

JUDGES The Outcast

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Groundhog Day is an obscure tradition in North America. It's in little parts of North America. It's not right across North America. It was popularized by the 1993 movie which starred Bill Murray.

It's celebrated on the 2nd of February when the groundhog, which is really just this furry creature thing, comes out of its hole from hibernation.

And if the animal sees a shadow, that is if the weather is sunny, it goes back into its hole because there's six more weeks of winter weather to come.

If not, apparently spring's coming early. No scientific fact to it, but a good reason for a party, I suspect. Now, Groundhog Day also describes a situation in which a series of unwelcome or tedious events to reappear again and again and again in exactly the same way.

And that's what you feel when you put up the book of Judges and as you read through it, it's like, oh, here we go again. We're back into the same cycle again.

[1 : 16] And that's what we're going to see as we launch into Judges. We have this depressing and this familiar cycle in chapter 10, verse 6.

Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and they served the Baals and the Ashtoreths and the gods of Aram and the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines.

So again, we have this picture of idolatry and slavery with Israel. The Baals and the Ashtoreths, they were the gods of the native Canaanites.

This is the land in which they're in. And so this is their native gods, their idols. But notice there are other idols, other gods that are mentioned here as well. Notice that it says the gods of Aram, they weren't, these are not part of Canaan.

This is Aram, they're up to the northwest. Sidon, they're up to the north. Moab and Ammon are to the east.

[2 : 29] And then the Philistines are to the south. And all of these nations belonged outside of Canaan, but they came into Canaan to oppress the Israelites.

Now, if you've been listening all the way through this series, then you will remember that in chapter 3, way back then, we saw that Othniel, remember him?

He helped Israel out of its bind with the king of Aram. Ehud, we all remember him because he's the guy stuck the sword in the fat guy.

He was against the Ammonites and the Moabites. And Shamgar, we just went straight over him. He only got one verse, really, so we just missed him.

He helped Israel against the Philistines. And in chapter 5, it was Deborah against the Canaanites. So what we get here is that every time Israel worshipped the idols of a nation, that nation ended up oppressing Israel.

[3 : 47] And this time, it's the God of the Ammonites and the Philistines. Verse 7 tells us that this is the consequence of them worshipping their gods.

He, that's God, became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. This is the key idea here.

Idolatry leads to enslavement. And enslavement leads to idolatry. Now, that doesn't seem logical.

Let's unpack that. That does not seem logical. You would think that once a nation like Israel was oppressed by these other nations, Israel would hate the gods of the nations who they were worshipping that led them into slavery.

They'd wake up one day and go, oh, we hate those gods. They've not been good to us. But that's not the case. The Ammonites had oppressed Israel in chapter 3, verse 13.

[5 : 09] And here is Israel serving their gods, which in turn leads to enslavement to the Ammonites once again. Despite their pain and their misery, Israel continued to worship the same idols that brought them the pain and the misery.

It makes no sense. It is so easy to sit back here and look at the futility of Israel's behaviour.

What's wrong with you guys? I wonder whether we can see ours in the same way. Let me remind you of our definition of idolatry.

You'll find it right there in the little, you know, fine print at the bottom of your service outline. Idolatry is taking a good aspect of creation, a gift from God, marriage, days at the beach, business, family, money, and turning it into the ultimate source of security, comfort, identity and power.

It's taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing. I've given you a chart there on idolatry and a whole different bits of idolatry.

[6 : 34] Ripped it straight out of Tim Keller and his book, Gospel Driven Life. It's really helpful. The point here is that our hearts still assure us that when an idol leads to slavery and misery, that we seem to think that we need more of that idol.

For instance, imagine someone who seeks value and purpose in relationship.

That's where their real sense of worth is, is when they feel loved by someone else. And they live that out by sacrificing everything in order to get into a marriage.

And that marriage fails. What happens then? What normally happens, what we see in our world, is that they think that what I need now is another relationship.

But what I need is a better relationship than the last one. But I need another relationship. And so the cycle repeats. Again and again and again.

[7 : 52] We don't seem to ever think that the issue is, in fact, idol worship. Our behavior tells us that the issue is not our worship of idols, but that we are not worshipping the idol enough.

And that is Israel's behavior here. Verse 7 tells us that God, in his settled anger at idolatry, sold them into the hands of their enemies.

That's a very strong phrase. In fact, it's the strongest phrase so far of God's dealing with his people in the book of Judges. You see, when you sell a car to another person, it means that that new owner can do with it what they want to do with it.

It's theirs. They can do with it. You know, you might have caught it gertie or whatever. You know, no longer does that apply. It might have been your child, you know, extra member.

You might have treated really well and washed it and polished. Once they get it, it's theirs. They can drive it into another car if they want. They can do whatever they want. You no longer own it.

[9 : 03] Now, we know from the history of God dealing with these rebellious people that this doesn't mean that God had abandoned them or canceled his promises to them.

It does mean that he stopped protecting them so that the things that they chose to serve began to dominate them. And in fact, in Romans chapter 1, verses 23 to 25, is a passage that really has the same idea.

It speaks of people who exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles.

That is, it's a description of idolatry. Reject a God, create our own gods. And what was the result?

The very next verse, Romans 1, 24, Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts.

[10 : 15] He let them do it. He abandoned them to their desires. And the phrase desires of the heart means to have an overwhelming desire, drive, an uncontrollable and therefore an enslaving desire.

For God to give them over means that he has allowed the things for which they have put their hope, things for which are not God, to become the ruling powers of their lives.

And in fact, Romans 1 describes all of humanity. Once God gave them over because of their idolatry in Romans 1, 24, what's the next thing that happens?

Romans 25, 1, 25, They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and they worshipped and served created things rather than the creator.

The judgment for idolatry is more idolatry. Idolatry and slavery go hand in hand.

[11 : 29] Idolatry leads to slavery and slavery to idolatry. Let's take money for an example. God says to us, If you live for money instead of me, then money will rule your life.

Money will control your life. It will control your heart. It will control your emotions. It will enslave you. And what you think is the answer to that solution is I just need to have a bit more and then it won't control me.

Then I will have freedom if I have a bit more and then a bit more and a bit more. Then I'll have freedom. Idolatry leads to enslavement and enslavement to more idolatry.

Or popularity. If you want to live for popularity instead of me, God says, then popularity and social media likes will rule you and control you.

And there has been some awful scenarios in recently in the media where we've seen that people have been controlled by social media likes. Even death.

[12 : 43] God says, If you want another God besides me, go ahead. Let's see how merciful it is to you, how effective it is at saving you and guiding you and enlightening you and affirming you.

It will control you and it will make you sacrifice everything for it and it will make you miserable. Idolatry and slavery go hand in hand.

And so in verse 8, it tells us that Israel's oppression was the worst oppression to date.

And the sad thing here is that the way Israel treated their idols was the way they treated their God as well.

They treated God like one of their idols. Worst oppression yet, the Philistines, the Ammonites, it says, shattered and crushed them.

[13 : 46] For 18 years, they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. And again, Israel cries out to God.

Verse 10, We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals. And what we see here is that God doesn't immediately forgive them or He doesn't jump in and solve their problem.

In chapter 6, when the people cry out to God, He sent them a really stern warning. And here, the warning's a little bit harder as well.

They have consistently turned their backs on God and He has consistently saved them. And this time, we get the crushing line in verse 13.

I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you're in trouble. Despite a confession of sin, God has heard this song and this dance before.

[15 : 02] Israel's sin, as we've seen, as judges progresses and we'll see the next couple of weeks, Israel's sin is not so much a cycle as it is a plunge.

It's like a ball gathering momentum. It's just a plunge. And it is a sheer tragedy when people become so accustomed to the mercy of God that they end up despising it.

Even, and especially, in the act of seeking His mercy. They just despise His mercy. Again, here, Israel is sorry for the consequence of their sin rather than the sin itself.

They are turning from idolatry in idolatrous ways. They are treating God like this great, warm, vending machine in the sky into which you need to just drop a token or two, one or two tokens of repentance and He will spit out the thing that I really want which is relief from my troubles.

That's what I really want. I want relief. How often do we treat God like that? I remember doing this so much before I was a Christian and especially whenever I knew that I was going to need help.

[16 : 41] So exam times, you know, exams are coming up and so in those moments, pray to God. Sorry, I've been rejecting you a bit lately but if you can help me here, you know, it's going to be different beyond this.

So it's like treating God like this vending machine, throwing some repentance, acknowledgement, haven't been kicking the goals lately but you help me in this exam and then we'll be fine.

So help me pass this exam and I'd walk out of there and I would pass the exam most of the time and I'd go, man, I studied, you know, I just ignored God and I had this sense that when I did that, for some strange reason, I thought God was on my side in that exam room but not on anyone else's side.

The rest of the pagans, I bet you they didn't think about praying to God, you know, helping with the exam so I've got a leg up here. I've definitely got a leg up over the rest of these people because God's on my side.

I remember the time that my attitude struck home to me was that I was always trying to manipulate God to get on my side when it was when I was actually a Christian and I was at Bible college and I remember sitting down for an exam and praying a similar thing, God help me with the exam here and then looking around, God's on everyone's side here.

[18 : 14] That's no help to me. I really should have studied. And Israel's here trying to push the right buttons, trying to make the right sacrifices in order to get God, to manipulate God, to exert power for them.

And God wants to shatter those false views that have been crafted of him. He's not a Baal.

He's not an Asherah pole. Israel just assumed that whenever things got bad, they'd always just put the right things in the slot machine and they'd get God back.

Now Israel seems to get their point. They're requesting verse 15 is different than verse 10. Have a look at it.

We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best. But please rescue us now. Now that shows at least an element of a change of heart.

[19 : 24] Before they were focused on their condition, on their comfort. Now they admit that God is under no obligation whatsoever to solve their problem for them.

It's like they're saying to God, we want you even if it means we will keep suffering. Although we'd rather not.

It is much more a sign of real faith. You see, if we say to God, I want you because I want or I need you to give me this particular thing, whatever it is, we reveal that that particular thing, whatever it is, is our ultimate God.

Our ultimate hope. Our ultimate sense of security. God, you exist to give me this stuff. That means that this stuff is more important than God.

That's idolatry. Things like God, your job is to make me happy. God, your job is to give me a family.

[20 : 40] God, your job is to make the current family I got better than what it is. When we say that, we're saying, God, you exist to exert your power to give me what I want.

That's idolatry. God's God, God, God, God, God, and so God responds to his people with mercy in verse 16.

He now acts to save Israel. The Ammonite and the Israelite camps are drawn up for battle. The men of Gilead search for the person who's going to lead them into the battle and beyond the battle in verse 18.

And we're introduced to him in chapter 11, verse 1. The new judge is now coming to the fore. It says here, Jephna, the Gileadite, was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead.

His mother was a prostitute. Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when they were grown up, they drove Jephna away. You're not going to get any inheritance in our family, they said, because you're the son of another woman.

[21 : 59] So Jephna fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gather around him and followed him.

Now there's a, if you like, an unsurprising and at the same time surprising choice of a judge with Jephna. Jephna, like Gideon before him, is described as a mighty warrior.

It seems like brawling and stuff's his thing. On the other hand, he's the illegitimate son of a prostitute. He's been driven out from his home, most likely as a young person by his half-brothers.

And then he's out there living in the wilderness and he surrounds himself with a band of robbers. Jephna, as it turns out, is into organized crime and he's the crime boss.

And so he's the natural choice. He's a complete outcast. He's a criminal from a broken home. And despite all of that, God chooses him to be the saviour.

[23 : 10] And the leaders of Gilead go to him, but Jephna was not so easily convinced. Verse 7, Didn't you hate me? Aren't you the same guys who hate me?

You drove me out from my father's house. Why do you come to me now when you're in trouble? Does that at all sound familiar? There are so many similarities here between the way Israel has treated their God and the way that they are treating their judge, their leader.

And so what Jephna wants to do here is he, before he does anything, before he picks up any sword, he resets the relationship between the leader of God's people, the judge, and the people.

Verse 8, The elders of Gilead said to him, Nevertheless, we are turning to you now. Come with us to fight the Ammonites and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead.

Then Jephna clarifies the point in verse 9. Jephna answered, Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me. Suppose we win.

[24 : 24] Will I really be your head? And the elders of Gilead replied, The Lord is our witness. You will certainly do as, we will certainly do as you say.

In other words, as we've seen already in this series, rescue and rule are inseparable. If I'm your saviour, I am also your ruler.

If you look to an idol to be your saviour and your hope, it will rule you. You don't ask it to, it will, because salvation and rule go together.

If you look to God as your saviour and your hope, he will rule you. And all of these judges point us ultimately to the greatest judge, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The way people treat Jesus is the way that they are treating God. It is impossible to respect God or to truly repent without acknowledging Jesus' rule over your life.

[25 : 41] It's impossible. As I said earlier in this series, Jesus cannot be your rescuer if he isn't your ruler. And so, here in the text, the battle lines are drawn up, but Jephthah doesn't go up to war immediately.

Turns out that this guy who's the crime boss actually happens with some negotiation skills. And so, his first option here is to go for a peaceful resolution.

Who would have thought? The Ammonites neither respond nor retreat. So, diplomacy is exhausted, war is inevitable. And once the spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah in verse 29, the outcome is certain.

The victory is won before swords are even drawn. And then there's something terrible happens. As Jephthah advances to meet the army, he makes this vow to God in verse 30.

If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's.

[26 : 56] and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. The Lord gives him his victory. He returns home as a victorious judge of Israel.

What should now follow is the celebration of the victory and a time of peace. But instead, we have verse 34. When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter dancing to the sound of timbrels.

She was an only child except for her. He had neither son nor daughter. And when he saw her, he tore his clothes and he cried, Oh no! My daughter!

You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break. He is distraught and yet at the same time he kind of hard blames his daughter for it.

And his daughter remarkably insists that he keeps his vow to God. After two months of mourning with her friends, she comes back and Jephthah keeps his vow and he sacrifices her.

[28 : 15] It's a terrible story. In fact, it's the worst so far in this terrible section of Israel's history.

It's going to get worse in the next two weeks but up to now this is the worst. And there is at least three big questions here. What did Jephthah actually promise in his vow?

Why did he promise it? And why did he keep the promise? Firstly, some people have thought that he just promised to sacrifice anything that came out the door and he was anticipating an animal sacrifice.

He was expecting the family dog to run out or maybe the cat or something like that. And there are, and I'm not going to go into all the details of this but there's a multitude of reasons as to why that's not the case.

They range from it being unlikely that animals were first of all even allowed in the homes through to if that was what he was thinking then he would never have been distraught by his daughter coming out.

[29 : 28] He would have been waiting for the first animal to come out. The reality is Jephthah promised to make a human sacrifice to God if he was victorious.

That was his promise. It was a human sacrifice. He was probably hoping for a servant rather than his daughter. Secondly, why did he make that promise?

Deuteronomy 12 says that human sacrifice is a detestable thing to God. Jephthah would have known that. God is so clear on it. Jephthah had clearly been deeply desensitized to the violence and the atrocities of the pagan cultures that surrounded him and that he was participating in.

He's obviously become desensitized. It's such an awful example of how believers in the one true God who profess faith in him hold to some truth but allowed the world to squeeze them into their own mold.

It's such an awful example of churches right throughout our world who have the word of God who knows what God's word said and yet allow the world and its priorities to squeeze the scriptures out.

[30 : 51] these days it's more likely as the church as Christians we're more likely to allow worldly attitudes to sex and money come in and live alongside biblical truth.

in his culture it was different. But Jephthah wasn't just impacted by the moral codes that surrounded him he was also impacted by their idolatrous works righteousness.

Human sacrifice is how all those gods that surrounded Canaan human sacrifice is how they would buy off their pagan gods.

It's how it's the tokens that they would put in to the vending machine to give God to give them what they wanted. Jephthah thought Israel's God needed to be impressed he needed to be bought he needed to be controlled through a lavish gift of human sacrifice.

And the tragedy is God had already decided to save his sinful people before he even made the vow to God.

[32 : 18] He'd already decided to use Jephthah as his savior. So why did he go through with it?

this is probably the more difficult thing to look at or to answer it's hard to know but except to say that he had no concept of the God of grace.

He sees God in the same way as the nations around them as all the other pagan gods and idols he sees the true living God in exactly the same way a being whose favor has to be earned through flattery and lavish sacrifices and that's why in this moment he can't just break down and he's distraught he doesn't just drop on his knees and confess his error and repent and save his daughter it's because he simply doesn't trust this God that's why he goes through with it because he's trapped by his mistrust of this God it's like he believes that if he doesn't go through with it if he doesn't strike his daughter down this God will strike him down and this has been the problem for every human being ever since

Adam and Eve it's our problem in the garden of Eden the very first line that comes out of the serpent's mouth Genesis 3 is to cause human beings to disbelieve that God has their best interests at heart you cannot trust this God and ever since then the default position of our heart the wiring is to feel like we have to control God that we have to pay God that we have to deserve God that we have to do something to put something in the vending machine to spit out for us what we want from God our default is never simply to trust God to love and to bless us we instead turn from him to other things turn from him to other things for the acceptance of the love that we crave it is always worth asking ourselves the questions in what ways would

I live differently more radically more restfully if I really really believe that God was completely committed to me to love me to bless me and to work what is best for me how would that impact everything the way I live if I truly believe death to my heart that that was true the Bible makes it so clear that this God is for us and so this episode is tragic in fact the great victory against the enemy is even barely mentioned it's overshadowed by the tragedy of the loss of Jephna's daughter this victory is like a it's a flawed victory it's an imperfect salvation instead of dancing in the streets it's like there's this dark cloud this doesn't feel like a salvation it's an imperfect salvation by an imperfect savior and so it won't last it's not worth celebrating but it should well in us a sense of where is the true salvation where is the perfect salvation where is the one that's worth celebrating and if we want a perfect salvation we have to look beyond

[36 : 40] Jephna to one that is greater than he the imperfect savior Jephna points us to the perfect savior Jesus Jephna didn't rise to be judged despite his rejection and his suffering he is fitted for his role as the judge of Israel through his rejection and his suffering and in this he is a pale shadow of the greatest savior Jesus John 1 11 tells us that Jesus came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him this is the Jesus who spent his time in the wilderness and was tempted in every way but was without sin according to Hebrews 4 15 he was rejected and unlike Jephna lived a holy righteous life a life of perfection and both his rejection and his perfection prepared him for his ultimate act of weakness a criminal death on a cross the death of a criminal on a cross and it also qualified him for his greatest victory the great victory where he bore our sin as the human sacrifice through his death so that he could give his people his righteousness and lead them into peace you see

Jesus the son of God is the great savior who chose to offer his life as a sacrifice for the sin of the world he wasn't trapped into it wasn't surprised by it his dad didn't all of a sudden pop it on him and go well okay he chose it it was his plan to pay for the sin of humanity and turn God's anger away from us his sacrifice was once for all time for all people that's why we celebrate that's why we sing what we sing and because of this sacrifice there is only one sacrifice that God requires of you and me he's not the great vending machine it's the self sacrifice of offering God lordship over every area of our life because with salvation comes rule and this is not done to secure his favour we don't offer him lordship he doesn't take it's not it's not to secure his favour

Jesus has already secured the favour of God for us our sacrifice is in response to him Romans 12 1 calls us to deal with our idols when it says I urge you brothers and sisters in view of God's mercy because of his mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God this is your true and proper worship do not conform to the pattern of this world Jesus perfect sacrifice results in his perfect rule he can be trusted his rule is the only rule that is not oppressive Matthew 11 28 it's Jesus who says to us come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me for

I am gentle and humble at heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light