

RUF Bible Study – Judges
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Judges 1-2

Judges 2:11 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. 12 And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. 13 They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashteroth. 14 So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. 15 Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.

16 Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. 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. 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. 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. 20 So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he said, "Because this people has transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, 21 I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, 22 in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not." 23 So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

When you open up the book of Judges, you could immediately be confused (even with my first chapter's overview), but the first verse sets the stage for you. Joshua has died. The conquest of Canaan has not been completed. In chapter two we have more of a commentary on Joshua's death (2:6-9), but in chapter one we have the fact asserted.

Remember that the writer of this book has both an informational, historical purpose and a theological purpose. Informationally we find out Joshua has died and God's people have not yet finished the task they were appointed to do. Theologically the reader should ask, "Will they be able to do it?" Much of the Old Testament hinges on this question. Will God's people follow God without a good leader? When they do have a good leader, what happens when he dies? Who will lead God's people?

But we, sitting here some 3,000 years later, don't feel the weight of that question. We would rather ask, "What does this mean for me?" That may be a selfish question, or it may be a good one that's asked a little too quickly. But it matters. Indeed, what does Judges mean for you?

There are thousands of stories about people led astray. Think of the 1994 Disney movie *The Lion King*. Young Simba is tricked into thinking he killed his father by his evil uncle Scar. Believing him, he goes into exile, filled with pain and guilt. Why did Simba believe Scar? We can see he just looks and sounds evil. But Simba couldn't see it.

A whole movie *The Talented Mr. Ripley* centers on the exploits of a con artist and his nefarious ways. He's so believable, so likeable, and yet so evil. Or consider Hansel and Gretel who get talked into going to the house of the nice, little lady – who wants to eat them.

Rev. Pete Hatton tells the story of a boy who went out fishing near his house. The boy had the pole, but he needed the worms, so he looked for them around the river. His mother found him dead. Instead of worms, he had found a nest of baby, poisonous copperheads. He had been bitten dozens of times on his hand. Sin is snakes, not worms.

The Bible says there is a real thing called sin. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says sin is any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God. That is a great definition, and it helps orient us quite a bit, but it also makes us think sin is doing and not doing things. It is that, but it is also more. It's a desire. It's a longing. It's a mindset. It's a thinking. It's in our hearts to long for things, and worship things that aren't godly or aren't God. So it's important to see that sin is more complicated than just getting your life in order and doing things well. The Pharisees tried to do that, and it didn't work.

So as we look at the first two chapters of Judges, we're looking at not only the way people are and the way Israel was, but the way *we* are.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Judges from Block Davis, Cundall/Morris, Jordan and Pete Hatton. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

We'll consider these two chapters in two large subheadings: *The way we are* and *The way God is*.

The way people are

Looking at Judges gives us a picture of the way people are. In the first place, they're a little bit faithful. Judges is helpful for us because it doesn't present a rosy picture of God's people, but it does give us some good things to see about them. They are going about God's work of claiming the land. They capture Adonai-Bezek (the lord of Bezek), and they take over Jerusalem, the all-important future capital of God's people.

One interesting and great story comes in the vignette with Othniel and Achash. It all seems strange to our ears, this bartering for Caleb's daughter as a bride, but this would be standard practice for the day. All parties come across as respectful, intentional and exemplary pictures of covenant fidelity. Hooray for Israel!

But it's not like that in full. The author of Judges has intentionally placed these first few stories (and then the commentary of it in chapter two) to raise some questions in our minds.²

The first sound of discord goes back to Adonai-Bezek. Why was he captured at all? God had told his people to wipe out the inhabitants, not to capture them. Thus, although Judah (the most important and prominent tribe of Israel) seems to be doing well, they in fact are showing a measure of accommodation that is troubling, though perhaps understandable. Surely the Israelites didn't want to kill everyone either. We should pause to note that Adonai-Bezek doesn't seem to think their torture is cruel. He waxes philosophically that he has gotten what he deserves. His speech, the speech of a Canaanite king, would have struck the Israelite as an odd portent in a book about God's faithful people.

But we continue, glad to find out Jerusalem has been captured. The people first reading this book would have known these places. It would be as if they were reading, "The land from Pike's Peak to the southern border of Colorado was captured. The land east to Kansas past Burlington fell into their hands." So this is a recounting of the work. And, despite the strange episode with Adonai-Bezek, we're encouraged, especially with the romantic story of Othiel and Achash. Things are going well.

Then we get to 1:19: *And the Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had chariots of iron.*

Judah couldn't drive out the inhabitants of the hill country. Why not? Because they had chariots of iron. It appears various tribes and people in the region had entered the Iron Age. For a nomadic, recently enslaved people, this was bad, bad news. How could they compete with chariots?

They were forgetting something, weren't they? They forgot what had happened in their history. They forgot they had walked around the city of Jericho and it had fallen down. That is recounted for us in Joshua 6. Jericho didn't fall to them because of their excellent battle strategy – they had walked around the city seven times and shouted. It hadn't fallen because of their weapons. It had fallen because of their God. If he could do that, couldn't he defeat an iron chariot? Caleb had been there, so he should have known. These people's parents had been there, so they should have known. But they didn't. And they were afraid. And they stopped short.³

Here we start to get the bad news. The tribe of Benjamin failed to drive out the Jebusites. The tribe of Manasseh failed to drive out the Canaanites who were determined to stay. The tribe of Ephraim failed to drive out the Canaanites, so they continued to live among them. Zebulun and Asher and Naphtali and Dan failed to drive out the Canaanites.

They didn't do it. They failed.

Well, you know people fail. God forgives them. What is so wrong about that?

Let's review for a second. Deuteronomy is one place where we see what God's people were to do. Deut 6:1-9: *"Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, 2 that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. 3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.*

4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

² "The author has deliberately arranged and shaped the conquest summary to reflect the moral and spiritual decline of the rest of the book. The catalog begins with the most positive examples (Judah) and ends with the most negative (Dan.)" Block, 83

"The genre of this chapter is transformed ironically into an anticonquest account. Unlike most military reports, the aim of this document is not to celebrate the achievements of the generation of Israelites that survived Joshua, but to lament their sorry response to the divine mandate to occupy the land and to eliminate the Canaanites." Block, 83,84

³ This had previously been discussed and decided in Joshua 17:16-18.

Israel was not only to go through and claim the land, but they were to obey God and teach their children about God. All of God's commandments and rules were in view, so they might fear and revere the God who had saved them. They were to teach their children about God's mighty ways, how he had delivered them and what he wanted from them.

Israel wasn't doing that. They hadn't lost full memory, but it was dimming. They were getting a little cloudy on what had happened. Yes, we won the battle at Jericho, but now there are iron chariots! Yes, God had told us to take the land completely, but the Canaanites are nice people. We could slowly convert them. We could win them over.

So they broke the covenant. This is God's declaration at the beginning of chapter two. "You were not to make any covenants with the people living in this land; instead, you were to destroy their altars. But you disobeyed my commands." The people wept, but they did not repent.

So God gave them over to just the thing they wanted. Huh? Well, let's look at another later assessment of what Israel was doing. They weren't taking the land. They weren't obeying God's commandments. They weren't teaching their children (or at least they hadn't been). And what were they doing?

Judges 2:11 tells us: *And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. 12 And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. 13 They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.*

They were slowly and steadily worshiping and serving the Baals. If you're familiar with the Bible, you should automatically be alarmed. The first of the ten commandments says, "You shall have no other gods before me" so this is bad news, a negative assessment. If you're familiar with the rest of the Old Testament, you know this Baal is the start of some bad, bad mojo for God's people.

What was happening? Baal is a Canaanite fertility god. His consort or mistress was Ashtaroth. These were nature gods, who ruled over the crops and the cycles of life. They were just two of an assortment of gods, but they were the two most practical, the two that touched people's lives the most often. Nature rules. Nature is all there is. Nature is king. We worship Nature.

How did they worship nature? The idea here is that Baal needed some encouragement to do his work. He appeared reluctant to scatter his fruitful seed on the earth, so he needed to be stimulated to do that. There wasn't a Let Go and Let Baal or Just Let Baal Do It attitude.⁴ Baal needed help. So the religion employed temple prostitutes. The Canaanite men would go to the temple to worship, and that meant they had sex with the prostitutes. Baal would watch, get excited and then want to have sex with Ashtaroth, and hopefully some of his semen would spill to the ground and things would work again. In other words, Baal would fertilize the earth.

You might be able to imagine that the Canaanite's evangelism methods could be rather effective. The Israelite might invite the Canaanite to come to worship with him one Saturday. There is no mention of the tabernacle, and not any indication of much Bible reading, but some really cool things happened to our parents and their parents. The Canaanite would say something like, "That's very cool. Yahweh seems like an pretty awesome god. I'll accept him, and worship him. He'll be one of our main ones, and I want to learn about him. If I do that, why don't you bring your son, and we'll go worship Baal. We don't just have worship experiences at 9:30, 11 and 5:30, but any time you like. And I think you'll like it." And they did.

The Bible's assessment of this is found in 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.*

Did you catch that? They whored after other gods. It's tempting to blunt this, but the imagery is intentionally provocative. Israel spread her legs and allowed others gods into her, breaking the covenant union, and she did this for profit. Remember that prostitutes give of themselves, and they never get loved. They miss out on pleasure and intimacy. They only have the form, but it is devoid of meaning. It is sad and awful. We get used, but we think we're doing well and having fun.

That's what God thinks of this idolatry. When we make money or relationships or career our idols, we "make ourselves completely vulnerable to it, and become little more than slaves to it."⁵ He doesn't like that. God doesn't simply want us to obey him like law-abiding citizens. He doesn't cast sin that way. He is hurt by it and wants to love his people like a wife loves her husband. God wants deep, intimate love with us, and he doesn't tolerate whoring around. He thinks it's the ultimate form of betrayal and delusion. It sounds remarkably similar to the incident in Exodus with the Golden Calf. Those people thought they were worshipping Yahweh, but they had gotten it all wrong. They were worshipping him the way they wanted to. It didn't take them long to create god in their image. Now here they are accepting another image.

You should consider reading *The Source* by James Michener. It gives a narrative feel to how this could happen. How the Hebrews could be friends with the people and slowly start to adopt their ways as their own. No grudges. No hard feelings. Let's all work together. God doesn't take kindly to other lovers. He finds this intolerable.

⁴ A phrase from Davis.

⁵ *Living in a Pluralistic Society*, p. 25

That's because this idol worship is a God Plus religion. God plus money. God plus sex. God plus popularity. That was what the Canaanites had, and that's what tempts us still today. It's something you add to God as a requirement for being happy.⁶

The end of verse 17 reveals that Israel couldn't wait to go with God Plus. In verse 19, the verdict continues: *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 got worse and worse. More corrupt than their fathers. Stubborn. Bowing down to them in worship and obedience.

The last piece of information actually comes at the beginning of chapter 3. We read in 3:5-6: *So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 6 And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.*

This was another form of this whoring after things. Israel would now be forever connected to these tribes and their gods, for who could so easily war against the god of your own wife not to mention your wife herself?

Now, it's easy to say, "Those idiotic Israelites," isn't it? To say "We would never do that"? You may, and I certainly do, know of people who have married unbelievers, which is a direct violation of 1 Corinthians 7. So people do these things even today.

I doubt many of you would ever walk into a temple prostitute thinking your orgasm would help stimulate the nature god who thus fertilizes your crops.

But – don't be so confident. The picture here of sin is laziness, compatibility, accommodation, idolatry and love.

Why did this happen? Israel focused on themselves and formed a friendship with these people. God had told them not to. He had told them this was a war and they were not to associate with them.

Leviticus 18: 24 *"Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. 25 Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. 26 But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, 27 for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. 28 And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. 29 "Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people. 30 Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God."*

Deuteronomy 18: 9 *When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. 10 Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, 11 or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. 12 Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. 13 You must be blameless before the LORD your God.*

But they didn't listen to him. They lived with and among the people who hated God, and they became friends. Theologically we have to read this as meaning they became friends with sin. Not just friends with sinners. But friends with sin itself. The Canaanites went from being God's enemies to being in-laws. They went from slaves to friends. This sounds good to us, but God's assessment is not ours. He calls this evil. The illustration that might help is a doctor who decides not to remove all the cancer because even cancer has a right to live. No, we must be vigilant against all evil.

Needless to say, Israel didn't think they were in immediate danger. They perhaps thought God was making too big of a deal about things. But they were handling snakes, not worms.

We see why when we realize that through this friendship they forgot and forsook God. Their friends definitely influenced them.

Your parents probably care about your friends. You may have had fights with them about that. Studies show that peers influence people at amazing levels, and it's becoming more and more common that peers are far more influential than parents. Who you are with affects who you are, what you think and what you do. That bad company corrupts good morals is true, at least some of the time. Who are you with and how they think gets into you without you even knowing it. It's like healthy people who are drinking poisoned tap water. Eventually they become poisoned, slowly without ever knowing it. It's how you can be trained to be a racist. It's how you can be trained to think down on people because of how they look, while you're just trying to be honest that they don't fit in with you. It's why a group of people may very likely start dressing all the same (watch the sorority girls go off to their parties and notice the similarity in how they look). It's how a group can start talking a certain way, a way only an "outsider" notices.

People start to say, "That's not so bad. Don't make everything such a big deal. Don't be such a prude." And we listen. We listen because it sounds good and we wonder if God really wants what's best for us. We listen because we don't trust God

⁶ *Living in a Pluralistic Society*, p. 21

and his ways. We don't like his commandments and he often feels distant to us. We don't have a close relationship to him – maybe our parents did and they dragged us to church, but that is then and this is now, and they don't understand what life is like at college.

We then, feeling disconnected and untrusting, start to listen to other gods. The god of success tells us we have to do better and fill our resumes so we'll be happy. The god of sex tells us if it feels good we should do it, that our bodies were made to feel good and there are no real consequences. The god of cool tells us we won't be accepted unless we have the latest and greatest fashion or technology. The god of nature tells us science is all there is and nothing else can explain the universe.

So we listen to them. They make sense. They seem right.

But they're like eating cotton candy. Cotton candy seems to be a food of substance. But it's air-whipped sugar. If you keep eating it, it will make you sick.

It's like a bag of snakes. They look like worms, but they're not. They'll kill you.

It's like Scar. He says he wants to be your friend, but he secretly wishes for and plots for your death so he can take over.

It's like a lover, who tells you you're special, when she's secretly got twenty others on the side.

As we befriend sin and forget God, we fall in love with these gods. They get in our lives, and we make friends with them, and we drift away. You've seen it. Maybe you're living it. Maybe it's happening with sex. God says sex is to be reserved for only a husband and a wife, but you're not so sure. A little pornography never hurt anyone, you think. Maybe it's drugs and alcohol. Things seem so much more fun with a little in your system, so that's good, right? Maybe it's the place of your grades in your life – how can you sleep without doing your best which means a 4.0 and 100% papers?

The university is a place where the gods of grades and success are easy to worship. Again, it's a God Plus. It's not like you will easily become an atheist (although that does happen in rare occasions). It's more likely that you'll keep your worship of God going, but you'll add a worship of grades to it. That's how paganism works – mix and match. So you'll be theologically worshipping God but functionally worshipping grades, success and career. Grades, success and career give you identity and security. You pattern your days in order to serve grades, success and career.

Friends, one of the things that is so bad about sin is how delusional it is. How right it seems to be. If you have grown up in the church at all, you have heard what is right and wrong. In your hearts you know. But sin will seem so right to you. It will deceive you into thinking it is good. Don't be fooled into thinking it will be obvious all the time. It is sneaky. It is tricky. It uses our momentum against us. It ensnares us. It is a good thing gone a wrong way.

The things we think are befriending us are actually enslaving us. God says this is the cycle of sin. That our idolatry is sick and disgusting.

I hope you can see yourself here. We're not talking about nonChristians or unbelievers. We're talking about people who claim to be God's people, but they are living just like all the people around them. These are the people described in the book *unChristian*, which asserts this is the majority of Christians in our country. When we start going with God Plus, we let things in that eventually will ruin us. Do you see any things you have to have in your life in order to be happy?

We need to see ourselves here in Judah. We need to identify and relate to what God is saying about the way sin works. Do you see? With what do you identify? What gods do you serve? Where have you befriended sin?

Are there places where you're saying, "I can't do that" but God says, "You won't do that"? Do you see the difference? Are you saying you can't forgive her? Are you saying you can't share the gospel with him? Are you saying you can't resist temptation? Or is it true that you can but you won't?

Are you willing to do whatever God says in an area of your life? Are you willing to accept whatever God sends in this area? If so, then you understand the lordship of God in every area of your life. If not, then you have some sort of God Plus in your life that needs to go.

The Way God is

If you have something in mind and can relate to the Israelites, then you're ready to hear about how God is.

In the first place, he is a judge. This should come as no surprise. The people are presented as rebels against him, breaking his commands, spitting in his face and sleeping with other lovers. So what should they get? They get judgment, and they deserve it.

Remember they didn't do what he had told them to do. They had blanched because of supposed superior technology and also it appears in 1:27 and 1:35 the Canaanites were simply just braver than the Israelites. God says Israel disobeyed him. He makes this assessment in 2:2. They were not unable. They were disobedient.

It's interesting to note just how God judges, because it isn't exactly what we'd expect. He gives them over to the people they live with. He doesn't strike them down or wipe them out or "smite" them. But he gives them over, which is language that brings to mind Romans 1:24-25: *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*

This is not what you want. When God gives you over, you are in trouble. He allows you to have the very thing you want, and, to be graphic, you hang yourself with your own rope. They wanted to be friends with the Canaanites, and to worship their gods. So God let them do it.

Here is where we read that in Judges: *So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.* (2:14)

God is a judge. You cannot do whatever you want. It's not even true you can do whatever you want as long as you don't hurt someone else. That is a poor definition of morality. God says we must follow his ways, and his ways are right and true for us. They are for his best. All fall short of the glory of God. All are under his judgment for our sins.

The worst thing for you would be for God to allow you the full reign of those wrong passions. Pray he would not do that. Pray he would judge you in a different way. Pray he would send someone to help you, to jar you out of your world of slavery as beautiful and fulfilling it might be to you.

And he just might. For there is a surprising thing in this text. Some of you are liberals and you're offended that sin is judged. Others of you are happy to see this, for you are conservatives, and you want people to be held accountable for their sins.

This text has something to offend you conservatives as well.

The same God who judges people for their sins in 2:14 also saves them from them in 2:16: *Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.*

Notice there is no prior repentance in view here.⁷ Notice there is no cry for help even. Notice there is no righteousness in the story. But God still intervenes. The same God who judges also saves. In spite of their harlotry, God delivers them.⁸

Certainly not because they are lovely, but despite their unloveliness. He doesn't save them because they deserve it at all. He saves them because he loves them and hates to see them suffer. They cannot save themselves.

God sees their sin and misery and truly understands the suffering of this estate. He loves his people even though they don't deserve him. So he sends deliverers time and again to save them.

How can God both save and judge? Who is this God who sends saviors to release his people and yet doesn't let them get away with their rampant unfaithfulness?

Let me put it this way. Israel needed a Deliverer from its sins. It was held captive, enslaved by the power of sin and needed release from a Savior Judge, not in a temporary sense but in an ultimate sense. Time and again, there was a temporary, imperfect savior. Couldn't there be a permanent, perfect Savior? That will be our question through Judges, one that we'll look at over and over through the book. That is one of the major theological themes in the book. It's not merely a historical record of the tribes of Israel. It's a statement about who we are and who God is.

God is both judge and savior. We see this evidenced on the cross where Jesus Christ died. We are a people captured by sin. The Bible everywhere says that. We live and experience that. We are in bondage. We have already seen how we can relate to God's people as pictured for us in Judges. If we were to write our own histories down, it would look much the same way. People would wonder about us. They would shake their heads at our foolishness.

We are a sinful people. The wages of sin is death.

But the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus, his Son. Jesus is the true son. He is the true Judge. He is permanent and perfect. He saves his people from their sins. He did and does what the judges could not do.

Think about Jesus on the cross.⁹ What were Jesus' last words on while he was dying? "It is finished." What was finished? In Matthew 1 we read why Jesus came to earth: to save his people from their sins. He was a deliverer, a judge, a savior. God had heard the cries of his people and seen their suffering, and he sent the final judge for them. All other judges had prefigured and pictured this judge. Now he was here. Now he had done his perfect work. God didn't save his people because of any righteous things they had done but because of his mercy. Because of his covenantal love, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so we could be made right with God. We call this the Great Exchange. In theological terms, it is substitutionary atonement.

One of the other things Christ said on the cross was "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What did that mean? It meant that Jesus was experiencing the wrath and curse of God. He had always known the love of his father, but here he was experiencing the full judgment of God. Every sin of God's people was being placed on him, and he was receiving the full cup of wrath for all of it. That is what Jesus took. That is what was finished. That is what was happening on the cross. An innocent man was dying for the sins of his people.

⁷ "Yahweh typically operates on Israel's behalf in mercy and grace, not in response to the people's manifest spirituality and merit." Block, 84

⁸ "The reader may justifiably be surprised when Yahweh intervenes on Israel's behalf. If this nation emerges at the end of the period with any sort of national self-consciousness and any sense of significance in history, it is due to no credit of their own. It attributable entirely to the gracious heart of their covenant Sovereign. He deals mercifully with them, not because they deserve it in any way but because of his long-range mission of mercy for the world. He has chosen this nation to be an instrument of blessing and he cannot let her die or disappear among the conglomerate populations of the ancient Near East. At times the nation appears determined to destroy itself, but each time he rescues her." Block, 140

⁹ The progression of this thinking comes from Rev. Pete Hatton's sermon on this text.

The other thing that then happens is Jesus' perfect life is accounted to you. That's the second part of the Great Exchange. The first is your sinfulness gets accounted to him, and he pays for it. The second is his righteousness gets accounted to you, and you benefit from it.

As Rev. Tim Keller puts it, "This is the only way God can both love us conditionally AND unconditionally. Jesus fulfilled the conditions of the law for us, so that now God can stay committed to us no matter what."¹⁰

Friends, all of this is yours. Our text points to this very thing in the God who judges and saves. He doesn't only judge. Some of you relate to him that way. You think of God as tallying up payment for your misdeeds. That will cause you to distance yourself from him. Or you will judge others because you think you are doing so well. You are glad when others get caught. You are the so-called good brother in the prodigal son story. But he hates his father.

Others of you think God only saves. You think you can do no matter what you want and God will love you. You think you can break all the rules and be "good to go" because God forgives sins. You are like the younger brother who hates his father and squanders his riches. You may find yourself coming to your senses in the pigsty someday soon.

God does judge. But in Judges we find the word "save." That word "save" is the verb form of Joshua, which is the Old Testament or Hebrew equivalent of Jesus. "Jeshua" – Jesus – save. And he does save. He does this in Jesus. It is Jesus who matters. It is Jesus who delivers his people from their sins. If you believe in and trust in Jesus then he covers your sins and pays for them. His life is to you as yours is to him. Don't you see how that has tremendous import to you? Do you see how your heart should respond to him in love and gratitude? Do you see how you do not deserve this kind of love?

The result should be a renewed faithfulness, not a continued degeneration. The result to this grand sort of love should be love for your groom, not an antsy looking to other lovers. That kind of love should be a humble reliance on God because you recognize your unworthiness, not a prideful boasting of how deserving you are to be a child of God.

God was showing his people that they needed to go to war with sin. Are you at war with sin or have you snuggled with sin? God was showing his people what would happen if they thought of sin too lightly. Have you thought of sin too lightly?

God is showing his people they were to be faithful in the little, unglamorous things. Do you have the same attitude and purpose as God would you to have? Here is a little, true saying: Ships don't sink by being in the water. They sink by the water getting in them. Can you spot the godlessness around you? Do you do anything against it or do you participate in it? Are you an unChristian? As commentator Ralph Davis puts it: "God rules over all of life; nothing is outside his dominion – whether business and politics, economics and education, science and sex, history and harvest, art and affliction, music and marriage. All of life is holy and must be submitted to his reign."¹¹

Amnesia can produce apostasy. Think of God's glory and his greatness. The God who rightly casts us down stoops to lift us up. While we were and are still sinners, God saves us out of the depth of his love to us. His mercies never fail. They are new every morning. This God is unguessable. He cannot be controlled or programmed like Baal or Nature. There are none others like him.

What should your response be? You should fall down on your knees and bow before him.

Micah 6:18 *Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. 19 He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. 20 You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.*

Salvation then is more than a religious charade but is an act of holy, vicious violence by which Christ wrenches his people out of the clammy clutches of the prince of darkness.¹²

We must live as a people who follow and obey God's commands. We cannot give up on this sort of holiness for our lives, but we must long to be like Christ in every way. But we must also understand that when we do fail, God will never give up on us. Thus, we don't ever give in to sin or live under the burden of the law. We are freed to truly live.¹³

Instead of befriending sin then, may we be able to sing about our beloved Savior Judge:

*1. Jesus! What a friend for sinners! Jesus! Lover of my soul;
Friends may fail me, foes assail me, He, my Savior, makes me whole.*

*Chorus: Hallelujah! What a Savior! Hallelujah! What a friend!
Saving, helping, keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.*

¹⁰ *Living in a Pluralistic Society*, 18

¹¹ Davis, 35

¹² Davis, 43

¹³ Concept from *Living in a Pluralistic Society*.

*2. Jesus! What a strength in weakness! Let me hide myself in Him.
Tempted, tried, and sometimes failing, He, my strength, my victory wins.*

*3. Jesus! What a help in sorrow! While the billows o'er me roll,
Even when my heart is breaking, He, my comfort, helps my soul.*

*4. Jesus! I do now receive Him, More than all in Him I find.
He hath granted me forgiveness, I am His, and He is mine.*

His, and He is mine.