

Powerless Idols, True Repentance

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Date: 18 February 2024

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[0 : 0 0] seated. Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we've become convinced that there's no one so good. They don't need God's grace, and no one's so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word. We're continuing this morning in the book of Judges, and I'm especially grateful that we're in the book of Judges this morning because I had a dream last night that I was preaching an obscure passage from the book of Acts that I had not prepared for. So I was delighted when I woke up and I realized we were still here. You'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things. It's about the need for constant renewal and revival among God's people. It's about our need for a true and faithful king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men. It's about the power of spirit-filled leadership, and it's about God's mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me. Last time we were in the book of Judges, we had those two small judges that we knew almost nothing about. You'll remember Tola ruled for 23 years, Jer for 22 years, and so we had 45 years of peace, and we asked this question, you know, how does God preserve His people in the midst of chaos? They were following up the chaos of Abimelech, and one of the ways that we saw is He gives them leaders better than they deserve. This week, we're going to see the continuing spiral of Israel, however. The peace of Tola and Jer is short-lived. Things again turn sideways very quickly, so we have an opportunity once again to talk about some very simple things related to the mechanics of spiritual renewal. What does it look like for God's people to have constant renewal and revival, and of course, the danger of idolatry. And so it's with that,

I'm going to invite you to turn with me in God's Word. We're in Judges chapter 10, starting at verse 6. You can turn with me in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your worship guide.

No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word, and God tells us that His Word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold, and it's sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. And so that's why we read now Judges chapter 10, starting in verse 6.

The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites.

[3 : 1 3] And they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Ammonites, which is in Gilead.

And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals. And the Lord said to the people of Israel, Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also and the Amalekites and the Mayanites oppressed you. And you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods. Therefore, I will save you no more. Verse 14, Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen. Let them save you in the time of your distress. And the people of

Israel said to the Lord, We have sinned. Do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.

So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord. And he became impatient over the misery of Israel. Verse 17, Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead.

And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do thank you for the privilege and the joy of being together in worship this morning. And we thank you for your mercy to us in your word, that you don't leave us to figure things out by ourselves or put them together on our own, but instead you instruct us and guide us, we confess that we can't do it without your help. And so we ask that you would send your Holy Spirit here in a powerful and special way this morning, that you would help us to clearly understand your word, to firmly believe it, to grow in our love for you and our obedience to you.

[5 : 44] We ask all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. If you've been with us from the beginning of the book of Judges, you will know that this is sounding pretty familiar at this point. We talked at the very beginning about what some call the judges cycle, others the judges spiral, which is that God rescues his people and then they turn away from him. Then they cry out for mercy and he rescues them again and they turn away. And so it's just this constant churn here. And as we begin this episode in verse six, you might think, well, we've seen all of this before. The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And in fact, we have seen it before. The Gideon story, chapter six of Judges, verse one, starts with almost the exact same words.

The Deborah story in chapter four begins with almost the exact same words. The stories that we saw with Ehud and Othniel, the same thing. We're getting this sense over and over that the book of Judges is a book of patterns. There is, however, something here that we have not seen before. Notice when I told you what we've seen, I just read the beginning of verse six. We have seen the beginning of verse six before.

We have not seen the ending. Verse six lists seven different idols worshipped by Israel.

Verse six doesn't just list the idols from one nation or another. No, we're given the sense here that Israel is worshipping every idol. In the past, Israel has gone after some of the foreign gods.

We're now almost halfway through the book and Israel is not going after some of the foreign gods. She is going after all of the foreign gods. Things are worse than ever before. Israel is stuffing herself to a new level full of idolatry. This reminds us of what we saw in chapter two, which laid out the cycle for us. Remember it said, every generation was more corrupt than their fathers. And so there's some compounding interest that is coming home to roost finally. If you're going to become more corrupt every generation, things are going to come to a place where we are very, very bad. And in fact, that is where we are here now. Israel has kept their stubborn ways.

[8 : 26] And so since their rebellion is worse than before, God's punishment is worse than before. It is overwhelming here. We're told of verse seven that God sells them into the hand of the Philistines and the hands of the Ammonites. Now you might wonder here, what does it mean for God to sell someone?

One pastor explains it this way. When you sell a car to another person, it means the new owner can do with it as he pleases. When we look back at how God sold the Israelites before, we know this does not mean that he abandoned them or nullified his promises to them. It does mean, however, that he stopped protecting them in some way. Israel is fully vulnerable to the foreign nations. God allows them to be oppressed for 18 years. In case we miss it, we have this cascade of words in verses eight and nine. Verse eight, they're crushed and oppressed. And then we're told again that they're oppressed.

Verse nine, Israel was severely distressed. And once again, we're seeing the Old Testament principle that the punishment fits the crime.

God essentially tells them, you're going to worship foreign gods. Well, then guess what? You're going to serve foreign rulers. You want to play stupid games? Well, then you're going to get to win stupid prizes.

You want to mess around? You are going to find out. You want to act like slaves? You will be treated like slaves. In other words, Israel worships all these gods, and then they end up serving the

nations of all those gods. Now, this is God's complaint against them in verses 11 and 12. He tells them, hey, look, I have saved you over and over. Did I not save you, this is verse 11, from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines. God is not just talking about the salvation that's happened in the book of Judges. No, he goes all the way back to Egypt. He's saying, can't you remember throughout your entire history how many times I've saved you?

[10:53] Now, unless you're fascinated with numerology, you probably did not notice this, but verse 6, we are told that Israel has gone after a list of seven different foreign gods or nations.

Here in verses 11 through 12, God lists seven different times that he has saved Israel. If you're familiar with the Bible, you know seven is the number of completeness, and so God is saying this, I saved you completely, and you have abandoned me completely.

This is a deeper betrayal than ever before. I was the God who did everything for you, and you are the people who go after every idol.

Now, it's tempting for us as people who live in the 21st century to think that, you know, idolatry, something silly for people in the pagan world.

You know, of course we're not going to bow down to a carved image. Although you might find some of that in America in 2024, actually, as we become more pagan. But we do have idols.

[12:18] We do have things that we love and worship more than God. Now, you'll see this on page 7, and a definition of idolatry. Idolatry is loving anything more than Jesus Christ.

Idolatry is treating anything as more important than Jesus Christ for your meaning in life, for your happiness, for your security and hope, or for your self-regard.

And so the warning for Israel is the same warning for us as well. God has saved us. Are we going to worship him? God has saved us.

Are we going to trust him? God has redeemed us. Are we going to look to him and him alone for our safety and our security, our belonging, our praise?

And of course, as God's people in the Old Testament, so also God's people in the New Testament. We are drawn over and over to love and look to things other than our Lord and Savior.

[13:28] Judges here outlines for us why, in fact, that is such a bad idea. Now, we saw just a few verses ago, hey, this is God giving them their punishment. Hey, you're going to worship these foreign gods.

You're going to be enslaved by foreign gods. But slavery is actually not the only thing that is going on here. It's not simply that Israel is enslaved, but that they have been tricked. They have been duped.

They have looked to idols to do things they are powerless to do. This is the point that God is making in verse 14. In verse 10, the people cry out to God and they say, look, we're sorry again.

Can we do the whole rescue thing again? Like, remember in the past where the foreign rulers would come in and then we would cry out to you and you would wreck them? Can you do that again?

Because that would be super cool in this situation. We've been here for 18 years. We remember now what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to cry out to you. And then you're going to come and you're going to do what we need to do.

[14:25] But God here does not continue his pattern from the past. Instead, he has something new to say to them. Verse 14. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen.

Let them save you in the time of your distress. It sounds like you guys have thought that the idols have been great for the past 18 years.

Why don't you go back to the same well? You've been saying for the last 18 years that these gods are the ones that deliver you. So why don't you just go and ask them for deliverance?

Seems pretty simple, right? This is what you've wanted. Why don't you go back? Because they understand God's point.

These idols are powerless. These idols cannot rescue you or save you. And you'll see this on the back of your worship guide.

[15:38] The worst thing about idols, as the Hebrew scriptures so tirelessly point out, is that they are utterly useless when you need them the most.

So God says, go to your idols. Go to your money. See if it can save you now.

Go to your many lovers. All the people you've had sexual experiences with in the past. See if they will solve your loneliness now. Go back to that same well and see if it can do what it's always

promised to do.

The point for us is this. Idols always enslave. And idols always disappoint. Idols always enslave. And they always disappoint. We might think that praise and recognition and success are going to save us somehow from our insecurity.

[16:51] And yet we find that it's still lurking there. Perhaps it's even worse than before as our resumes grow. We might think that control is going to be what gets us ahead.

If we can just maneuver and negotiate enough. If we are good enough at playing chess and not checkers. If we have competence and knowledge. Somehow we can cover up our shame. And yet that is also an idol that enslaves. Because the kingdom must always be defended. There is no rest for the weary.

Because idols demand too much. No matter how much knowledge and control and competence you have. There is always someone smarter. Someone more powerful.

We might worship money. It dominates our hearts and our hopes. And yet somehow it never produces meaning or connection or hope.

[18:04] And as many people have found, it appears to appear and disappear rather quickly. And so we don't serve it.

It doesn't serve us. We serve it. Idols enslave. They cannot save.

God makes this point loud and clear to the people of Israel. Makes it loud and clear to us as well. And so that raises the question, what do we do in the face of the idols that enslave us?

What do we do as we are tempted to believe that they are more powerful than they actually are? Maybe we find ourselves deep in the grip of them wondering how it is that we get out.

There are many answers and an important one is found here in this passage. And the answer is this. Not false repentance. Not performative repentance. But true, deep repentance.

[19:11] Verse 10, we see something. Verse 11, a bit shocking here. God's people come.

They try the same trick they've tried over and over. We have sinned against you because we've forsaken our God and have served the Baals. Rescue us again.

Do what you always do, right? We know that you're the faithful God. We know that you show up over and over. We know that you never abandon your promises. So if we just say the right thing, you're going to show up.

You're going to crush the foreign nations once again. What does God say? He says, no. I am not going to deliver you this time.

Why? Because your repentance is fake. Your repentance is not real. You know the right words, but you won't do the right actions.

[20:13] We see this in verses 11 through 14, especially in verse 14. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen. In other words, they're talking to God on one side, and they're worshiping the foreign gods still.

You can imagine this is like an unfaithful husband returning to his wife saying, please, please forgive me, right? Have me back. And he's still seeing the other woman. No, that's just words, right? And what is she going to say? Go back to her. She's the one you're still with. And that's what God is saying to Israel here. You have just words for me.

If you're going to worship the foreign gods, fair is fair. If they get your worship, then they give you deliverance. End of story.

And so Israel models for us here the temptation to use repentance merely to relieve pain.

[21:21] The temptation for repentance not to be a change of heart, but a technique. Someone who's smart enough, gifted enough, has enough emotional intelligence to know the right words to say, to get what it is that they want, and yet there is no true or real or deep change.

God tells Israel here he is not going to be their genie in a bottle to get them out of trouble. Realizing that then, we see Israel try again.

Verses 15 and 16, they move from words to action. They confess their sins again, and they turn away from them.

Verse 16, so they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord. Judges tells us, once again, a very simple point.

Repentance is not repentance unless it heads in a new direction. The Greek word for repentance in the New Testament literally means a turning around.

[22 : 40] If I say, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, and I keep doing the same things and heading in the same direction, I have apologized, but I have not repented. No, repentance is a redirection, a reorientation of the heart.

Repentance is saying, I'm sorry, and I'm going to stay away from places and people that cause me to drink too much.

Repentance is saying, I'm sorry, and I'm going to start listening to my spouse rather than talking at my spouse. Repentance is saying, I'm sorry, and I'm going to put a filter or an accountability software on my phone and my computer.

Repentance is saying, I'm sorry, and I'm going to work on a budget so that my money reflects God's heart. Repentance is saying, I am sorry, and I'm going to call that person I need to call.

Repentance means saying, I'm sorry, and talking to a friend about the ways that you're tempted to gossip. Repentance is saying, I'm sorry, and talking to a friend about the ways that you're tempted to gossip.

[23 : 53] It is possible to apologize and not repent. But to turn away from idols means to turn away.

It means to go from one direction, to turn 180 degrees and walk in the other direction. Now, you may be wondering here, as you see, it appears that this repentance from Israel makes a difference. We're told in verse 16, the Lord became impatient over the misery of Israel. And this sets us up for what's about to happen in the story of Jethro. They are going to have their prayer answered.

Israel is going to be delivered from the Ammonites and the Philistines. Jethro is going to deliver them from the Ammonites. And then before too long, we'll be in the story of Samson. And we're going to hear about the deliverance from the Philistines.

And so that raises the question, perhaps for some of you, did God lie? God said, I'm not going to rescue you. And then they repent and he says, I'm going to rescue you.

[25 : 07] What do we do with that? Well, you have to understand the way that prophecy works in the Old Testament. When someone comes and declares a disaster, there's an understood conditional element to it.

It's understood that this is what's going to happen, spoken, unspoken, unless you repent. And if you think I'm making that up, think about the story of Jonah.

Jonah is sent as this prophet to Nineveh. He goes into Nineveh and he says, in three days, this city is going to be destroyed. No qualifiers, right? The people of Nineveh, being good ancient Near Easterners, know what this means.

They know it's conditional. And so they turn aside in repentance. And what does God do? He does not destroy Nineveh in three days. Israel understands this as well.

God is saying, look, I'm not going to play your games anymore. I'm tired of your false repentance. I'm tired of these performative words. And Israel gets it. They receive the point.

[26 : 09] And so one commentator puts it this way. God doesn't change. Israel changes. God doesn't change. Israel changes.

Now, it might be tempting for us at this point to think, well, Israel did the right thing. You know, they earned from God what they needed by their repentance. God owed them something at this point because they did what he asked.

They confessed their sin. They turned away from foreign idols. No. God owes Israel nothing. God is bound only by his covenant.

And so it's interesting here what we're told. Verse 16. It does not say God was moved by their repentance. And because he was obligated by their repentance, he then worked to start raising up Jethro.

No, it says he became impatient over the misery of Israel. Why did God move to rescue Israel? Israel. Because he was fed up with watching his people suffer.

[27 : 21] Why did God move to rescue Israel? Not because they had earned anything from him, but because of his never stopping, never ending, never giving up, always and forever love.

Why did God rescue Israel? Because he had made a covenant with them that depended not on them, but on him. Why does God come to Israel even though he's rescued them completely and they've abandoned him completely?

Because God chose them as his own. And for no other reason. Christian, the same is true of you. God calls us to worship him and run to him rather than idols. And our worship of him earns nothing. Our hope and our only hope is in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our repentance did not draw him to the earth. No, Romans chapter 5 tells us while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. It was because he was impatient over our misery.

[28 : 39] And so that's our hope. Our hope is in our Lord Jesus who came and lived the perfect life that we should have lived. He died the death that we deserved. And so we receive forgiveness from him, not because repentance is some scheme that earns something, but because God in his mercy and his grace forgives all those who come to him.

His mercy is for those and only for those who have faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Even in his discipline here, we see he's drawing his people back.

He doesn't leave them without a word. No, he tells them, you want to be rescued? Come back to me. Really come back to me.

Not just the words, but the actions. Brothers and sisters, that's our hope as well. That all those who come to Jesus Christ are forgiven and restored.

And so we're reminded once again of God's mercy. His mercy for hard-hearted people. People like you and me.

[29 : 54] Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you for your goodness and your mercy. We know that we haven't earned anything from you.

We don't deserve anything from you. But you come in your grace and your goodness and your Lord Jesus. And you draw us back to yourself. We thank you for your faithfulness to Israel and your faithfulness to us.

We ask that it would grow our love and our devotion to you. That idols would appeal to us less and less. And we would run to you in repentance more and more.

We ask all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.