise.

Okay? He openly declares himself to have Christian inclinations, but he also wants diversity. God will have nothing of this.

The first commandment is crystal clear. And it's first for a reason. Israel is to have no other gods. They are not to explore other deities.

He is to have their exclusive allegiance. Friends, please listen. It doesn't matter whether you're an ancient Jew or a contemporary Christian. You are to have no other gods.

[23 : 30] In a world of deities, we Christians often want to mix and match just like our spiritual ancestors wanted to. That's why the New Testament constantly says, keep yourself from idols.

Idolatry can have many forms. It can mean trying to worship two or more deities. That is, mixing and matching Christian faith with another faith. But it can also mean corrupting Christian faith with foreign elements that come from other faiths.

We see this when individuals think they can be Christian and yet live non-Christian lifestyles. Or when churches think they can have the label Christian outside, but as soon as you come inside, their means and their methods are just like the world in terms of how they run their ministry.

Friends, God's answer is no. You shall have no other gods but me. And you shall not make for yourself a graven image, an idol.

Friends, keep yourself from idolatry. Idolatry can only end up in facing God's anger. The second big idea in the passage arises out of observing the fact that chapter 2, verse 6 to 3, 6 starts and finishes with a word that shapes the question of the chapter.

[24 : 46] Have a look with me. Have a look at Judges 2, 6. I'm going to read. I'm going to. I want you to have a look at 2, 6. And then I want you to have a look at 3, 6. And I want you to see if you can spot the word that begins and ends that section.

Have a look just quickly. Judges 2, 6. And a word used there is repeated in Judges 3, 6. Did you notice the word serve? Friends, the question of this chapter for Israel is this.

Whom will you serve? And it is a question for us as well. You see, we live in a world of competing allegiances. And I want to tell you that there is only one to whom we are to give allegiance.

Friends, whom will you serve? Will you serve the God of grace who has made himself known to you in Jesus? The same God of grace who made himself known to Israel. Just we have known him in much greater grace through Jesus Christ.

Will you serve the God of grace who has made himself known to you in Jesus? Or will you serve someone or something else? Or will you mix and match? My own experience and my own observation of Christians is that we need to ask this question of ourselves again and again.

[26 : 04] So let me do it this morning. Let me ask you. Whom will you serve? Is it God? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Or will you give token allegiance to him and go running off after what the world can give or other gods can give you?

Friends, service of Christ is the be all and end all of Christian existence. Do not mix and match. In the immortal words of the prophet Elijah, how long will you waver between two opinions?

If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal or anything else is God, then follow them. But don't mix and match. Hear this chapter.

God will have no rivals. Give him and your son total allegiance. Stop wavering. Stop syncretism. My third big idea has to do with having two perspectives on life.

You see, Judges 1 and 2 gives us two perspectives on the period of the Judges. Chapter 1 gives us a down-to-the-ground perspective. Down-on-the-ground perspective.

[27 : 17] It's all about the nitty-gritty of life that the Israelites live there in the promised land. Here they are, living life in the land, making decisions, waging war, entering into contracts, apportioning the land, making decisions how they're going to deal with it, marrying and giving in marriage.

They're just getting on with life. Chapter 2 gives us a more panoramic view. It is God's view. And he sees behind the decisions they make on the ground.

And he sees the heart of the people that are there. And he knows it's a heart filled with idolatry. Friends, take this to heart. You see, God is interested in our daily lives.

He is interested in what we do and how we act. However, God is also interested in our hearts. He is interested in what motivates us.

And he is interested in knowing whether our hearts are truly his. And let me tell you that as I look at my own life and the lives of the people that God has given me to serve, I don't always like what I see.

[28 : 31] There is a deep divide often. A deep divide between what we want, between our allegiance to God and our allegiance to other things.

Well, friends, let me close with the words of Jesus. He is actually speaking about money, which is, I suppose, a deity of our world more than any other. But nevertheless, it could apply to any other one you want to serve.

The principle applies not only to money, but any other object of your affection. And listen to what he says from Matthew 6, 24. He says this. No one can serve two masters.

Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money, both God and money. Friends, let me urge you to focus on God's perspective in life. Not on the mundane, but on the eternal.

[29 : 38] You see, the day will come when the mundane will pass away and only the eternal will remain. So choose this day who you will serve, because it has eternal consequences.

And don't, don't, don't mix and match. For God will not take being mixed with any other God. He wants your exclusive allegiance.

Let's pray. Amen. Father, we thank you for the words of the Lord Jesus, that no one can serve two masters.

For if we try to, we'll find ourselves either hating the one and loving the other, or being devoted to one and despising the other. Father, please help us, Father, not to mix and match, to take little bits from here and there.

But, Father, help us to be totally devoted to you, running our lives by what you say, not by the world, what the world says, or the things that the world worships say.

[30 : 47] Father, please help us to live totally devoted to you and to your Son. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.