

Judges 2:6 - 3:6

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[0 : 0 0] Where did it all go wrong? Let me read two verses from the passage that we've already read, the very first verse, and then the very final verse of our reading. And as we read just these two verses, I'd invite you to listen and to compare and contrast what is said in these two verses. So, in Judges chapter 2 and in verse 6, we read, After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to his own inheritance. The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel. And then reading the final verse of our reading in chapter 3 and verse 5, the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perisites, Hivites, and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons and served their gods. At the beginning of the account, we're told, the people served the Lord. And at the end of the account, we're told, and served their gods. Other gods, the gods of the people amongst whom they lived. So, where did it all go wrong? And how did God respond to it all going wrong? These are the two questions that we want to consider this morning. And we'll begin with the first. Indeed, we'll spend most of the time we have available on the first question, where did it all go wrong? Before, more briefly, though in many ways, it is certainly as important considering how God responded. But before we even begin with the first question, where did it all go wrong? We do have a preliminary question, and it's this. What's the point? What's the point spending time considering what is ancient history? How can any of what we've read be relevant to us living lives in the real world today? Well, there are certainly two reasons, maybe more, why what we read is very relevant. The first is simply this, that people haven't changed. Believers haven't changed. God's people hasn't changed fundamentally through the generations. We still mess up. We still go in the wrong direction. And then, parallel to that, we know, very particularly, we know that God hasn't changed. And so, the manner in which He responds to the plight of His people long, long ago, speaks to us of how an unchanging God responds to His people today, that He still graciously responds to the folly and the foolishness of His people. Where did it all go wrong? The question is perhaps more accurately, why did things go wrong? Let me suggest three reasons that are described for us in the passage. God's people were a careless people. That's the first thing we're going to notice.

God's people were a careless people, but also they were a compromised people. And then finally, they are presented to us as a captivated people. Three reasons why things went wrong. Why a people who are described as serving the Lord, as being obedient to Him are then, and not much time has passed, are then described a generation later as serving other gods. Why? Well, here we have a careless people, a compromised people, and a captivated people. Let's think of each in turn. First of all, a careless people. And here I'm thinking particularly of the first verses of the passage as they're described to us, very particularly as they conclude in verse 10 there of chapter 2. After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, the generation of Joshua and of the elders who lived with Joshua, after that generation, had been gathered to their fathers. We're told another generation grew up, the subsequent generation, who knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel.

In this verse, we have described for us this very sobering and dramatic generational shift. The verses describe what happened. Here we had a generation who served the Lord, and then another generation arose who did not do so, who did not know the Lord and did not know what He had done for Israel. So, the passage in a way describes the reality, the sober or sobering reality.

But of greater interest to us really is to ask why. Why the dramatic shift from one generation to the next? Who's to blame? Who can we point the finger of blame towards? Are we to blame the fathers?

Or are we to blame the sons? Did Joshua's generation fail to bring up their children in the feed of the Lord? Or did the children, as they grew into men and women, did they consciously and culpably choose to ignore the godly example and instruction of their parents? I imagine that the answer is a bit of both.

[6 : 09] Well, let's just explore this a little more. First of all, as we think of Joshua's generation, who are described in this summary statement, the people served the Lord. The people of that generation served the Lord. As a summary statement, it is, of course, true, but it is a broad-brush statement that doesn't present to us the whole truth, nor is it intended to present the whole truth.

You see, even last week, if you were able to be here last week, you'll remember how even this generation was a generation to whom God was painfully obliged to pose the question, why have you done this? Why have you disobeyed me? This is the same generation described as a generation who served the Lord, who had failed to obey the Lord in all that He had demanded of them. They had not driven out the Canaanites in the manner that He had indicated. And, of course, this culpable cohabitation, this intermingling with the peoples of Canaan was only going to end in tears, as, of course, we will soon discover. So, this was a generation who, with a measure of sincerity, served the Lord, but who fell short and began to compromise in different ways. The other reality that a single statement to describe a whole generation cannot adequately portray is that the Israelites of Joshua's generation were a mixed bag. There were those whose service was heartfelt, and there were others, no doubt, who served as a matter of custom, or perhaps in some cases even of self-interest. Well, this is what everybody does. It's in my interest to go with the flow and to do what others do. And so, no doubt, as in every generation, there were those whose service was genuine and others whose service was far from being so.

I wonder, did they, as a generation, a generation described as those who served the Lord, did they bring up their children in the ways of the Lord? Did they, by precept and example, mold their children in godly living? Did they pray for and with their sons and daughters? Or were they careless in such matters?

I think we can only conclude that as a people, as a generation, they were careless. And the damning evidence of this is in the very words that were given here in the passage in verse 10. Another generation grew up. Not some distant generation, no, the immediately subsequent generation. Another generation grew up who neither knew the Lord nor what He had done for Israel. How could that be?

Had it not been for certainly in part, perhaps in great part, to the carelessness of their appearance?

[9 : 32] Now, notice that when here in the verse this new generation is described as neither knowing the Lord nor what He had done for Israel, I don't think we're to reasonably imagine that they knew nothing about the Lord. That seems quite inconceivable that they would know nothing. They must have known something from what they heard their parents and grandparents speak of. Yes, they knew something about God. They knew something of the stories of the Exodus and of the conquest. These are things that had not happened in ancient history for them. They knew something about these things, but they did not know the Lord for themselves. This was their problem. This was what characterized this new generation that arose.

And when we draw these things to our own day, what we find described here of a careless people, what we find described really as a frighteningly contemporary picture. I remember years ago, far away from Aberdeen, so you can't even begin to try and work out who I'm talking about. It would be impossible for you to do so. If it weren't, I wouldn't tell the story. But I remember years ago, visiting an elderly couple who had always attended church on a fairly regular basis, but would never made any public profession of faith, and who gave no evidence in as much as we can discern these things of enjoying themselves, a living, vital faith. Now, on the occasion that I was there in their home, as it happens, their grandchildren were visiting. It was the summer, and they'd come to spend some time with Granny and Grandpa. Now, I had never met the grandchildren, and one of the reasons why I'd never met them is that even when they were visiting Granny and Grandpa, they never appeared in church. Now, it was evident that for the couple I was visiting, this was a source of some discomfort, some embarrassment that the grandchildren never went to church. Not only embarrassment, but also, I think, genuine sadness.

And they seemed genuinely at a loss to explain why their son, the father of these children, and his wife failed to send their children to Sunday school. That's what they should be doing.

They weren't doing what they had done as parents. But what they seemed unable to understand is that they were the problem. Their nominal church attendance, unaccompanied by a living faith, had proved, not surprisingly, unattractive for their own children who were now grown-ups. And they, of course, in turn, chose not to impose such formal religiosity on their own children. It's not surprising at all. The responsibility in great measure, not exclusively, but in great measure, was on the very grandparents who lamented the non-attendance of their grandchildren to Sunday school. Now, it is, of course, true that those who profess faith, those who are active in church, can also fail in the matter of bringing up their children in the ways of the Lord. That is certainly also true. We can be as committed Christians if we are so described. We can also be careless. We can be a careless people in this matter. And if we are, we will likely reap a sad harvest. Well, that of the generation who did serve the Lord, but what of the children? Well, of course, they too may well have been guilty to choose to go their own way. They too may well have been guilty of ignoring the fallible, certainly, but genuine instruction and example of their parents. No doubt this was true of this other generation who grew up and knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel. The challenge for us is to learn from the mistakes of Joshua's generation. We must examine ourselves as parents and as a church in this matter of raising our covenant children in the faith, and we must take action. What action? Well, I can do no better than to direct you to the action that God Himself has indicated for believing parents, as we find it described certainly in summary form in Deuteronomy and chapter 6 from verse 4. Familiar words, and I'll limit myself simply to reading them for you.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your against. Let's make sure that we are not a careless people, but this is one of the reasons that we have this tragic shift from one generation to the next. But the second reason I think we can identify in the passage is that Israel was a compromised people. A careless people, but also a compromised people. What was God's call upon His people? Well, they were called to absolute loyalty and devotion to Him alone. Now, this call that God laid upon His people is one that we can be found in many different passages. Let me just read a couple of verses in Joshua chapter 24 where the covenant is renewed at Shechem. And so this is in the very time that we are relating to or considering. In chapter 24 of Joshua and from verse 19 we read,

[15 : 46] Joshua said to the people, you are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God. He is 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.

But the people said to Joshua, no, we will serve the Lord. Then Joshua said, you are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord. Yes, we are witnesses, they replied. Now then, said Joshua, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel. This was the uncompromising demand of God upon His people, a demand for absolute loyalty and devotion to Him alone. But what did the people do? Did they throw away the foreign gods that they encountered in Canaan? Well, that's not what they did. What are we told in chapter 2 and from verse 12? What is the next step in this drifting away, this abandoning of the faith of their fathers?

Well, we read, they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the people around them, and they provoked the Lord to anger.

But why? Why would they do that? Why would they so easily, it would appear, forsake that the God who had rescued them from Egypt and served these other gods, why would they do that? Why would they compromise themselves in this way? I wonder if the people woke up one morning and said to themselves, well, you know, we've had enough of the Lord. We've had enough of Yahweh and His demands. We're going to worship Baal now.

Thus far, we've worshipped Yahweh. Well, no longer. From today onward, we're going to worship Baal. I wonder if that's what happened in some communal decision. Well, of course, I'm sure that's not the way it happened. That's not the way it works. What no doubt happened was a slow but steady seduction by the seeming attractions and advantages of Baal worship alongside what they

would have testified to being their primary commitment to Yahweh. Of course, they were deceiving themselves in that, but that is how they would have painted it. No, we are the people of the Lord. We are the people of Yahweh.

[18 : 18] He is our God. We are His people, but you know, these other gods, they're not to be dismissed. We're not to be intolerant of them. We're not to draw the good things that we can find in them. Our God is Yahweh. Make no mistake. But, you know, these other gods, they have something to offer also. I think we can better understand the attraction of these other gods if we know just a little bit about Baal and Ashtoreth.

These were the two principal gods of the Canaanites. And the worship of Baal and Ashtoreth was basically what would be described as a fertility occult. The belief of the Canaanites was that when Baal, who was the male god in Ashtoreth, the female god, engaged in some kind of cosmic intercourse, well, the harvests would be bountiful and their wives would be fertile and their beasts would have many young. This was the core conviction that surrounded their religion and their worship.

And of course, this was a very attractive outcome, that they would see great bountiful harvests and fertile families. Well, that's what they believed.

It all depended on Baal and Ashtoreth engaging in intercourse and having sex. And if that was happening among the gods, then there would be bountiful harvests. But did the people simply have to wait and hope that Baal or Ashtoreth were in the mood? Were they simply dependent on that happening?

Did they have to simply say, well, we hope that this will happen, but if it does, great, but if it doesn't, well, what can we do? Well, no. You see, they were very clever in this regard. There was a way of encouraging Baal and Ashtoreth to do the business. And how did they do that? Well, they had these shrines in the high places. And Canaanite men would go and they would have sex with the cult shrine prostitutes. And in so doing, the purpose of that was to encourage Baal and Ashtoreth, that they would do likewise and as a consequence, you would have these bountiful harvests. Well, you can see, however pagan and alien and almost primitive that may sound to us, almost to the point of being comical, you could see how for the Israelites, a people who would have been struggling to come to terms with an unfamiliar agricultural economy. Remember, these people, they'd been slaves in Egypt for generations.

[21 : 02] They'd spent 40 years in the desert. These were people who knew nothing about crops and about harvests and about how to get big harvests. And here they were trying to make a living in this new land.

And it was alien to them. They didn't know the ins and outs of it. And their neighbor, the Canaanite, well, he'd been doing it for years. He knew all about agriculture and harvest. And he said, you know, listen, friend, I see you're struggling there. Your harvests are really not that great. You know, listen, don't misunderstand me, my friend. You know, your God, Yahweh, you know, he's some God.

We've heard the stories. We know about the Jordan. We know about the walls of Jericho. Wow, he is some God. But, you know, when it comes to agriculture, he really, that's not his field of expertise. Now, Baal, he's your man. If you want big harvest, Baal's the one who can help you.

Why don't you come with me to the shrine? Yeah, you and you've got a good strapping sun there. Well, why don't we go to the shrine? You'll enjoy it. It'll be good. What have you to lose? You know, you carry on worshiping your God, but let's go along to the shrine and see what happens.

You can see how that could have been attractive to a struggling Israelite. And so, something or something along these lines is what happened. You see, in a nutshell, and this brings us to be something very contemporary. In a nutshell, what Baal offered, Baal could not deliver, but what Baal offered was good money and good sex. I don't know how good it was, but money and sex, big harvests, lots of money, shrine prostitutes, lots of fun. This is what Baal offered to the Israelites, and this is what drew them. It was a potent combination.

[22 : 44] Well, let's try and bring things to our own day and ourselves. What about us? I don't think many of us are about to throw ourselves into paganism. We're far too sophisticated for that. But the temptation to marginalize God and be seduced by the thinkings and priorities and idols of the world remains as strong. For many of us, the areas where we are tempted to compromise and serve other idols are not so different than for the Israelites over 3,000 years ago. Money, wealth, pleasure, sex. We buy into the lie of our culture that money and possessions brings happiness. We are slaves to our work and careers. We imagine that our very worth as human beings is determined by the job we

do and the salary we command. We bought into the lie of the gods of our age. We too bow down before the idols of our day while turning up religiously to church every Sunday. And the challenge for us is to maintain or commit to an unyielding loyalty to the Lord. We must recognize His legitimate authority over every area of our lives and activity. We must dethrone the many gods that jockey for position and for our affections. And this, like with the Israelites, will involve being distinct from the world. We must be different from the world. There must be, in some real sense, separation from the world. That is what being holy is all about. That is what it means. It's to be separate. It's easy to say that, but what does that look like for us? Are we called, like the Israelites were, to be physically separate? They were called to drive out the Canaanites. That there would not even be physical contact between the Israelites and the Canaanites.

This was to protect them. That is what they were called to. But we are not called to that kind of separation. The manner in which we are to be distinct is different. The basic purpose and principle remains the same.

We read in John's gospel part of Jesus' high priestly prayer. And in the part of that prayer that we read, Jesus identifies the manner in which we as His people are to be distinct or separate. We're told that we are in the world, but not of the world. This is, I have a phrase we're familiar with, in the world, but not of the world. I think we need to just understand that what Jesus says is a little bit more than that. He says, sent into the world, but not of the world. Being in the world isn't some necessary evil. No, we're sent into the world. This is where we're meant to be, in and around others, in the world, sent into the world, but not of the world. We're not to live in a monastery or some cult-like commune. We're not to avoid all contact with unbelievers who might beguile us and lure us into their honey traps. That's not our calling. We're in the world, but not of the world.

Let me quote from, at least to me, it was a fairly obscure 19th century commentator who captures the picture, I think, helpfully, speaking about this very passage in Judges, but bringing to it the very reference that we are bringing to it of what Jesus explained concerning our calling. And he says this, our calling is to be in the world, but not of the world. It is not our being in the world that ruins us, but our allowing the world to be in us, just as ships sink, not by being in the water, but by the water getting into them. And certainly that picture, I think, helpfully illustrates for us.

We're in the world. We've got to be that ship that sails in the world where God has placed us. We're not to be in dry dock. We're to be out there in activity, but we're not to allow the world to come in to us.

[27 : 15] We must retain a distinct separation from our culture while bouncing an active opposition to it in as much as it is contrary to God's way and God's will. And this is true with regard to wealth and pleasure as it is to every other area of human activity. Christ is Lord over all, or he is not Lord at all. And notice just one final thing, that this distinct lifestyle is to be lived in the world that we might persuade and draw others to our God. Listen to what Peter says in his first letter in chapter 2, addressing believers and speaking on this matter. Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world. You're in the world, but you're not of the world. You're aliens and strangers to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. And then listen to what Peter says, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God. Why did things go wrong? Well, a careless people, a compromised people, but finally, a captivated people. From verses 16 to 19, we have something of that described to us because in these verses we have shown to us not only what immediately happened to the succeeding generation, but we are also presented with a cycle that would repeat itself time and time again, and then subsequently described in the book as it continues, a downward cycle. And the question that seems to scream out from the text is the people are rescued and then fall again, they're rescued, and then they rebel again, they're rescued, and they are even more wicked. The question that screams out is, why were they so foolish? Why didn't they learn the lessons? Why didn't they just get a grip and stop prostituting themselves to other gods as they saw and experienced the consequences of their folly? Why didn't the people just get a grip? Well, they didn't because they couldn't. Certainly at one level we could say that they couldn't. They were captivated by sin. You see, sin is not a pesky habit that by an act of the will we can easily overcome. It's not a case of saying, well, from today I'm not going to do that anymore.

And hey, if we put as much effort in as possible, we'll overcome that sin. Sin isn't like that. Sin is a merciless master. It captivates us. The people were captivated by sin, and they became quite incapable of breaking its grip upon them. Notice that what the judges are able to do, even these

judges that God sends to rescue them, what the judges are able to do is limited. They're able to restrain for a season the wickedness of the people. That's really all they do. They restrain it for a season. But when the judge dies, when the judge passes on, they're back to where they began and worse. They're captivated by sin. And sin hasn't changed. Sin grips us. It captivates us. We see the damage that it does, and yet we continue in its vice-like grip. We can perhaps win little battles, but ultimately, in our own strength, we are powerless to break its hold upon us. Sin is part of our spiritual DNA. We're not sinners because we sin.

We sin because we're sinners. And so a captivated people forsook the Lord and served other gods. What's the challenge for us? Well, given our stated inability in our own strength to free ourselves from sin, we'd be better served considering, just in a very fleeting manner, how God responds to this turn of events, this change from one generation to the next. And how does God respond? Well, these same verses from 16 to 19 give us an indication of his response. And what we can say is this, that how God responds is, and always is, a function of who he is and what he is like. Who God is and what he is like is revealed in this passage by two emotions attributed to him in response to the apostasy of his people, emotions which, in turn, explain his actions. What are they? Well, the two emotions attributed to God are anger and compassion. Anger and compassion. In verse 12, we're told that the people provoked the Lord to anger. In verse 18, we're told in the midst of this cycle being described, for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them.

Anger and compassion. And some might say, well, are these two even compatible? Is the fact that God is both angry and compassionate, does that not present the picture of a capricious and unpredictable God?

Well, let's just think about these two reactions, responses of God. Anger. Is anger a bad thing?

Well, it depends. Why was God angry? God's anger was an expression of his love. It's because he so loved his people that he was angry with them. Had he not loved them, it would have been water off a duck's back.

[32 : 55] So they've rebelled. Well, so be it. They can go their own way, do their own thing. Doesn't bother me. But because he loves them, he's angry with them. You can imagine a husband who has been faithful to his wife. And of course, the roles could be reversed, but for the sake of the illustration, a husband who has been a faithful husband and a dutiful husband and an affectionate husband, not perfect, but all of these things. And his wife has an affair. Would that husband say, oh, well, it doesn't matter. You know, life goes on. That's the way the cookie crumbles. No, he would be jealous. He would be angry. And he would have reason to be. It would be a good thing.

It would be a worrying thing if he was not angry. And as I say, the roles could be reversed. God is angry with his people because he loves them. It's an expression of his love. And of course, his anger also is anger that is expressed in a way that is just. In verse 15, we're told that when God acted in judgment against his own people, we're told that he did so just as he had sworn to them. Just as he had sworn to them. This is not a capricious act of punishment. No, he had warned them. He said, if this happens, this will be the outcome. And he is true to his word. He is a God of integrity and justice. So his anger reveals who this God is, but also his compassion, a compassion that is stubborn and practical. Time and time again, the people would stray and forsake the Lord. And yet, he never abandons them. He never washes his hands of them. He's always there for them. And he is there not simply to sympathize, but to act in deliverance by means of judges or deliverers. This is how God responds in anger and in compassion. But what the book of Judges reveals, and it will do so time and time again, is that the anger and compassion of God could never be fully satisfied and expressed by means of temporal acts of judgment upon his people and the provision of flawed deliverers, provided as the need arose. As we see this vicious cycle repeating itself, we are being invited to look forward, to look forward to the way, the only way that the anger and compassion of God, the righteous anger and the eternal compassion of God could find ultimate satisfaction and expression.

And of course, it finds that ultimate satisfaction and expression at Calvary. At the cross, God himself, in the person of his Son, carried upon himself and satisfied the full and just anger and judgment of God.

And at the cross, God himself, in the person of his Son, proved himself to be the flawless and perfect deliverer, driven by his love and compassion, securing for captivated sinners, release and eternal salvation.

Jesus came to die for the careless and the compromised and the captivated, and he rose again that we might live in resurrection power, lives characterized by careful service and uncompromised loyalty, and captivated no longer by sin, but by him. Well, may that be true of us. Let us pray.

[36 : 31] Heavenly Father, we come and we acknowledge that we are so like the Israelites of old in so many ways. We confess our carelessness. We confess the tendency that we have to be drawn and seduced by the gods of this world that we often don't even recognize as such. We recognize also that we are guilty of falling short in so many ways of sinning against you, even as your people. But we thank you that in your Son, Jesus, we have one who has not only fully satisfied your righteous anger, one who has not only proven himself to be the perfect deliverer of his people, but the one who, as he rose again in resurrection power, shares that power with us that we might live the lives that you have called us to live. That we might be those who carefully follow you and bring up the succeeding generation. That we might be those who are unyielding in our loyalty to you. That we might be those who are no longer captivated to sin, but captivated by yourself. And we pray that it would indeed be so. And these things we pray in

Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing now. We're going to sing Psalm 124 in the Scottish Psalter, Psalm 124, the second version of the psalm. It's on page 418. The second version of Psalm 124 will sing the whole psalm to the tune, Old 124th. Now Israel may say in that truly, if that the Lord had not our cause maintained, if that the Lord had not our right sustained, when cruel men against us furiously rose up in wrath to make of us their prey, then certainly they had devoured us all. And singing on through to the end of the psalm, we'll stand to sing.

O'er the psalm, we'll stand to sing. And there it would sound to be adorach for some mronic joka. That the Lord had not our right sustained, playing like the word And not our righteous faith When cruel men Against us joyously Rose of the earth To make of us their grace And certainly they had devised us all And followed with more

All that we could give Such was their way As we might fallest here And as it was before the morning sky So have it brought our souls to death by time The raging saints with their prospering ways And then our soul, Lord, well met in the deep And bless me, Lord, who doth our sacred King And not forgive us for our living grave Unto their deep and blood in cruelty He has a burdened of the fowler's snare His lips are away So is our soul set free Pro-heartedness And thus he's stupid we Therefore our hope is in the Lord's great name

[41 : 40] Who have had the earth By this without his way Christ, the love of God And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit Be with us all, now and always God bless our hearts And love you Amen Now and confess wines When goodness