

Judges 10

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] I will no longer save you. It would be difficult to imagine more solemn words from the lips of God directed to His people. I will no longer save you. That's not the way it works, surely.

There must be a mistake. That's not what God is meant to say. Where are the open arms and the reassuring words? Where is the God who delights in mercy and is ever ready to forgive? These are the words of God that stand before us in all their starkness in our passage this morning. There in verse 13 of Judges chapter 10, I will no longer save you. Now just taking a step back and considering how we've been plowing our way through the book of Judges, in so doing what we've generally done, almost invariably, is that we've attempted to see the big picture. And in order to do that, we've generally dealt with large chunks of the book, a whole chapter or sometimes more than a chapter. And of course, that has led to the need to sacrifice, in some measure, attention to detail, and attention to detail that would derail us from seeing that big picture and grasping the big truths that we find in the book. But though that's the way we've generally been treating the book, and I imagine the way we will continue to treat it largely, it is sometimes good to pause and consider the details. While we acknowledge, even in life, the danger of not seeing the wood for the trees, it's also true that there can be profit sometimes in examining the trees. It doesn't have to be either or. And this morning, we're more concerned with the trees than the wood, and we'll focus our attention on just 11 verses of chapter 10 of the book of Judges, the verses that we've read already this morning. Now these verses at the beginning of chapter 10, or that really make up the bulk of chapter 10, serve as an introduction to the enigma that is the character of Jephthah. But today, Jephthah will remain unconsidered. Our concern this morning is with a brief but telling drama that is played out with two main characters, namely Israel and the Lord. In these verses that we've read, we have this drama, we have this dialogue, this encounter between the Lord and His people. And it's a drama that is played out in three acts, or in any case, that's the manner in which we are going to consider it this morning. Three acts of this drama, of this encounter recorded for us between the Lord and His people. And as we consider each of the three acts, what we're going to do is, first of all, we're going to notice what it is that the Israelites do.

What do the Israelites do, and then how is it that God responds? So this is what we find each step of the way. Something that the people do, and how God responds. And then again, what the people do, and how God responds. And then on a third occasion, what it is that the people do, and how God responds.

Let's begin with act one of this drama that really is recorded for us from verses six through to verse nine of Judges chapter 10. How does that section begin? Well, then in verse six, again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Now, there's a depressing predictability about this summary statement of what the Israelites did. Again, again, and again. But leaving aside that observation of the depressing predictability of what happens.

Leaving that aside, what concretely is it that the Israelites do, or are we told that they do? Well, they did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Now, this expression that the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord is an expression, a description of the Lord is an expression, a description of the Israelites that we've met already in the book of Judges. But on previous occasions, we have not paused to consider more carefully the significance of this particular manner of describing what they did.

[5 : 30] They did evil in the eyes of the Lord. What I want to do is just think a little bit more carefully about this expression. And what I want to do is to highlight the place that God occupies in this matter of evil that the Israelites were guilty of. What place does God occupy? Now, that may seem a strange way of expressing it, and some might be protesting, well, God doesn't occupy any place in the matter of evil. But bear with me as I try and explain what it is that I want to say. And there's

two points that I want you to notice relating to this matter of how God is involved, if you wish, in the matter of evil. The first thing that I want you to notice that I think we find very clearly declared in this phrase is that evil is defined by God. This is the implication of the phrase for the evil that the Israelites do.

We're told is in the eyes of the Lord. Very explicitly, we're told that. They did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Now, what does that mean? What is it intended by saying that the evil that they did, they did in the eyes of the Lord? Well, it doesn't simply mean that the evil is perpetrated in His presence or that God is a witness to their evil, though that is surely true. But it means that what they do is determined and judged to be evil is determined and judged to be evil by the Lord. Now, that is hugely significant for us to recognize and to get to grips with. It's a truth that each of us must take on board and submit to. Evil, and what evil is, is determined by God. He decides what is good and what is evil. He decides what is right and what is wrong. The problem with the Israelites is that they did what God had determined and declared and revealed to them was evil. Now, if we bring this to ourselves and to our own circumstances and our own generation, our own society, in our thirst for autonomy, our greatest folly is to imagine that we can decide what is right and wrong. Now, that foolishness, it's very modern, but it's also very ancient. It goes right back to the Garden of Eden. Did God really say, is it really such a bad thing to eat of this forbidden fruit? Is it really forbidden at all? You see, in this way of thinking, in this way of debating, what man is doing is saying, well, I'm going to decide what's right and wrong. I'll decide what's good and what's evil. I'm not having any God telling me what is good and what is evil. No, I will determine these things. We live in a society that delights in rejecting God's authority and prerogative to determine that which is good and that which is evil.

And, of course, the problem with that is that if the Almighty is not to decide, then who will? Who does decide? Who will decide? The powers that be, the movers and shakers, 50% plus one of the population. Can we all just decide for ourselves? I'll decide for myself and you decide for yourself. But then what happens when my judgment clashes with your judgment? Who is to resolve that clash of values or morals or however you wish to describe it? Who can arbitrate?

What this expression describing what the Israelites did determines and declares very clearly is that it is God who determines what is good and what is evil. God decides. God has decided. And your concern ought to be God's judgment on your life and conduct, how He determines how you live and what you do, rather than being obsessed with what others think or indeed what you think yourself about your life. Your greatest concern should be the eyes of God and what He determines about you. The evil that we do, the evil that I do, the evil that you do is in the eyes of the Lord. So that's one truth that we can draw out and that is implicit in this description of what the Israelites did. They did evil in the eyes of the Lord. But a second thing we can say in terms of how God relates to this matter of evil is this, that evil involves the rejection of God. Ultimately, that is what evil is. It is rejecting God. Then in verse 6, God Himself speaks of how the Israelites forsook the Lord because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served Him.

[10 : 48] They rejected God. They rejected God. And this rejection of God involves two intertwined actions, the rejection of God and the replacement of God. And these things we really can't separate. They go together. We're told, as we've just noted, that they forsook the Lord, but we're also told that they did so as they served the Baals and indeed all the other gods that are mentioned and listed in the passage. Of course, this rejection of God, this replacement of God is very much tied to what we have just said concerning God's prerogative to define evil. The problem was that the Israelites grew tired of God's burdensome demands as they saw them. And so they rejected God and replaced Him with God's definition of good and evil. Now, it's not greatly surprising that the replacement gods were much more in tune with the moral compass of the sinners who chose them as it was sinners who created them.

These were gods in the image and likeness of sinful man. All of the gods mentioned here, and we don't have time to consider them all, but all of them, of all the different nations that surrounded Israel and indeed inhabited within Israel, these were gods made in the image and likeness of sinful man. And so, not surprisingly, we're very amenable to the sinful likes and dislikes of sinful men. Now, of course, today when we read of these gods that the Israelites served and bowed before, it seems so almost quaint, it seems so alien to anything we would do. We're much too sophisticated to fashion gods of silver and gold.

But be assured of this, we remain, as men and women, master craftsmen of the dark art of fashioning idols after our own image. We just give them fancy names like progressive values or even values for a modern Scotland, or we could multiply the names that we give to describe gods that we fashion after our own image that fit much more nicely with what we want to do and what we don't want to do.

Before moving on to consider God's response, let me just very quickly invite you to notice one other depressing feature of evil, and it is this, that evil spirals. Now, why do I say that? Well, this book of Judges is often described as a book that records for us a vicious cycle. There's this cycle that is repeated of the people rejecting God, of suffering as a result of that, crying out to God, being delivered by God, and then again they reject God, and the cycle repeats itself. And the picture of a cycle is, in a measure, a helpful and in a measure accurate. But what I would suggest to you is that rather than a cycle, what we have in the book of Judges is a spiral, or if you wish, a spiraling cycle that spirals downwards to greater evil and to greater misery. When one cycle, to use that language, is replaced by another, it's not just the same. It gets worse. But in recognizing that, let me just say one other thing as well for you to just take note of, and I think hopefully could be relevant and helpful to you even in your own personal experience. Note that our need, your need and my need for God's deliverance and forgiveness is as urgent at the beginning of the spiral as it is when we have spiraled further downwards in our own life and in our own conduct. Don't wait till you're at the bottom of the pit before you ask God to rescue you. Any time is a good time to recognize your need of a God who is able and ready to rescue you from yourself. How does God respond? In this first act, how does God respond to what the Israelites do? The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. How does God respond and why?

Well, we're told in the passage of a twofold response on the part of God. Twofold response, but is very much part of a parcel that you can't really divide in neatly into two parts. But none the less, just picking up on the language of the passage, we're told that he became angry, and we're also told that he sold them, that is, the Israelites, his people, he sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. We have that there in verse 7 of the passage. And let's look at both of these things that we're told that God did in response to the evil of the Israelites. First of all, he became angry.

[16:14] Now, why did God become angry? One thing that I would say, even before we directly answer the question, one thing that we can reasonably deduce from the fact that God, or the fact that God became angry, is that God cares passionately about our conduct. In particular, the conduct of those who claim to be his people. An indifferent God, who couldn't care less, is not likely to get angry at the conduct of some uppity creatures. An indifferent God could look on, unmoved by our rebellion, by our evil.

Well, why should he care? He's indifferent to the way you behave, the way I behave. It is not a matter of concern to Almighty God. But God's anger, it tells us a great deal, but it certainly tells us this, that God is concerned that God does care about you and your life and your behavior and your conduct.

God became angry. He became angry because he cares, and he became angry because he is holy. And his holiness requires just anger in the face of evil. Anger that is just in the face of evil. And while we don't have time to think about this in greater depth, be assured that this is a good thing. It is a good thing that God is angry with evil. There is nothing more terrifying than the prospect of an almighty God who is indifferent to evil. What a horrendous world this would be if God was indifferent, if he couldn't care less. While we may struggle, and while we may even tremble at the reality of God who is angry with evil, it is a good thing that it is so. He became angry. But then we're told, and of course this was an expression of his anger, he sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites.

Now this action of God is very tough to digest. That he would sell his own people effectively into slavery does seem very drastic. And of course it is drastic. It's intended to be drastic. It is drastic action that reveals both God's justice and God's grace. It reveals his justice because evil deserves judgment. It is the just and right thing to do, to judge the evildoer. But this drastic action also reveals God's grace because the ultimate purpose of his judgment, of his drastic judgment, is to bring his people back. We just need to look at what happens as described in what follows in the account. You see, we read there in verse 7, he sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. And then what is described is horrendous, who that year shattered and crushed them.

It's God who exposed them to this, that they be shattered and crushed. For 18 years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gideon, the land of the Amorites. The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin, and the house of Ephraim. And Israel was in great distress. But then, what do we read? Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord. You see, this is where we see God's grace in selling them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites that it might have as its outcome, that as they suffer and as they endure this misery, they would cry out to him, recognizing their need of him. So that's act one. The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. God responds. He's angry with them. He sells them into the hands of his enemies. But then we have act two from verse 10 through to verse 14. What do the Israelites do, as recorded for us here? What do they do?

[20 : 21] Well, we read, then the Israelites cried out to the Lord. Now this is promising, and it gets better, because then what do we read? We're told what they say, what it is that they cry out. They cry out to the Lord, we have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals. Now the words are fine.

We can't quibble with the words that they use, but I think we have reason to conclude that though the words are fine, what we have here is a superficial, we might even say a false repentance. And I want us to just notice some of the features of false repentance. But first of all, we need to establish that it is indeed false repentance, and that we're not being unfair on the Israelites. I think what establishes definitively that what we have here in act two is false repentance, is the manner in which we can establish is by comparing that verse 10 with what we're told in verse 16, which is moving forward to act three. But we just need to do that quickly to establish that this is indeed false repentance. In verse 10, the words are fine, we have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals. But then in verse 16, this is subsequent to them confessing in this way, what are we told?

Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. Well, what's being said there? Well, what's being said is that when in verse 10, in act two, they say we have sinned against you, we've forsaken you, we've served the Baals, the words are fine, but they don't actually do anything about it. They continue to serve the Baals. And so, fine words, but they're not accompanied by action on the part of the Israelites. And that, of course, brings us on to notice some of the features of false repentance. First of all, it's just words, just words, fine words, commendable words, but just words, not accompanied by action. And how often is that true of us, even as believers? Fine words, maybe even accompanied by tears and wailing. But when it's not accompanied by action, then it's not true repentance, just words. We might say also that false repentance is just regret. Regret at the consequences of sin, but no sorrow for the sin itself. That's false repentance. We regret the consequences. The Israelites, they take no delight in being crushed and being shattered and being oppressed.

What kind of masochist would enjoy that? Of course, they don't enjoy that. Of course, it's miserable for them to be in this situation. Of course, they want relief. Of course, they do. Who wouldn't? But what they're regretting are the consequences of their sin, but they're not sorrowing for their sin itself.

Just words, just regret. We might summarize false repentance in the words, just me. It's all about me. My problem, my predicament, my needs, my peace of mind, my terms and conditions. And so we come to God and we say, get me out of this hole. But just so that I can jump into another one, once you get me out of this one. Just so that I can go on doing and living as I see fit. Relieve me of the consequences of my sin, but let me carry on sinning as I please. And that is false repentance. How does God respond to this false repentance? Well, this is where we come back to what we saw at the beginning, the shocking reality of God's declaration that He will not save them. How does God respond? Well, He doesn't save.

[24 : 12] We can consider just a little bit more carefully those sobering words recorded for us there in verse 13. I will no longer save you. I will no longer save you. God says three things really in response to their false repentance that culminates in these sobering words. In verses 11 and 12, He reminds them and He establishes His credentials as a loving and saving God who can rightly expect and demand the loyalty of His people. He says, didn't I save you on so many occasions from so many enemies?

Didn't I do that for you? But then He goes on and He makes clear in verse 13 that though willing to save, He is under no obligation to do so in the absence of genuine repentance. God will not be

mocked by the self-seeking repentance of a rebellious people. But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. And then in the following verse, He urges them with really a great dose of irony. He urges them to look for a quick fix elsewhere. If it's a quick fix that they're looking for, then they can look elsewhere. They can go to the gods that they have been besotted with for all these years. Go to these gods, He says. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble. The conduct of the people has placed them this close to being beyond the covenant privileges that God grants to His own people. With privilege comes responsibility, and if they will persist in trampling underfoot God's grace and presuming on His fatherly love, then He will withdraw His fatherly care of them. And yet, even this determination grounded in justice to not save them is also reflective of His grace. We might say of ridiculous grace, as even these words have as their purpose to shake them out of their stubborn stupor that they might truly repent. I will not save you. Go seek help from the other gods. And as He says these things, words that are just, yet there is also in the heart of God this intention that as the people recognize the depth of their plight and the inability of the other gods to save them, that they will finally come to Him in genuine repentance. Before we move on to the third act, we ought to soberly reflect on the folly of testing God and presuming on His grace and patience. His patience is not, as it is sometimes wrongly described, eternal. Act 3, verses 15 and 16,

But the Israelites said to the Lord, We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now. Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord, and He could bear Israel's misery no longer. What do the Israelites do? Well, they cry out again. Well, actually, they don't cry out again. We're told there in verse 15 that they said to the Lord. And while we would have to take a little bit care of not trying to read too much in the choice of verbs that are employed, it would seem that there is a significance in the choice of verbs employed here by the writer. In Act 2, we're told that they cried out, and in many ways crying out seems so much more dramatic than simply they said to the Lord. But the problem with their crying out is that it was full of drama, but there was no depth. It looked good, but it did not emerge from a heartfelt recognition of their need. Now things are a lot more calm. They said to the Lord, not crying out, maybe not accompanied by great song and dance or much weeping and wailing, and yet there is a genuine and a true recognition of their condition of their sin. They soberly said to the Lord, we have sinned. They've ditched the drama but are now speaking from the heart. And this time they give solid evidence of true repentance. If we just compare and contrast with what we noted a few moments ago, now it's not just words. There in verse 16, then they got rid of the foreign gods among them.

It's not just words anymore. It's accompanied by actions. It's not just regret. Notice what they say in verse 15 as they lay themselves at the mercy of God. Do with us whatever you think best. Whatever you think best. Yes, our desire is to be rescued, but do what you think best. We will submit to what you determine for us. Here there's not just regret for the consequences of sin. Here there is an acknowledgement of their own responsibility for sin, sorrow for sin. Now it's not just me.

[29 : 44] Now it's just God. It's no longer all about me. It's now all about God and what He determines and a willingness to submit what He determines for us. Now centuries have come and gone, but true repentance, the repentance that we are called to exercise before God remains the same for each of us.

Have you repented of your sins? Do you acknowledge that it is God who determines what is right and wrong, what is good and evil? Do you acknowledge that you have fallen short of the standards that He has set for us? Do you not only regret the consequences of your sin, but do you sorrow for the sin itself? Do you acknowledge God's prerogative and right to deal with you as He sees fit, and do you cast yourself upon His mercy as the Israelites do here, as they genuinely and sincerely come before Him in repentance? And then we come to the final part in God's response to what the Israelites do. How does God respond? Well, God's response is described in quite remarkable and challenging language. There in verse 16, at the end of the verse we read, and He could bear Israel's misery no longer. He could bear Israel's misery no longer. And so it follows consequently, and if we were to continue reading the passage it would be confirmed, God acts to save His people and to raise up again a deliverer in this occasion, Jephthah. The reason He acts on their behalf, the reason He raises up a deliverer for them is because of this. He could bear Israel's misery no longer. God's response to their genuine repentance is a saving response. But why? Why does He save them? Or to put it another way, what is God's salvation ultimately in response to? Now, that may

seem a silly question because it may seem so obvious. We might almost instinctively imagine that the answer is indeed an obvious one.

God saves in response to the true repentance of His people. When their repentance was false, as we've seen, He declares, I will no longer save you. But now that it is true repentance, God steps in to save. Now, it all seems very reasonable. It all seems very coherent. The problem with this thesis is that it does not correspond to what we're told in the Bible, in the passage. You see, let's ask the question and see what the Bible says. Why does God act in favor of His people? What is it that moves God to compassion? It's not the people's repentance principally, but the people's misery. That's what we're told. And He could bear Israel's misery no longer. And so, He steps in to save and to raise up a deliverer. It is the people's misery that so moves God, and it so moves God because of His compassion.

The heart of our salvation lies in the very heart of God. The cause of our salvation is to be found not in our imperfect penitence or our repentance, even when it is sincere, but the cause of our salvation is to be found in the love of God for us. God steps in to save because He could bear Israel's misery no longer. Not because He says, oh, they've ticked the right boxes, they're repenting as they're meant to, now I'm going to save them. No. It is because of their misery and because of how that moves His compassionate heart to act savingly on their behalf. Now, in saying this, are we suggesting that repentance is unimportant by no means? Repentance and faith are the means that God has established for us to be saved, but they are not the cause of our salvation. The cause is to be found in the heart of God, in His heart of compassion. So, the third act provides, if you wish, a happy ending.

God raises up or is about to raise up a deliverer for His people. A happy ending, we might say, but is it a coherent ending? Has God had to sacrifice His justice and truth on the altar of His love and compassion? What are we to make of the words that He had expressed and voiced to the people, I will no longer save you? Did God change His mind? Did His heart rule over His head? The tension that we find time and again in Judges, between the demands of God's justice and His heart desire to save, seems to be captured by the very words in our passage, and He could bear Israel's misery no longer.

[35 : 12] And of course, as we've already seen, this is a tension that awaits a future resolution. A tension that awaits ultimate and future resolution in the person of Jesus and at Calvary. At the cross, where Jesus died for the sins of the world, the justice of God is fully and definitively satisfied in the death of the altogether righteous one in the place of sinners. But also at the cross, we have displayed the very heart of God as His compassion is enfleshed in the giving of His own Son for our salvation. And thanks be to God that it is so.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for what it reveals of who You are. And we thank You for Your heart of compassion. We thank You that You are not indifferent to us.

We thank You that You are a God who is concerned about the lies that we live and the conduct that we undertake. We thank You that You're a God who looks down in mercy upon us as You see the self-inflicted misery that we often endure. And we thank You that You respond and You respond to save. And we thank You that that saving initiative, that saving purpose is grounded in Yourself. That it does not depend on us.

It does not depend on how loud we cry or how low we stoop. It doesn't depend on how genuine or true our repentance is, but it is grounded in Yourself and in Your love and in Your heart. And we thank You for this.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.