

JUDGES Living Among Idols

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[0 : 0 0] What a great night to gather with you, Darcy and Genesis, awesome public declaration of faith in Lord Jesus. That is just awesome. So great to be part of it. If you've just joined us, this is our second week in the book of Judges, Old Testament book, which is a little strange, a bit awkward, but a great start last week. Having said that, there's something I need to address because there's been a little bit of banter lately, I've noticed, in my presence, mind you, much more outside of my presence, about the length of my sermons. And I thought that I needed to address that tonight. And I'm going to do it, first of all, I'm going to do it by giving you perspective on the length of my sermons. I'm going to do that by reading from Acts chapter 20.

Paul spoke to the people and because he intended to leave the next day, he kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where they were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on.

When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. So the first thing I want to say is that when someone dies from my preaching, then I'll shorten it.

That's the first thing. The second thing I'd want to say is that what I've noticed is the longer I've been a Christian is that, and delving into God's Word, there is just so much there. So many gems in the Bible. And this is the other bit of perspective. You don't get the original script. I get the original script. I write the original script. And every sermon I write, such as tonight's one, is there is another whole entire sermon which is scrapped before it gets to the final text. And it's the hard yards of trying to work out what to keep and what not to keep. There's so much more to be said. And so if you were just engaged in that Bible reading, you would notice that this passage is a preacher's gift. It's a gift to me because as Nick was reading it, you would have picked up, I'm confident, that it is the second introduction to the book of Judges. Judges has got two introductions. And so everything that I didn't get to say last week, I get to say this week, which is a gift to me and to you. Praise God, you know, come on.

So second introduction of the book of Judges. It is a great text. It is what I did say last week, and I want to repeat here because in all the confusion of this book of Judges, you can lose this, is that the book of Judges is pure gospel, absolute pure gospel, good news. You see, Judges is about the God of mercy, the God of long suffering and patience who continually works in and through and for his people. And what's more, he does that consistently despite his people's constant resistance to his purposes. God relentlessly offers his grace to people who neither deserve it nor seek nor even appreciate it, even after they've been saved by it. And so that, it's a great summary of the Christian life, if you like. And what sets Christianity apart from every other world religion?

[3 : 44] Every other world religion says you come up to scratch and then God will love you to perform in this particular way and God will accept you. Christianity says you can't do anything to be acceptable to God. God does all the work on your behalf, which is what the baptism was all about, declaring that God has saved me by his grace. He's washed me clean from my sins by his death on the cross. And so what we notice in the book of Judges is that the only, even though there's a bunch of figures in here who are famous Bible characters, the only true hero in this book is God himself.

And so the verses today, which are before us today, they are a second introduction to the book, but there are somewhat more than that, a little bit more. They are, in fact, a summary of the whole book, whole book in summary form. And the really sad thing is that if you were here last week, you would have noticed the first introduction ended with some kind of hope for Israel's future.

Now, this second introduction ends on a much more depressing tone about the spiritual state of God's people by the time we get to the end of the book of Judges. And have a look at it there. You can see it in chapter three, verses five and six. It says, the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites, and they took their daughters in marriage and gave their own sons to their daughters to their sons and served their gods.

That's the end of it, if you like. That's the end of the picture for them. Like the first introduction, the second introduction begins with Joshua. What we see with the life of Joshua is that he had a life that was lived well. Joshua was supremely a servant of his God. He was a wholehearted servant of his God, of all the leaders of Israel, from Joseph right through, in fact, to Joshua. Joshua was the very first of them to have the privilege to die and be buried in the land of his inheritance. Every one of the leaders before then, if they had the opportunity, he said, don't leave me in this place. When you leave this place, pick up my bones and take it with you.

But not Joshua. His was a life that was lived well in service of his God. However, those that came after Joshua served the Lord wholeheartedly. It's what we saw last week. But Joshua saw it, or at least saw the seeds of it, in his own generation. He warned them at the end of the book that bears his name. Joshua chapter 24, verses 19 and 20, verse 23, he says this to his generation.

[6 : 44] You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God. He's a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you after he has been good to you. And then he says, now then, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel. And that's the theme I want to pick up today, which was in the first introduction, again in the second one, the concept of yielding your heart wholeheartedly to God as opposed to serving him with other gods.

So there's three things I want to focus on. Compromising with idols, identifying idols, and dealing with idols. So first of all, compromising with idols. As you get to verse 10, so have your text in front of you, open in front of you, chapter 2 of Judges, verse 10, we see a significant shift from one generation to the next generation. Joshua's wholehearted commitment is contrasted with the complacency of his own generation, which is then contrasted to the slippery slide of compromise with the generation that follows. And so verses 10 and 11 of Judges 2 describe a rebellion. Verse 10 says that the generation after Joshua neither knew the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Now, that doesn't mean that they didn't know about the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. It doesn't mean that they didn't know about the miraculous Red Sea crossing, that they weren't aware of the crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land. They weren't aware of the walls of Jericho being torn down without them even raising a sword. What that verse means is that the saving acts of God were no longer precious to them. They had not learned to revere and to rejoice in what God had done for them. They had forgotten the good news that they were saved from slavery in Egypt and brought into the promised land by the gracious, mighty acts of God. That activity of God on their behalf was not something that was close to their hearts, where they enjoyed it and revered it. Now, there is essentially a warning here for Christians to never forget the good news of the gospel. The baptism display that for us, the good news in physical form, visual display of the gospel of what Christ has done for us.

In fact, the Lord's Supper is the same thing that we, Jesus says, do this in remembrance of me. Take it and remember again that my body was broken and my blood was shed. There's a warning here not to forget that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, came into this world, took the just and the righteous punishment from God that we deserve for making good things ultimate things, for making God's good gifts the ultimate things and forgetting God the gift giver. See, the essence of idolatry is us substituting a good thing for an ultimate thing for an ultimate thing. Well, the essence of the good news of the Christian faith is that God substitutes himself for us. We have put created things, good gifts from God at the center of our lives and build our lives around them. And so God chooses to put himself where we deserve to be.

Though Jesus was equal with God, the Father, he emptied himself of his glory. He came down and took the place of a servant, our place, and he gave his life for ours. He traded his life for ours. He took our seat so that we can take his. He died our death so that we can live his life. And as long as we remember who God is and what he has done for us in the Lord Jesus, we will serve him wholeheartedly, radically, and joyfully. And it's not just a simple matter of knowing that intellectually, it is actually adoring that truth, of that truth, building, you're building your life around that truth, wholeheartedly being determined by that truth. Now the consequence of forgetting is in verse 11 of chapter 2 of Judges, they did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals.

Now what's interesting here is that God's definition of doing evil is in fact turning away from God and towards loving and serving idols. That's his definition of evil. And it's also interesting that the word Baal is a Canaanite word for Lord. And so the description here is that this generation forgot to put the true Lord, they forgot the true Lord, and they replaced him by serving many lords instead.

[12 : 50] And it happened within a generation. Commitments replaced by complacency, which is replaced by compromise. Now, let me just, you know, divert over here just for a moment. We've got kids in kids' church right now. And if you're a parent here, you're a godparent. In fact, you're someone who's an older generation with kids amongst us as a church. We as a church have a core value called Christ-centered Bible saturation. And it says there that we are committed to passing on to the next generation a biblically informed love of God. And there's a bunch of passages in the Bible that you want to go to to talk about that. But there's one, a couple that really sort of stand out for me. Deuteronomy 6 verses 4 to 9 and 20-25 are really instructive, I think. Deuteronomy 6 was written to avoid the generation that does not know God relationally or personally, as you see in the beginning of the book of Judges. It was written just before they entered the promised land. And they'd obviously forgotten it somehow in a very short period of time. And Deuteronomy 6 tells us how they and we should lead the next generation. And ultimately, it's about us. So if you're a parent, you're a godparent, you're an older member of a congregation here and there's younger members in our church, firstly, here's a few tips. We must love God ourselves. We have God's Word at the centre of our hearts and our lives. That means that we're not hypocritical. We're not inconsistent in our behaviour.

God's Word impacts every aspect of our lives. We are confident in it as the Word of God and transforming our lives by it. You see, young people see inconsistencies so clearly.

Secondly, we are to apply and reflect on the Gospel practically. This is not just an academic or an abstract exercise for the Christian to just increase your knowledge of the Bible. Deuteronomy 6-7 is, does not promote regular family lecture times. The reference in there in Deuteronomy 6 is when you're sitting, walking along, lying down, getting up. That is in, it refers to the daily routines of life.

Instruction in God's truth is not so much a series of lectures and classes as it is showing how God permeates every aspect of your everyday life.

It is a call to be wise and thoughtful about how the values and the virtues of the Gospel distinctively influence our decisions and our priorities.

[15 : 48] Thirdly, verses 20 and 25, 20 to 25 of Deuteronomy 6, tell us that we are to give personal testimony to the difference that God has made to us. The sort of thing that Darcy was doing tonight.

Personal testimony. How God has brought us from bondage to freedom. We are not just to speak of beliefs and behaviours, but of our own personal engagement and experience of God Himself through His Word.

We are to be open about our own struggles and weaknesses as we grow. We are to be transparent about how repentance works in our life with the younger generation, which means older people say sorry to kids when you fail them. That's what it means.

Really, really important. How rare it is for parents to humble themselves, for adults to humble themselves and to bend a knee and look a kid in the eye and say, I have failed you.

Show them how repentance works. If you don't do that, they will just look at you as proud and arrogant.

[17 : 10] We must be consistent in behaviour, wise about reality and warmly personal in our faith. In other words, love and serve God wholeheartedly. And to do that, we need to be so real about the idols that lurk in our hearts, the idols of our hearts.

We need to identify them and we need to deal with them, which is the things we're going to move to right now, identifying idols. One of the great things about this book of Judges is, the thing you wouldn't normally think of when you read through Judges is the subtlety of the storyline.

There's not a lot of subtlety in the book of Judges, frankly. There's a lot of blood and guts, not a lot of subtlety. But there is a subtlety to the storyline. Verse 19, it doesn't say that Israel stopped serving God who rescued them from Egypt.

It just says that they opted for some alternative gods. It just simply says they also served the Baals and the Ashtoreths in verse 13.

They did both. That is, Israel's spiritual life was way more complex than a simple decision to stop worshipping this god and start worshipping those gods.

[18 : 37] Much more complex than that. They, in fact, combined the two. In fact, there's a great verse that you would just read over if you didn't notice it at all. In Judges 17, verse 3, it's an Israelite woman who gives her valuable stuff to her son and says this to him.

I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord for my son to make an image overlaid with silver. I consecrate, I dedicate my valuables to God so that my son, with those valuables, can go and make an idol.

Do both things. Now, when Westerners think of idols, our minds, we sort of wander off into sort of like carvings and incense and candles and dark rooms and stuff like that.

You know, the biblical concept is much more sophisticated than the Western mind. And certainly my Western mind. Idolatry in the Bible integrates intellectual, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual categories.

There are personal idols, such as romantic love and family and or maybe a love of money and power and achievement.

[20 : 07] Or access to particular social circles. Or the emotional dependence of other people on you. Or...

Sorry, this has gone crazy. Can I go back to a blank slide? Is it up there? Yep, thank you. Romantic love, power, emotional dependence of others on you, health, fitness, physical beauty.

Many people look to these things in our culture for hope and for meaning and fulfilment that only God can provide. There are also cultural idols. For instance, military power, technological process, progress, economic prosperity.

In fact, every election that rolls around in this country, the biggest thing that is there front and centre in front of people is economic prosperity. We will make you richer.

That's the promise of every government because it's the idol of our culture. The idols of traditional societies include family, hard work, duty, moral virtue and other stuff.

[21 : 10] Those of Western cultures include Western... Sorry, individual freedom and personal choice and self-discovery, personal affluence and happiness. Now, all of these good things can and do take on disproportionate size and power with a person and with a society.

These things, when you have them, promise you peace and safety and happiness and identity in such a way that you base your life on them and they will offer you these things.

Now, to understand our hearts and our culture, we need to be able to discern what are the idols that influence both our culture and our hearts. If we don't know them, we can't deal with them.

And if we don't know that they're there, we are defaulting in exactly the same way the Israelites are of trying to meld gods together.

Now, you might be sitting here and say, I'm not a Christian. That's fine. You're just worshipping a certain set of idols. Christians here are doing both. So Romans 1, 21 to 23 shows us that idolatry is not one sin amongst many, but the core issue that is fundamentally wrong with the human heart.

[22 : 39] There may be a long list of sins, and there is a long list of sins that create misery and evil in our world, but they all germinate in the soil of idolatry.

Martin Luther, he's a German monk and a church reformer. He pointed this out centuries ago. He said that 10 commandments begin with a commandment against idolatry.

And he argues that you never break the other nine commandments without first breaking the first commandment. The other nine is ultimately a breaking of the first.

And so the secret to change is to identify and dismantle the idols in our heart. So my starting point here is to assume that you're all idolaters, as I am.

I'm just making that assumption. And that they are hidden in every one of us. And the important question is what to do with them. How do we get some clarity on them?

[23 : 42] How do we get some clarity so that we don't remain under their power? How do we free from the idols so that we make sound decisions, wide choices, and be finally free from all idols that will ultimately crush us?

They never set us free. They never give us what they promise. So here's four tests. First one, look at your imagination. Archbishop William Temple. He was an Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury during part of World War II.

And he said, your religion is what you do with your solitude. Your religion is what you do with your solitude.

In other words, the true God of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there's nothing else demanding your attention.

In other words, what do you effortlessly daydream about? What do you enjoy daydreaming about? What occupies your mind when there's nothing else to think about?

[24 : 54] You know, when your head hits the pillow at night, you've got an opportunity to dream about all the weights of the world on you. And just what consumes your mind? Do you develop potential scenarios about career advancement or material goods like the dream home, a relationship, or one or two daydreams is an indication of idolatry.

But what do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort and escape in the privacy of your heart? What is your habit there in that moment?

That's the first test. The second test of a heart's true value is how you spend your money, your spending habits. And I think I want to develop this a little bit more since even speaking about it this morning.

It's more than what's your spending habits, but what are your habits of your money? What do you do with your money? Jesus said your heart is wherever your treasure is in Matthew 6.21.

And our money flows most effortlessly towards our heart's greatest love. It flows effortlessly towards our heart's greatest love, to the thing that we get our affirmation, our applause, our security from.

[26 : 16] In fact, one measure of an idol is that we spend too much money on it. And it's the one area where if you're married, your spouse is saying to you, you need to exercise some more self-control there.

I'm noticing the number of visits in the last two weeks to Bunnings. You know, or somewhere. What is it that you need to exercise constant self-control in?

Now, this one's important. I've made the change from spending habits to what you do with your money because some of us don't spend it, some of us save it instead. So if you're habitually pushing your money to investments, saving, it most likely means that your sense of identity is wrapped up in security.

I need security. That's the big idol of my heart. But if it's spending, what is it spending on? Because you can see that that's a good indicator of where your affirmation lies.

You see, if God and his grace is the thing that we love the most, we will give our money away to ministry, charity, and the poor in astonishing amounts. Most, however, tend to overspend on clothing, on travel, on their children, on success symbols like cars and houses and whatever else.

[27 : 45] Okay, third test. And this is especially for those who profess a faith in Jesus.

It is possible to declare faith in Jesus, be regular at a place of worship, have an orthodox set of beliefs, be rigorous in practicing those beliefs, and yet have a different functional saviour at the core of your heart.

And one way to test this is how we respond to unanswered prayers and frustrated hopes. So, for instance, if there appears to be silence from God, it is reasonable, I think, to become sad and disappointed.

But if it's not an idol, you won't be crushed by it. Life goes on. However, if it's something that you're consistently asking for, but you don't get it, and you get angry, is it that that thing is your functional saviour?

You're using the true saviour to get to your functional saviour, to provide you with your functional saviour. If we pray and work for something you don't get, and you respond with anger and despair, it's possible that you have found your true saviour in that moment, your true God, your idol.

[29 : 12] Fourthly, this test works for everyone. Take a look at your most uncontrollable emotions. If you are angry over something, ask, is there something here way too important to me?

Is there something here that I must have at all costs? And the reason I'm getting angry is because someone or something is blocking me from getting it.

Do the same with fear, with despair, with guilt, with shame. Ask yourself, am I so scared because something in my life is being threatened that I think is a necessity for my life when in actual fact it isn't?

Am I so down on myself because I've lost or I've failed at something I think is a necessity when it's not? If you are overworking and driving yourself into the ground with frantic activity, ask yourself, do I feel that I must have this thing to be fulfilled and significant?

Second, I think what test number four is suggesting is that when you grab your emotions and pull them up from the roots, you will notice your idols generally attached to them.

[30 : 38] So let's deal with them. You see, idolatry is not just a failure to obey God. It is fundamentally setting your heart on something besides God.

And this can't be fixed simply by repenting or with a determination to live differently. It's not less than those things, but it's so much more than just repenting and a determination to do differently.

Let's see how we go about dealing with idols. And I think Colossians 3, 1 to 5 is a great place to start. Since then, you've been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, which is idolatry. He's saying all those things are idolatry.

[31 : 53] So, see the right beginning, set, setting the minds on things above where your life is hid with Christ. What that means is appreciating, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done for you in the gospel.

That's what that means. And it includes joyful worship and a sense of God's reality in prayer. Jesus must become more beautiful in your imagination and more attractive in your heart than idols.

That's what Colossians 3 is saying. And this is the only way to replace an idol. It's so much more than just repenting and being determined to work harder.

Idols are removed by them being forced out from the centre of our lives by something that is greater.

an idol is something that we is dear to us. It's something that we love. We become enslaved to what we love.

[33 : 10] And the only way to remove something that we love is for a greater love to come in and push it out. That's what Colossians 3 is saying.

which means for the Christian rejoicing and repentance go together. Repentance without rejoicing leads to despair.

Oh, woe is me. I'm such a rotten individual. Rejoicing without repentance on the other hand is shallow and at best it produces a fleeting inspiration to pull up your socks instead of going through deep, deep, deep heart change.

When we repent out of fear of consequences which fundamentally is what religion is all about we aren't actually saying sorry for our sins we're actually saying sorry for ourselves.

You know, it's the fire insurance just in case I must repent. Repentance because of fear is actually self-pity. We don't learn to hate the sin we learn to hate ourselves and the sin doesn't lose its attractive power.

[34 : 34] On the other hand when we rejoice in God's sacrificial suffering love for us where he has given us everything even though we don't deserve anything we learn to hate the sin for what it is.

We see what our sin costs God and we see what his love cost him and you see fear-based repentance makes us hate ourselves joy-based repentance makes us hate the sin.

Rejoicing in Jesus is so essential because idols are almost always good things. They are good gifts that have been given to us from our God and instead of honouring him for them we've made the gift the ultimate.

it's the ultimate. And so if we've made idols out of our work or out of family or a bunch of other things we actually don't want to stop loving our family and stop loving our work.

That is fear-based repentance. we actually just need to see and experience that Jesus is in fact better than he's bigger and that he's greater.

[36 : 10] We actually want to treasure Jesus so much that we are no longer enslaved by the attachments but set free in order to love them as they should be loved as gifts from God.

And at that point we won't be crushed by them. Rejoicing in Jesus is in fact to treasure Jesus. It's why we as a church exist to treasure Jesus.

It is to assess his value to you to reflect on his beauty and his worth and his importance until your heart rests on him.

This is so much more than just an intellectual assent and knowledge of the Christian faith, the core doctrines of the faith. This is seeing the value of them, the beauty of them, the worth of them until your affections fall up.

And the way of the idols, the tools that God has given us for that is what has traditionally been called spiritual disciplines.

[37 : 22] They include things like meditation on his word, that we might be flooded with the gospel and God's graciousness and his goodness to us consistently. That another one of these tools is corporate worship, what we're doing right now, and private prayer.

These disciplines will ultimately over time take head knowledge and make it life shaping reality for us. What we're doing as we gather tonight with baptism, preaching, singing, prayers, all that sort of stuff, you know what we're doing, what we do tonight and every time we gather is just being reminded again of the magnificence of Jesus, of our priorities again and again and again and again and again for him to shape our lives, for us to declare how good he is, to be reminded of that, to hear other brothers and sisters do that.

You see, spiritual disciplines are a form of worship and worship very simply worship is the ultimate way to replace idols in our heart, giving God the due honour to him.

You see, you cannot get rid of idols simply by understanding what they are, just by identifying them. We actually have to get the peace that Jesus gives and that only comes as we worship him as our merciful, patient, sovereign saviour.

And that process, my friends, is the bad news for you quick fix people. That's an entire life process. process. It's a process of rejoicing and repenting, rejoicing and repenting all of our lives.

[39 : 05] You see, mature Christians are not those who've got to the bottom of their hearts, you know, finally hit bedrock, clunk, clunk, clunk, nowhere further to go. Mature Christian are those who keep digging, who never stop digging into the depths of their hearts and constantly rooting out the idols of their hearts.

setting your heart on Jesus as your peace and your hope and your life is the road to true freedom, freedom from enslaving idols that crush us, that control us and will ultimately destroy us.