

8

Tough Love

Judges 2:11-19

11 The Israelites did what was evil in the LORD's sight. They worshiped the Baals **12** and abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They went after other gods from the surrounding peoples and bowed down to them. They infuriated the LORD, **13** for they abandoned Him and worshiped Baal and the Ashtoreths.

14 The LORD's anger burned against Israel, and He handed them over to marauders who raided them. He sold them to the enemies around them, and they could no longer resist their enemies. **15** Whenever the Israelites went out, the LORD was against them and brought disaster on them, just as He had promised and sworn to them. So they suffered greatly.

16 The LORD raised up judges, who saved them from the power of their marauders, **17** but they did not listen to their judges. Instead, they prostituted themselves with other gods, bowing down to them. They quickly turned from the way of their fathers, who had walked in obedience to the LORD's commands. They did not do as their fathers did. **18** Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for the Israelites, the LORD was with him and saved the people from the power of their enemies while the judge was still alive. The LORD was moved to pity whenever they groaned because of those who were oppressing and afflicting them.

19 Whenever the judge died, the Israelites would act even more corruptly than their fathers, going after other gods to worship and bow down to them. They did not turn from their evil practices or their obstinate ways.

Exploration

Toward the end of Romans 8, Paul asks an important rhetorical question, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God demonstrated once and for all that He is not opposed to us—He is *for* us. What does it mean, however, for God to be *truly for* us? Does that mean that we will have easy lives? Does it mean that He will spare us from the consequences of our foolish actions? Take a minute and think about someone who cares about you deeply, perhaps a close friend or parent. Does this person always make life easy on you? Do they always spare you from the consequences of your foolish actions? Far from making life easy on us, those who care the most about us are often the most difficult on us because they love us. While God will always be for us, that doesn’t mean He won’t ever oppose us. While faith in Christ forever frees us from eternal punishment, God’s love sometimes compels Him to let us face the consequences of our sin. He will even sometimes purposefully inflict earthly punishment on us. We see this pattern again and again in the Book of Judges. Israel begins worshiping idols and God punishes them through the surrounding nations.

Today, as we begin studying the Book of Judges, we will see that the punishment God inflicts upon His people is never out of spite or revenge, but always rooted in His faithfulness and motivated by His desire for us to know and love Him more.

CONTEXT (JUDG. 1:1–3:6)

Joshua led the Israelites in the conquest of the promised land. Once the land was in their possession, he divided it among the twelve tribes. Israel remained faithful to God throughout Joshua’s lifetime (Josh. 24:31), but matters changed not long after his death. Though the Israelites possessed and lived in the promised land, enemies lived among them, as recorded in Judges 1. The Israelites couldn’t remove them because they had iron chariots (Judg. 1:19). They never drove the Canaanites out completely from the land (1:28).

The “Angel of the Lord” (2:1) reminded the Israelites of God’s command not to make a covenant with the peoples living in the promised land. The Israelites disobeyed. Not only did the Israelites endear themselves to their pagan neighbors, they “took their daughters as wives for themselves” and “gave their own daughters to their sons” (3:6). Additionally, the Lord instructed His people to destroy pagan altars. Instead, the Israelites “worshiped their [pagan] gods” (3:6).

Because of their rebellion against the Lord’s commands, the Israelites “suffered greatly” (2:15). In this environment, the Lord “raised up judges, who saved them from the power of their marauders” (2:16).

Conversation

Discuss the following quick response questions with students and allow time for a few of them to share.

› **Share about a time you were caught clearly breaking a rule your parents set for you. What consequences did you face for doing so?**

› **Even though we don't like rules, why are consequences necessary when we break them? What would life be like if there were no consequences for rule-breaking?**

Although the idea of a life free from consequences might sound appealing, in reality, a life without any rules would be chaotic. We like the idea of being able to do whatever we want without having to face any consequences. This idea, however, upon close scrutiny breaks down quickly. For instance, we like the idea of driving 110 miles per hour down the interstate, but the moment someone hits us or someone we love with their car going that speed, we are going to want that person to face serious consequences for doing so. While there are certainly rules in life that may seem pointless or unnecessary, if we are honest, we will admit that most rules in life exist for our guidance and protection. They are not restrictive, but rather life-giving. This was certainly true of the laws God had given the nation of Israel—primarily His commands to put no other “gods” ahead of the One true and living God, and to worship Him exclusively. In fact, there is no greater life-giving command than God’s charge to us to put Him first and worship Him supremely. Today, we will see that Israel utterly failed to keep this law and as a result, God sovereignly and deliberately forced them to face difficult consequences. God did this not because He is a killjoy, but because He loved His people enough not to sit idly by while they continued down the self-destructive path of idolatry. The same is true for students today: God loves them enough to oppose their sinful actions and attitudes.

JUDGES 2:11-13

Throughout the end of Judges 1, we see a phrase repeated over and over with reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, they “did not drive out” the various inhabitants of the promised land. In other words, they did not fully complete the mission God sent them to accomplish. This, combined with Israel’s forgetfulness, resulted in a less than stellar start to Israel’s life as a nation in the promised land.

› **In verse 10, how did the generation after Joshua forget what God had done for them? How can we avoid a similar fate?**

The generation that follows Joshua did not know the Lord or remember what God had done for the nation of Israel. This is astounding given the miraculous way God had provided for, fought for, and delivered Israel through Joshua and Moses. Perhaps they wanted to speak directly with God as Joshua and Moses had done, or perhaps they simply gave into the pressures of the pagan nations around them. Judges 2 does not outline for us the root of their forgetfulness, but the fact that they so quickly lost sight of God should serve as a warning. We must make every effort to maintain consistent mindfulness of God’s purpose for and presence in our lives.

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Conversation

› **How do these verses characterize the spiritual unfaithfulness of the Israelites? Why is idolatry so offensive to the Lord?**

These verses do not sugarcoat what the Israelites were doing not long after Joshua's passing. They did evil in the eyes of God (v. 11), they "abandoned" the Lord (v. 12) who had meticulously cared, protected, and delivered them in favor of the false gods of the nations around them. Idolatry is offensive to God because He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things—He alone is holy. When we worship anything other than God, it is as if we are saying that there are other things that can rival His majesty, goodness, and power. To worship an idol is to ascribe ultimate goodness and worth to things which are ultimately lacking. The worship of idols, therefore, is ultimately destructive. The author of Judges is also clear on God's reaction to Israel's sin—their actions provoked Him to anger. God would not sit idly by while His people ran after false gods that would not satisfy them, provide for them, or bring them life. As we continue in Judges 2, we will see how God demonstrated His goodness and love in His severe response to Israel's idolatry.

JUDGES 2:14-15

› **What consequences were a result of the Israelites' unfaithfulness to God? Who was ultimately responsible for the difficulties Israel faced in these verses?**

› **Look at the end of verse 15 (see also 2:2-3). Should the Israelites have been surprised by their suffering? What does this tell us about God?**

› **What did the Lord want His people to understand when He handed them over to their enemies? How did He want them to respond?**

We see a pattern laid out that is repeated throughout the Book of Judges: (1) Israel abandoned God for the worship of idols, (2) God used the nations around them to judge them, (3) Israel cried out to God for deliverance, (4) God saved them, and (5) they soon forgot what God had done and fell back into idolatry. The writer of Judges could not be more clear, God Himself was ultimately responsible for the Israelite's suffering at the hands of their enemies. It was God's "hand" that prevented them from being able to stand up against their enemies and overcome them (vv. 14-15).

Stress to students that the suffering Israel faced did not come out of the blue. God had warned them—He had promised them that if they worshiped the false gods of the Canaanites that He would punish them (Judg. 2:2-3). Far from evidence of God's abandonment, the fact that Israel was now suffering, was evidence that He had not given up on them.

Leader Prep

At Hazor, the Israelites defeated an enemy “as numerous as the sand on the seashore—along with a vast number of horses and chariots” (Josh. 11:4). This mighty army once “took all this land ... He [Joshua] captured all their kings and struck them down” (Josh. 11:16-17). But sadly, Israel’s once mighty army could now no longer resist their enemies.

The Lord not only withdrew His protective hand, He also worked against them and brought disaster on them. God's action should not have been a surprise. Previously, He had promised and sworn to do this. Joshua warned them: "be very diligent to love the Lord your God for your own well-being" or else "the Lord your God will not continue to drive these nations out before you" (Josh. 23:11-13). Ominously and candidly, Joshua warned, "If you break the covenant of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, and go and worship other gods, and bow down to them, the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly disappear from this good land He has given you" (23:16).

Notice in Judges 2:14 that God's people "could no longer resist their enemies." Also notice in verse 15 that God actually worked against His people as they went out to meet their enemies. These two verses demonstrate God's passive and active wrath.

Every believer understands God's active wrath. God destroyed "every creature under heaven" with the flood (Gen. 6:17). He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with burning sulfur (Gen. 19:24).

God's passive wrath may be more challenging for believers to understand. The Lord's passive wrath is His decision to not intervene in the life of a person or a situation. King Saul made a series of poor decisions, including making a sacrifice in Samuel's absence (1 Sam. 13:8-13) and failing to kill Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:8). A desperate Saul then "inquired of the LORD" (1 Sam. 28:6). But in that situation, "the Lord did not answer him" (1 Sam. 28:6). The Lord simply allowed the decisions of Saul to have their natural outcome.

The apostle Paul attempted to help Christians in the church at Rome understand God's active and passive wrath. Of God's active wrath, Paul wrote: "God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness" (1:18). But sometimes God's wrath is passive in that He delivers individuals "over in the cravings of their hearts" and "degrading passions" (1:24-26). In God's passive wrath, He simply allows normal consequences to occur. In the Book of Judges, the Israelites disobeyed God, and God then allowed their enemies to oppress them.



Ashtoreths referenced female consorts of Baal. These idols infuriated the Lord. Verse 14 specifically references that “the LORD’s anger burned against Israel.”

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Conversation

A father who truly loves his child will act quickly and decisively when he sees his child heading toward harm. Likewise, when we sin, God may allow the consequences of that sin to run its course in our lives. We should not resent or become angry at God's loving correction, but return and submit to Him in loving obedience.

JUDGES 2:16-19

› **How did the Lord respond to the Israelites' distress (vv. 16, 19)?**

› **How does His response show the difference between punishment and discipline (see Heb. 12:3-11)?**

Not all punishment is discipline. Sometimes punishments are enacted simply in hopes of correcting wrong behavior. God, however, always punishes us for the purpose of disciplining us, to help strengthen and grow in our love for Him. It is important to note that not every difficulty that we face is due to our sin, however every difficulty we face can be used by God to grow our faith and deepen our love for Him (1 Pet. 1:6-9; Heb. 12:7-11). We often miss opportunities for spiritual growth because we neglect to see God's hand at work in the details of our lives. The more we acknowledge God's hand in our lives, the more opportunities we will see to grow in our relationship with Him.

› **How can we put an end to the cycle of sin that seems to repeat itself in our lives (see 1 Pet. 3:18; Heb. 7:27)?**

The cycle of sin that we see in Judges basically continues through the rest of the Old Testament, the same basic cycle is repeated again and again as Israel constantly fell into worshiping the false gods of the nations surrounding them during the time of the kings and prophets. There is a reason that this cycle is never truly broken by any of Israel's kings or spiritual leaders. These men were not God's answer for sin. Jesus is the ultimate answer both to Israel's perpetual cycle of sin and to the sin in our lives. Jesus accomplished the salvation that the sacrifices the priests offered looked forward to. As the sinless one, Jesus was able to put Himself forward as the one sacrifice for all sin. In so doing, Jesus broke the cycle that has kept us from a right relationship with God. His sacrifice not only brings us forgiveness, but it also that empowers us to live for Him.

➤➤ **ITEM 6 (LEADER PACK)** Display the **Judges Cycle** pack item to allow students who may learn visually to better understand this cycle we see in the Book of Judges that continues through the rest of the Old Testament as well. Discuss how students can take action to break the cycle of sin in their own lives, and how this is only possible when we are seeking Christ first.

Leader Prep

JUDGES 2:16-17

Verse 16 completes a cycle often found in the Book of Judges: rebellion, oppression, repentance, and deliverance. In these verses the cycle is incomplete, but notice: “The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord’s sight” (rebellion, v. 11); “He handed them over to marauders” (oppression, v. 14), and then “the Lord raised up judges” (deliverance, v. 16).

The complete cycle can be seen in chapter 4. The cycle can be seen additionally in 3:7-15 and 6:1-14. The Israelites made the same mistake again and again.

God provided judges to provide leadership during these dark times. We should not understand the judges simply in terms of a judicial role. While some judges tried cases and administered justice (see 4:5), the judges of the book by the same name served as military deliverers. The exploits of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, often involved armed conflict. Ehud and Samson more or less acted alone, but the others led armies into battle.

Considering the trying times in which the Israelites lived, we might conclude they would have welcomed the leadership of God-appointed and God-anointed judges. Instead, they did not listen to their judges, but prostituted themselves with other gods. The phrase *did not listen* means the people did not obey God's instructions through the judges.

While Joshua and the elders had been faithful to the Lord (Josh. 24:31) and walked in obedience to the Lord's commands, the Israelites of the Book of Judges quickly turned from the way of their fathers. The term *quickly* speaks to the rapidity with which God's people returned to their idolatry.

JUDGES 2:18-19

God's faithfulness in verse 18 is contrasted with Israel's unfaithfulness described in the previous verse. Compassionately, the Lord raised up judges and, through them, saved the people. He was moved to pity whenever they groaned because of those who were oppressing and afflicting them.

The same word for groaned was used in Exodus 2:23-25. When His people groaned because their bondage in Egypt, God heard, remembered, saw, and took notice. During the time of the judges, when God's people groaned because of their oppression, the Lord was moved to pity. The Hebrew word translated moved to pity reflects God's compassion for His people.



As long as the judge lived and provided leadership, the Israelites remained faithful to the Lord. But whenever the judge died, so died the faithfulness of the Israelites. In fact, their disloyalty to the Lord only worsened: the Israelites would act even more corruptly. They depended on human judges to deliver them; unfortunately the judges died. We depend on the eternal Christ as our faithful Deliverer.

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Application

CENTRAL TRUTH

God loves His people enough to oppose them.

NOW WHAT?

- › **When we abandon the Lord and turn instead to something else, what are we hoping to find? How can we avoid this temptation?**
- › **What is your typical response when God points out sin in your life? What does it take to admit our guilt instead of defending our actions or blaming others for our choices?**

Because we are sinners who have not yet been fully redeemed, we all struggle with the temptation of thinking too highly of ourselves. Christians, more than any other people, ought to have a humble view of themselves. As followers of Christ, we know that in and of ourselves, we have nothing that would make God love us or earn His approval. Rather than thinking highly of ourselves, Scripture challenges us to think of ourselves with “sober judgment” (Rom. 12:3). In other words, we should strive to maintain an accurate view of ourselves. This requires being open to correction. How students respond when others correct them or call them out on sin in their life is telling. Encourage your students both to seek accountability from their brothers and sisters in Christ in your group and to ask God to make them humble and correctable rather than selfish and prideful.

- › **How might God be using your present circumstances to correct you and help you grow? How can we be more aware of God’s work in our lives?**
- › **Think about some ways God tests people today. How should we respond to these tests?**

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Finish your group time with these thoughts and encourage students to memorize the verse listed for this session. Memorizing God's Word allows it to dwell in us and allows Him to speak through His Word in our times of need. Also encourage your group to take advantage of the Keep on Digging section in their Personal Study Guides and to take the truths of this section and apply them to their lives.

- › **Dwell:** Read Joshua 2:11-19 again. As you read, consider how Israel's cycle of sin relates to your daily life. Are there any patterns of sin that you seem to keep falling back into? Ask God to break the cycle of sin in your life so that you would no longer be enslaved to it. If there are persistent cycles of sin in your life that keep coming up, consider confessing this to a trusted Christian friend or mentor and asking for accountability in fighting it.
- › **Memorize:** Judges 2:18
- › **Pray:** Are there patterns of sin in your heart and life that feel like they are almost unbreakable? Spend some time confessing these sin patterns to God, admitting your inability to overcome them on your own. Ask God to soften your heart to His Spirit so that you hate the sin that is keeping you from Him. Look to Him for the strength and grace necessary to overcome patterns of sin.

KEEP ON DIGGING

Read Hebrews 7:11-28. As you read, consider the following questions.

- › How does Jesus' sacrifice on the cross compare to the sacrifices of the priests?
- › What made Jesus able to offer a once for all sacrifice for sin?
- › How has Jesus broken the cycle of sin in our lives?
- › How will you trust Jesus this week to help you overcome cycles of sin?



For an expository verse-by-verse sermon outline/discussion guide that complements this session with a study in Galatians, see lifeway.com/12PJETBFAL16. For free training, go to MinistryGrid.com/web/ExploreTheBible.