

# “EVIL IN THE SIGHT OF GOD...”

## *THE IDOLATROUS CHURCH*

### **JUDGES 2**

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In our first sermon Israel had already become the compromised church (see chapter one and sermon “*After the Death of Joshua...the Compromised Church.*”); in our sermon today, we will learn that the compromised church had already become the *idolatrous church*.

Even if the sinful consequences of Israel’s failures before God were not immediately noticed; even if the church seemed strong on the surface, when the church made compromises rather than hearing and obeying God’s Word by His grace, they had already become covenant-breaking idolaters that worshipped and served someone or something other than God.

We must remember that to fail to resist and fight against the world, the flesh and the devil is to break covenant with God; this is called “evil in the sight of God” (2:11) even if one never actually bows one’s knee to the Baals and Ashtaroth; it is idolatry nevertheless.

Idolatry. All sinners are all capable of it; even sinners saved by grace will always struggle with idolatry. Even the most faithful, learned, and strongest of God’s people will be tempted to idolatry.

Summary Statement: We love what our hearts worship and serve. God wants to take his people (“My People”) and bring them into obedience to him by giving to his people hearts of flesh. We have hearts that worship someone, or something. God’s punishment and chastisement is to conform us to his image, to make us people fit to live in the land of the New Heavens and New Earth in His Eternal presence. God’s coming wrath is to bring about repentance, so we will look to him for mercy.

FCF: We are idolaters; or another way of stating this is that we are by nature covenant-breakers or those who do not listen to the Word of God and do what it says. What is first in our hearts, what we care about, or love the most is what we worship as “GOD”.

Believe it or not, all who call upon the name of the Lord have divided hearts (hearts *trying to be loyal to two Lords- Matthew 6- “Two Masters”*).

Remember: *Whatever rules the heart will exercise inescapable influence over the life and the behavior.*

We must come to understand that idolatry is simply the desire for something other than God at the center of our lives as our guiding star, or the source of ultimate meaning in our life. As such, idolatry is the sin behind every sin, the life-lie that drives all of our choices

and values. The object of that idolatry varies from person to person. There are probably as many different idols as there are human beings.

Idols of “beauty”; “strength”; “power”; “success”; “money”; “self-sufficiency”...

### ***Israel: the Compromised and Idolatrous Church***

Israel did not obey the LORD in our passage from Judges. Israel had already compromised on God’s commands and they had become covenant-breakers. As we learned in the last sermon their complacency came because they believed that *pragmatism was better than sacrifice*; that what worked on the surface of things was what was best as long as no real “big” sins against God were committed.

The Tribe of Joseph had let a man and his family go who relocated the City of Man where sin would still prosper rather than the Kingdom of God being established (1:22ff); many of the other tribes did not drive out the nations from before them as God had told them, but rather enslaved the Canaanites (1:27ff).

This disobedience on the surface would have seemed to make Israel stronger, mightier, and have a greater workforce because of the slave labor; but God had crystal-clearly told the Israelites to reveal His judgment against the pagans rather than His mercy. They did not obey, and they did not listen to God’s Word, and so from their hearts, they revealed that they were sinful covenant-breakers before God.

On the surface it seemed the Church under age was strong and powerful, but from within, from the heart, the sinful consequences had yet to be fully revealed as the people would begin to spiral down into even more sin and idolatry against the God who had redeemed them!

We learn earlier from Moses that Israel did not have the heart ability to obey the Lord and keep Torah. As Moses said to the people in some of his final words:

***And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. – Deuteronomy 30:5-6***

Israel was to love God and keep His commands (cf. John 14:15: “If you love me, keep my commandments...”). Israel was to hear God’s Word and not make pragmatic decisions based upon their own understanding. Rather, with all their hearts they were to trust in the LORD (cf. Proverbs 3:1-6).

Yet Israel’s inheritance of the Land of Canaan would be conditional; they were to be obedient by God’s grace:

***<sup>ESV</sup> Deuteronomy 30:16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God<sup>l</sup> that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his***

***commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.***

Israel was to hear and believe God's Word no matter how things looked from their perspective- -no matter what looked as the best option- -no matter what seemed best or them- -they were to obey God without "if, ands, and buts" knowing that God would enable His people to love Him by doing a work in their hearts.

God uses HIS WORD to convict idolaters and cause the hearts to be clean. *God's Word always places our hearts on trial before the Great Judge of Heaven and Earth!* Heb. 4:12-13.

Another important message of *the Book of Judges* is the anticipation that God would circumcise the people's heart so that they can love the Lord and show that love for God through obedience to His Word.

Because the people of God so quickly forgot the covenantal promises that God had made to them which included victory over their enemies, by God's grace the Angel of YHWH came to them to remind the people of Israel that there were to be consequences for their sins and covenantal unfaithfulness (2:1 ff).

This was the Angel of the LORD, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Pre-Incarnate Christ who was the Commander of the LORD's Army who was the One who God said would be with them after the exodus and forever (this is also known as a *Theophany*, but you knew that!):

***ESV Judges 2:1-3: Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you,'<sup>2</sup> and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?<sup>3</sup> So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides,<sup>1</sup> and their gods shall be a snare to you."***

What specifically were the people of God guilty of? They made covenant with the inhabitants of the land; they broke the covenant God made with them when he brought them out of Egypt (2:1b). How? I don't remember a covenant making ceremony in chapter one?! It was not an explicit covenant ceremony but through **toleration and compromise** the Israelites had disobeyed God and did not utterly exterminate the heathen unbelievers.

Thus, the Church under age implicitly covenanted with the people to preserve them rather than utterly destroy them by making them their slaves- -which was precisely what God had forbidden them to do. Remember that listening in the Bible, as well as hearing, and obeying are all related. To hear God and listen to God is to obey him by His grace. We learn from Judges 2:1-3 two important things:

- 1) God's people only have NOT to obey God, and only have NOT to resist the world, the flesh and the devil to be in covenant with them (remember that James says that friendship with the world is enmity with God because it is adultery, James 4:4ff). This means that a covenant can be made with unbelief and sinful idolatry simply by not resisting it and failing to obey God.
- 2) We also should notice that God's Word through His appointed servants is Christ's very Word to His people and should be heeded (2:2b). The Angel of the LORD said: "...You have not obeyed my voice..." God had spoken through Moses and Joshua to the people, his appointed servants; Moses had preached to the people His final words in the Book of Deuteronomy, but the people did not hear Christ in His sermons and did not obey Christ from his sermons (Judges 2:20; cf. Romans 10:13-17).

God had preached to them His Word through His servants Moses and Joshua that if Israel spared the people and showed them mercy rather than judgment (at this time in redemptive-history), then Israel would become *like them*; this is what God had clearly said.

So the Angel of the LORD went up to a place now called "Bochim" to prosecute the people with a sentence of judgment from God for covenant unfaithfulness and disobedience to God's commands.

In response to this judgment because of their covenantal unfaithfulness the people of God were filled with sadness and they lifted up their voices to weep before God (2:4). And so the place was called "Bochim" and they sacrificed there to the LORD (2:5).

The Bible says specifically that the Angel of YHWH "came up from Gilgal to Bochim..." (Gilgal was the place where the Angel of the LORD promised to be with the Israelites in their first victory at Jericho, Joshua 4:19-20; 5:9-10). In fact "Gilgal" meant "to roll away" in the sense of God making the Israelites clean from their oppression in Egypt (and their sins as their circumcision outwardly signified):

*ESV Joshua 5:9-10: And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called Gilgal<sup>1</sup> to this day.<sup>10</sup> While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho.*

The reference of "from Gilgal to Bochim" is not so much a geographical statement as it is spiritual one (cf. Fausset, pg. 29).

What is the significance of the place of "Bochim"? The term Bochim comes from the Hebrew *bakah* [בָּכִים] which means "tears" and so "Bochim" means "weepers".

The church under age responded to the Angel of YHWH's words of promise with weeping. Was this real and true repentance that leads people to reform and reformation in the way one lives and thinks before God? Had there been true repentance revealed

here, or are these just tears of those who have disobeyed God and now must suffer the consequences for their actions?

It is hard to say, and the author purposely leaves us to ponder this as the people of God. I think that these *are tears of regret*, what we might call attrition, or sadness for getting caught and having to pay the just penalty of one's sins. Remember that attrition is sad because you have to suffer consequences; contrition is to be truly contrite or repentant or sad for one's sins before God *just because your sins offended God whether you get caught or not* (as David was contrite before God in Psalm 51).

As one Biblical commentator wrote: "Confronted with their sin the children of Israel wept, but in the light of their subsequent history it may not be unjust to regard their tears as superficial. Certainly there was no evidence of a true and abiding repentance. The Lord is not deceived by the external expressions of repentant; he looks for the rent heart, not the rent garments (Joel 2:12-14; cf Psalm 51:17)" (*Judges*, TOTC, pg. 67).

One can weep tears of sorrow, and yet have no mind at all about real change and repentance; one can weep and still be hard-headedly hard-hearted. As the great preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said as a pastor in Wales England: "It is very easy to make a Welshman cry, but it needs an earthquake to make him [repent and] change his mind!" (Quoted in Davis, pg. 27).

Yet as many of you know, God uses our tears of sadness and failure to look upon the crucified, resurrected and glorious Savior once again as our only hope from sin! Many times the Spirit of God wounds before he heals, but this can be the way to true and lasting heavenly joy (cf. John 16:9, Fausset, pg. 38).

God is always faithful whether his people are or not! God continually showed the people grace and mercy after chastisement so there would be true belief, healing from sin, and joy in the presence of God!

***Who are the Judges and how can they help Israel in their predicament?***

We should remember the cycle that is revealed in *The Book of Judges*; there are four phases: apostasy, servitude, supplication, and deliverance. In the fourth phase of deliverance, God raises up a Judge-Deliverer to redeem Israel from her slavery to sin (we shall see variations on this cycle throughout the book in future sermons, D.V). Chapter 2:6-3:6 serves as an overview for the entire purpose and focus of *The Book of Judges*.

As we learned briefly in our first sermon on *The Book of Judges* "Judges" as in *the Book of Judges* does not mean judges that sit robed over a court room in a local court, circuit court, federal court, or the Supreme Court (although these judges might engage in judging causes as representatives of God's court).

When we hear the term we think of black-robed figures and then we are confused as to how these guys and gals with long flowing black robes would have been riding around on

horses killing the enemy. The main purposes of these judges were not legal or judicial, but rather soteriological, that is they were savior-deliverers for God's people primarily.

The Hebrew verb *shaphat* [שָׁפַט vb. judge, govern] means “to judge” or “to lead” or “to govern” (Judges 3:10; 4:4; 12:7; 15:20; 16:31; *shophetim* is the plural as in “judges” in the book's title) We actually have a good definition of Judges found in chapter 2, verses 16-19:

*ESV Judges 2:16-19: Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.<sup>17</sup> Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so.<sup>18</sup> Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.<sup>19</sup> But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.*

It is important to note a few things in defining what judges were and what they did. First, the LORD raised them up to lead Israel as an act of His special providence to serve as warrior-deliverers to redeem and save them from their enemies (2:16).

Their judges were called to specifically teach them God's Word (2:17 notes that they did not listen to their judges' instructions); this shows that they were proto-prophets before the call of Samuel later in redemptive-history (1 Samuel 1-2; 4:18 says that Eli judged Israel for forty years so these judges extended into the time of the monarchy in Israel). The Apostle Paul wrote in the New Testament speaking of this time period:

*ESV Acts 13:20 All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet.*

These judges were not of the priestly family; they were not formally of the line of Israel's prophets; they were not kings. Who were they then? They were extraordinary ministers who at times ministered to God's people as warriors, leaders, proto-prophets, and saviors according to the biblical definition in chapter 2. They are special ministers of God in redemptive-history who are unique (perhaps they could be compared to the New Testament prophets who served God specially until the closing of the Canon of Scripture).

We know that the Judges were successful and powerful in their redemption because they were endued with God's Holy and Powerful Spirit:

*ESV Judges 3:10 The Spirit of the LORD was upon him, and he judged Israel.*

*ESV Judges 6:34 But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon...*

*ESV Judges 13:25 And the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him...*

In many ways the judges did what prophets, priests and kings would do more formally in their offices later; but at this particular time in redemptive-history they delivered and saved God's people by the sword rather than by the Word of God as the later prophets would be called to do.

In other words, these judges were primarily raised up by God to reveal God, and particularly God as THE JUDGE of all the earth.

But the Judge-Warrior-Saviors were also capable of death and so their ministries could never continue and their ministries were imperfectly fulfilled as well as we will see throughout our sermon series (2:19).

Perhaps the title "Judges" is deceiving for we English readers ("Judges" comes from the Latin Vulgate of Jerome) and perhaps a better title of the book would be "**Book of Saviors**" or "**Book of Warrior Deliverers**" or "**The Book of Tribal Rulers**" (see Block, pgs. 23-25).

And why did God raise up Judge-Savior-Warrior-Deliverers?

*ESV Judges 17:6 In those days there was no king in Israel.* (18:1; 19:1; 21:25)

When God would raise up oppressors to punish Israel for covenant disobedience, Israel would weep and cry out to God and then God would raise up Judge-Warrior-Savior-Deliverers to release Israel from oppression and bondage again. Israel had been set free from slavery by the great event of the Exodus under Moses; no longer were the people of Israel slaves, but now they were God's beloved children.

Yet they could not understand this grace of redemption shown by God and they would forsake God just as quickly as they had turned from their sins after the judge died:

*ESV Judges 2:19 But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.*

Israel would forget God's mercy and pity upon them, then the next generation would become worse or more corrupt than their fathers before them. Rather than living and acting as redeemed sons, or children, the people of Israel were sinfully content enough with constant slavery to idolatry! The Church under age continually acted as if they were slaves and God would grant to them their request for slavery as punishment by reversing Israel's fortunes so that they return to these mini-Egypt experiences.

For instance, because Israel was unfaithful and disobedient to God about the full and utter extermination of the Canaanites, God allowed these enemies of God to rise up and oppress and enslave Israel- -Israel went back to Egypt in her heart- -and God allowed Israel to experience a mini-Egyptian slavery experience in reality. In other words, if the

people wanted to live as slaves to idols as the pagans, then God would allow them to be slaves, oppressed under harsh rulers as chastisement for their sins.

So, the Judge-Warrior-Savior-Deliverers sent by God were “little Moses” or “mini-Moses” who were repeating the Exodus deliverance on a smaller scale. Israel was to remember through God’s Word the great salvation-deliverance of the Exodus and were to live in light of this gracious act of God, living obediently before him. So, when they forgot the kind of people they were, that is they forgot their identity as God’s people who have been shown His grace and mercy, they were reminded through mini-exoduses that God would never fail His own.

***Watch your life and doctrine closely...Watch your heart and temptation toward idolatry closely...***

At the heart of the life of God’s people should be a constant focus on our eagerness and quickness to turn to God to worship and serve someone or something other than God- - especially during the “good” and “fat” times as His people. As the people of God, there should be a constant and sober guard on our hearts.

Our hearts so quickly deceive us; our hearts too quickly make us believe that pragmatism, or doing our own thing is so much more important than obedience to God’s Word. Notice in our text from Judges 2 that it doesn’t take long for the people to forget the Word of God.

***ESV Judges 2:10-11: And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.<sup>11</sup> And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals.***

If there is one similarity in every generation of God’s people it is disobedience to God; more particularly if there is one similarity in every generation of God’s people it is how we so quickly forget what God has said to us and begin to commit idolatry that we never imagined that we were capable of doing or committing against God and man.

Judges 2:10 should sober us all! Because Israel did not hear, or listen and obey to God’s Word, their failure did not only affect them, but also the next generation of the Church (see Psalm 78).

The next generation did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel (2:10). This does not mean that they didn’t know *about* God, but that they did not personally have a knowledge by faith of him; ***they simply disregarded God and His Word.***

Surely their sins were not that great! Surely they only compromised a little, how could that so quickly and devastatingly affect the next generation of the Church and the gospel?

How could that be? Because church leaders, fathers, mothers were too busy doing their own will- ***-what was right in their own eyes-*** -and not placing God and his will first. So



many other things became more important, they became busy and committed to other things, and over time they lost their first love- -the One who had redeemed them had been placed second in their schedules and then their affections. Moses had clearly taught the people that God's redemption power and promises were to be made known to the children- -to the next generation:

*ESV Deuteronomy 31:12-13: Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, <sup>13</sup> and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess."*

*There first mistake was their assumption that their children would not be the same kind of idolaters that they were; there second mistake was related; they were so enamored and blinded by their own idolatry and desire to do what is right in their own eyes, that they were not aware of the extent to which they were idolaters!*

Remember after the Exodus event how quickly the people of God exchange the glory of God revealed through Moses and the Law on Sinai for a golden calf, and image of God made by their own defiled and sinful hands (Exodus 32).

No sooner had Moses turned to go and get instruction from God on the mountain on how to worship God in spirit and truth at that time in redemptive-history, that the people turned from God and His Word to a sinful and abhorrent pagan party-festival of dancing around and worshipping a golden calf like the sinful and pagan nations around them:

*ESV Exodus 32:1-5: When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." <sup>2</sup> So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden<sup>1</sup> calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."*

Amnesia of God's Word and Work leads to idolatry and eventually to apostasy if there is no repentance. Idolatry (contrary to modern mankind's so-called noble and elevated sensibilities) is still common to all mankind- -and oh how we love it! We love to be idolaters. It is not that we do not like to commit idolatry- -we are by nature idolaters. We must admit our big problem before God: we do not wish to love and worship and serve the true and living God by nature.

We sometimes arrogantly think as so-called "moderns" or modern folk that we don't engage in idolatry like those wicked pagans "out there" in dark lands and islands; or we fool ourselves into believing that the idolatry of ancient Israel's time and ours are much different.

Not really, though. We may not create golden calves (Baal and Ashtaroth and Dagon may not be much in favor and popularity these days, and the reason why the Israelites made specifically a calf was because Baal revealed himself as a cow/calf); but nevertheless we love, worship and serve all kinds of people, and agendas, and things more devotedly and wholeheartedly than we do our God.

Baal is the son of El in the Canaanite pantheon of gods and was considered the god of the storm and the rains and therefore the one who controlled vegetation which meant that that pagans thought that if they were to eat they needed to worship him. Ashtaroth was the consort of Baal and the plural form of Astarte, the goddess of war and fertility (worshipped as Ishtar in Babylon and Anath in Northern Syria).

We forget our identity, that we have been saved-delivered and shown grace, so that we might live for God and worship and serve only Him! Listen to the Apostle Paul's admonition for all Christians (and this was written to the visible Church at Corinth characterized as "sanctified in Christ Jesus"- those called "saints", 1:2):

*1 Corinthians 10:6-14: Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." <sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup> We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, <sup>10</sup> nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. <sup>11</sup> Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. <sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*

What is the HEART of the problem? Judges 2:19 tells us clearly:

*ESV Judges 2:19 But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.*

"Break this down for me, Pastor –what does this mean?" This means that when the people of God were safe, secure, at peace (in their own estimation) "fat and happy" and content with no immediate tribulations or problems, they fancied idolatry again. They became even more corrupt forgetting God's goodness in salvation and deliverance and began to worship and serve something other than God *because God gave them what they wanted- they wanted peace- they got peace!*

Think about how we are tempted NOT to serve God wholehearted when all things seem well in our lives and in the world. Yet when trouble comes, we like our forefathers the Israelites, find time to pray and call upon the LORD. But are we sincere? Do we love and serve God in both good times and in bad (in our estimation, I mean "bad")? Do we commit to God in covenant that we will love Him in "sickness and in health" "in good

times and in bad” come what may? Or when things are well, do we not slip into complacency, compromise and then potential apostasy?

The people were at the heart idolatrously stubborn before God. When is the last time you have clearly heard what God’s Word teaches and you refused to obey the instruction? When was the last time someone confronted you with the clear will of God in Scripture and you said:

“BUT”- -or “what if” or “but how?” or “but I can’t do that!” or “God cannot surely mean that he wants me to do that?!” When is the last time the Spirit of God by the Word convicted you of your sins and you made excuses before God: “Well, it’s not so bad.” “Well, I’m getting what is coming to me, it can’t be that bad.” “Well, I am in a unique situation and unique situations require a different kind of thinking and doing that God’s outdated ways!”

You’re stubborn; I’m stubborn; we all are stubborn by nature. And being stubborn before God is a symptom of our idolatrous hearts. We’re so stubborn that by the time we complete the *Book of Judges* some of you will be so ridiculously tired of being called idolaters and hearing about the temptation toward idolatry in this book that you might want to scream.

While some of you will respond by faith and hear of your deep-rooted sinful heart condition and repent of your idolatry and become more like Christ. Remember what we read in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 that this history of God’s people is written down for us so that we would not be like them – but rather respond by faith to God’s Word!

Will you be stubborn? Or will you respond to God’s Word, the very voice of Christ (cf. Romans 10:13-17)?

Stubbornness before God’s Word is a dangerous cancer that can eventually kill you; it is a stubbornness like a mule that has to be directed to the right or the left and is unwilling with stiff-necked disobedience to the will of the master.

*<sup>ESV</sup> Psalm 32:9 Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.*

*<sup>ESV</sup> Hosea 4:16 Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the LORD now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?*

**“They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways” (2:19).** The LORD described his sinful people in this way to Moses:

*<sup>ESV</sup> Exodus 32:9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.*

How many times throughout redemptive-history, God's people who were recipients of His clear revelation are called stubborn. Stubbornness from the heart is rebellion against God. Listen to Moses, the Prophets and the Writings on this:

*ESV Deuteronomy 9:6 "Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.*

*ESV Psalm 78:8 and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

*ESV Isaiah 46:12 "Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness:*

*ESV Jeremiah 5:23 But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away.*

*ESV Ezekiel 2:4 The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.'*

What is the HEART of the problem? "You have not obeyed my voice" (2:2b). The people of God had not obeyed the voice and the preaching of God's pre-prophetic Judges:

*ESV Judges 2:17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so.*

Disobedience to God's Word, not obeying or hearing the voice of God through one of his messengers is the way we manifest our sinful stubbornness. Stubbornness is such a sinful sickness that it is listed with rebellion and unrighteousness (see above).

***Stubborn hearts cannot be cured by works, or by our best efforts of loving God and neighbor. Stubborn hearts cannot be cured by "trying harder" and "making New Year's resolutions". Stubborn hearts will remain stubborn, rebellious and unrighteous before God until God sovereignly acts as the Great Physician to cure our sinfulness.***

***The Israelites were outwardly circumcised, but only God by His grace and mercy could sovereignly and powerfully circumcise their hearts; only God could give to the people hearts that truly loved Him!***

What is the need for stubborn, sinful, rebellious, deaf and stiff-necked people before God? A heart change; a circumcision of the heart:

*ESV Deuteronomy 10:16 Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.*

Stubbornness is a characteristic of our sinful nature. Stubbornness before God that leads to God's people doing what is right in their own eyes, and doing evil in the sight of the LORD (2:11; 3:7). How are you stubborn before God?

We might overlook this stubbornness by merely saying: “Well, it’s just a characteristic of my people”; or “my father was stubborn”; or “stubbornness has gotten me out of a lot of situations that otherwise might have blown up in my face”; or “stubbornness has prevented others from walking all over me throughout my life” etc. But stubbornness before God’s Word is rebellion before God- - it is unrighteousness which means that it’s only reward is God’s wrath and eternal punishment.

A stubbornness before God is a stubborn rebellion against God NOT to do His will but to do what is right in your own eyes and to do evil in the sight of the LORD.

Think about apostasy. Apostasy means to ultimately not listen to God’s Word and you leave the visible congregation of God’s people to seek your own will and no longer be associated with the people of God, the Word of God and the sacraments. Apostasy is no longer listening to God, then no longer listening to elders, then no longer listening to parents, etc.

“I don’t want to hear it!” you might say. You have heard others when you try to give them good advice (and your advice is not necessarily the Word of God) and you’re disrespected. Someone might say “Let’s just not talk about that”; or “That’s not a conversation we’re going to have today”; or “Mind your own business- -I will live the way I want!”

Stubbornness before God’s Word is at the foundation that you have become like the world. To put it another way, you have become “worldly-ized” or “Canaanized”. The people you were to witness to, hold accountable before God, and to be an example of how God wants you to think and live- -you have become like.

You were called by God’s grace to make known the truth and you have believed a lie. That is precisely what happened to the Israelites in the *Book of Judges*. Rather than teaching, they were taught; rather than being married to YHWH alone as their Husband, they committed adultery with the world and eventually looked, smelled, thought, and acted like them. In fact, the text specifically describes idolatry and a failure to listen and obey God by using adultery as an image:

*<sup>ESV</sup> Judges 2:17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so.*

Remember James 4:4-5?

***You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup> Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?***

BUT although the people of Israel have become Canaanized or friends of the world; although the people are rebellious, stiff-necked and stubborn before God, nevertheless,

when they cry out for salvation-deliverance, God is near to them and sends them the Judge-Warrior-Savior-Deliverer.

***Why? Doesn't God ever learn how stubborn we truly are? Doesn't God ever give up on his people?***

No, he doesn't. God is gracious and merciful. There are consequences for our sinfulness and rebellion before God (Israel repeatedly experienced these "back-to-Egypt-type-chastisements")- -but when they cried out to God for salvation-deliverance, he did not turn a deaf ear, but saved and redeemed them from their enemies. The Gospel is clearly revealed here in 2:18:

*ESV Judges 2:18 Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.*

God always remembered his covenant with His people! God always raised up judges to deliver and save his people because He is gracious and merciful. God heard their groaning (which is the same word used when God hears the groaning of his people in Egypt and remembers his covenant, cf. Exodus 2:24ff, Hebrew word נִקְנָה).

It is the same for us. God is always faithful when we repent of our rebellion and stubbornness and cry to him and turn to him by faith. God was faithful because of his covenant to Adam and Abraham to save and redeem a people.

No matter how great the apostasy, rebellion and idolatry in the land- -no matter how much the visible church looks sometimes like the pagan world or Canaanites around her, there is always a faithful and believing remnant of God's people that is preserved by God's grace- -the gates of hell will never fully prevail against God's Church- -His Final Deliverer-Savior-Messiah would still one day come.

God would circumcise the hearts of His people! God would make his power and salvation more fully known. For His own Name's sake, because he swore on covenant oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he would remain faithful to his believing people.

In every case of rebellion against God when Israel does evil in the sight of the LORD, the LORD conquers the enemies because of his promise to crush the head of the serpent one day (Gen. 3:15). The deliverance of the judges then is another aspect, a partial fulfillment and a mini picture of the cosmic battle that rages between the Seed of the Woman and the seed of the serpent.

But what about the problem of idolatry? What about Israel's inability to take the land through obedience *themselves*?

You could say that Israel's problem throughout the period of the OT, the reason she was never fully able to enjoy the blessings of God's covenant, was that *her heart was simply not in it*.

We must remember the Lord's Covenant Commitment and Love to His People and be reminded of his abounding grace to the chief of sinners- Ezekiel 36:24-29a:

***ESV Ezekiel 36:24-29a: I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. <sup>28</sup> You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses.***

The Israelites (and we) will have pure hearts because of One Faithful Israelite named Jesus Christ who is the climax and consummation of God's covenant promises to His people!

Jesus Christ, the One circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day to represent his people and complete his work of fulfilling the Law perfectly so that his Spirit might circumcise our hearts; the One who sat down on David's throne in Heaven at God's right hand! Jesus Christ, whose ministry is representing his people as God's Priest, interceding for them according to God's will and committing himself to weeding out all the foul idols that swallow up the devotion and worship of our hearts that belong to God alone!!

What do you love and cherish, ultimately worship the most this day? Let us remember the power of sin and how it seeks to enslave us although it promises joy and a happy life. Sin against God that still remains within us (although it no longer reigns over us in Christ) should be taken seriously and we should be reminded that it seeks to enslave us while God wants to make us thrive as his children. We are those who have been set from sin's dominion and reign in Jesus Christ- -we are freed to live as sons, loving God and neighbor (Romans 6:1-17).

As God used HIS WORD to weed out the idols in his people in the OT through the judges that He raised up, so God uses HIS WORD today to search us out, deeply within our hearts, in order to transform his people so that we might inherit the land of God promised so long ago to Abraham, and was bought at a precious price by Abraham's Seed, who is Christ. We should remember that the land was a picture-type of the entire cosmos, a renewed New Heavens and New Earth that is inherited only by faith in Jesus Christ – the One True and Faithful Israelite that loved God and neighbor with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and his neighbor as himself!

Read Hebrews 4:12-13:

***ESV Hebrews 4:12-13: For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup> And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.***

We must never forget as God's people that we have yet to make it to the Promised Land, and so we like the Israelites must be aware of the constant temptation we face to idolatry. We must continue to keep our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith (Heb. 12:1 ff) as we run the race with perseverance by faith.

God knows us better than we know ourselves and is more committed to us than we are to him- -thus the importance of his covenant promises. Notice Jesus' words *in the present tense* to the His Local-Visible Churches in Revelation:

Jesus holds his Churches in His hand and is in our midst. He knows all about us and searches us out by His Word. He claims that the church at Ephesus had "left their first love", implying that even good churches are tainted with sin.

Jesus writes to them differing messages, but the same form:

1. To "My" Church...
2. Identification that Jesus is LORD of His Churches...
3. He says "HE KNOWS" what they do well and poorly...
4. He rebukes and commends (reminding us that he wants to encourage us in our labors, but wants us to be ever mindful of idolatry because we always have something that needs daily repentance)...
5. He promises and threatens: "I WILL"...
6. He promises "To those who overcome"...
7. He exhorts all the churches to HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD... "He who has an ear, let him hear."

The difference between religiously minded idolaters and true Christians is that Christians repent not only of their sins but also of their very best deeds, their best righteousness, in order to receive in its place the righteousness of Christ, to which they cling wholeheartedly!

Because of God's great love for us in Christ, we are confident that God alone can forgive us when we repent of our idols. That he will not only forgive, but that he is committed to smashing every last idol, every affection, every divided loyalty which craves and desires anything other than HIM!

He who began a work will continue it and we as the people of God look forward to the Day when God shall ultimately destroy all sin and the idolatry in his people when we shall see him face to face and what we know by faith will be a reality when we shall dwell in God's presence and the glory of the Lamb, and...

**HE SHALL BE OUR GOD AND WE SHALL BE HIS HOLY PEOPLE!**



### **Bibliography for Further Reading**

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### **Scripture Lesson**

<sup>ESV</sup> **Deuteronomy 30:1-6:** "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup> and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>3</sup> then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. <sup>4</sup> If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. <sup>5</sup> And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 32:1-5:** When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." <sup>2</sup> So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." <sup>3</sup> So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden<sup>1</sup> calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" <sup>5</sup> When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Joshua 24:1-3, 13-15:** Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of

Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac. . . . <sup>13</sup> I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant. <sup>14</sup> "Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

<sup>ESV</sup> **Proverbs 3:1-6:** My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, <sup>2</sup> for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. <sup>3</sup> Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. <sup>4</sup> So you will find favor and good success<sup>1</sup> in the sight of God and man. <sup>5</sup> Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. <sup>6</sup> In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

**1 Corinthians 10:6-14:** Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." <sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup> We must not put Christ<sup>1</sup> to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, <sup>10</sup> nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. <sup>11</sup> Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. <sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.