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Bread of Life
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Judges 1:1 - 3:6

The Danger of Drifting Away from the Lord

One of my favorite living Christian authors and theologians is a man named D.A. Carson. In several places, Carson mentions a conversation he once had with a fellow seminary professor who grew up in a Mennonite context and later became Baptist. I've mentioned this conversation before, but the point is so profound, and fits so well with our sermon text, that I think it is well worth mentioning again. As they were talking one day, Carson asked his friend about his Menonite heritage, and the friend, now baptist professor, gave this summary reflection:

“One generation of Mennonites *believed* the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation *assumed* the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation *denied* the gospel: the “entailments” became everything.’ Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.”¹

What he's saying teaches us a profoundly important principle: the first generation *believed* the gospel. But the second generation *assumed* the gospel - they believed it, but they no longer taught about the gospel, preached it, or emphasized it. The next generation *denied* the gospel - they lost it altogether. They no longer assumed or believed the gospel. The sad story of the Menonites teaches us a profound lesson that we must learn and cannot afford to miss: What is assumed in one generation is lost in the next. If we stop preaching, teaching, and emphasizing the true faith of the gospel of Christ Jesus and a right understanding of God's Word, then pretty soon, we will gradually *forget, lose, and deny* the truth of the gospel and God's Word. This is a warning to us to be on guard against spiritual drift. And this is a danger that threatens all of us - not just Menonites, but all Christians, all churches, all people. And that's because we're all sinners, by nature. We don't naturally drift toward holiness and morality; our sinful flesh naturally drifts toward sin and ungodly desires. We don't naturally drift toward faith, truth, and worship; our sinful hearts naturally drift toward unbelief and idolatry. We don't naturally drift toward a right understanding of the gospel; as sinners, we naturally drift toward rejecting God's judgment and our need for the gospel; we naturally drift away from the grace of the gospel and

¹ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, p.26.

toward self-centered pride and legalism. We all need to heed the warning against such *spiritual drift* that tugs on us all.

And this is a thoroughly biblical warning - a warning that comes straight from our text this morning, Judges 1:1 - 3:6. We see the same principle at play here in Israel: what begins in faithfulness and obedience gradually drifts into a downward spiral of sin, unbelief, and idolatry. The book of Judges tells a tragic story; as it goes on, it gets worse and worse, until by the end, it's almost impossible even to read it. The story is one of moral and spiritual descent - a dark, downward spiral into sin, depravity, and idolatry. And yet, it is not a time without hope. God warns and judges Israel, yet also raises up Judges, time and time again, to save them. Yet time and time again, they do not repent, but go right back into sin, disobedience, and idolatry. And in fact, each time, they get worse and worse.

Our text, Judges 1:1 - 3:6, sets the stage for the rest of the book. In these first two chapters, we see two parallel accounts of what happens to Israel in the second generation onward after Joshua's death - that is, after Israel had come into the promised land of Canaan. Chapter 1 shows Israel off to a good start, but then shows how they gradually decline into disobedience and sin, and go from victory to failure. Chapter 2 makes that clear and shows us the *spiritual and theological significance* of their decline. Starting in 2:5, the story backs up, back to the death of Joshua, and goes back over this exact same timeline - only this time, the author is "pulling back the curtain," so to speak; if chapter 1 shows us these events of history from a human perspective, chapter two gives us a theological interpretation from God's perspective, showing us the spiritual realities at play here. And both chapters, looking at the same sequence of events, show us Israel drifting away from the Lord, spiraling down into greater sin, unfaithfulness, and idolatry - until, by the end of it, Israel has become just like the pagan nations that they were supposed to drive out. And then, each section tells us how the Lord responds: the Lord is angry with them, pouring out judgment; and yet, He is also merciful, raising up saviors for them and giving opportunity after opportunity for them to listen, repent, and turn back to Him in faith. And so, this passage is given to us as a *warning*, that we might learn these same lessons. We're given warnings here against *moral drift*, *spiritual drift*, and ultimately, against *drifting away from the gospel*.

First we're warned against *Moral Drift*:

I. Moral Drift: The Danger of Compromise and Partial Obedience (1:1 - 2:5)

Chapter 1 begins with Israel off to a great start. It picks up right where the book of Joshua left off, with Israel finally having come to the promised land. God commanded Israel to go in and take possession of the land. And GOD made their mission clear: the Lord clearly commanded Israel to drive out the inhabitants of the land *completely*, wiping them all out with the sword. For example, we see this in Ex. 23:31-33: “For I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” Or again, in Deut. 7:2, “and when the LORD your God given them over to you, and you defeat them you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.” God made his expectations clear, but also what was at stake if they disobeyed: if Israel disobeyed and let the pagan peoples of the land live among them, they would mix with them, intermarry, and start to worship their gods, falling into the snares of idolatry. Throughout the book of Joshua, we see a beautiful picture of God fulfilling His promises and delivering Israel’s enemies into their hands. The point is clear: this isn’t about Israel’s military strength, but whether or not they will trust in God to fulfill His promises. But then, Joshua dies. And so the question is: what will happen now that Joshua is gone? Will Israel remain faithful?

Well, in the first half of chapter 1, they are off to a good start. Verse 1 begins with Israel seeking the Lord’s will: “After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD, ‘Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?’” In verses 2-26, we see, mostly, a picture of obedience and victory. But even here, we start to see signs that Israel is backsliding - that they are not fully obeying the Lord, but are compromising, drifting into *partial obedience* - and partial obedience is full disobedience.

In v.19, we read: “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.” Now, when it says “chariots of iron,” we should hear, “the enemies had a far superior military.” The Canaanites were by far the stronger, more technologically advanced force! So when it says they “could not” drive them out, we might think that this means they tried but were just unable. But I don’t think that’s the case at all. After all, in Joshua 17:18, they received the promise, “For you shall drive out the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron, and though they are strong.” The problem was not military strength; they problem was that, in their fear, Judah was

not trusting the Lord. Just a couple verses later, after telling us of Benjamin's conquest, we read in v. 21: "But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem, so the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day." What this is telling us is that they *disobeyed the Lord*. Now, we might think, at first, that this means they tried to, but were unable to because they were beaten in battle. But that's not what we see here. It says that "the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day." Obviously, in order for Benjamin to move into their city as overlords, this meant they won the battle, but accepted the Jebusites' surrender! In other words: they disobeyed the Lord. They did not drive out the inhabitants like God told them to, but accepted their surrender, made peace, and lived with them.

The second half of chapter 1 continues, giving us a long list of all the many times that Israel continued to disobey the Lord. Sure, they obeyed by carrying out the conquest, possessing the land; but it was only *partial obedience*. They compromised by taking them as slaves instead of destroying them. For example, verse 28 reads: "When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not drive them out completely." And it continues, telling us how tribe after tribe disobeyed the Lord, compromising with the inhabitants of the land, putting them to forced labor instead of completely destroying them. This was wilful disobedience. Chapter 2:1-5 makes this very clear, as God pronounces judgment on Israel. Since they are morally compromising, He no longer gives them victory, explaining why, by the time we reach then end of chapter 1, Israel no longer enslaves the Canaanites, but Dan is actually defeated and cannot take the land. And we're told that God's warning will surely come to pass: their sin will lead to greater sin, as Israel will embrace the idolatry of the pagan nations they choose to live with.

Israel was only partially obeying, because they thought that their plan was better than God's. Maybe they thought, "Why destroy them when we could make them slaves and profit from their labor?" In fact, we might be tempted to read this story and think that God's commands are harsh, and that the Israelites terms of surrender, instead of utter destruction, we're more merciful and loving. But this text makes it very clear for us: *we do not know better than God!* And yet, how often are we just as tempted to disobey God because we think we know better than He does? How often are we tempted to think, "Yeah, I know the Bible says I should do it that way, but that's just incredible impractical and inconvenient for me; surely if God knew my

circumstances He wouldn't expect me to obey *completely!*" Yet the second we do that, we're saying we know better than God. God's commands are not arbitrary. God's demands that we repent and fight sin, pursue sexual purity, boldly believe what the Bible says, be part of a local church, give financially to the church and for missions, care for the poor, and share the gospel - these aren't just commands for *some Christians* to obey, they are for all of us to obey, all the time, not just when we think it works for us.

Yet we often morally compromise in an effort to *partially obey*. But partially obeying God is *completely disobeying GOD*. I think we can draw a helpful analogy from parenting. When teaching our kids to obey, we teach them to obey *completely*. If I tell my son to pick up his toys, and he only picks up half of them, he did not obey. Partial obedience is disobedience. We are called to fully obey God in all things, all the time. And when we disobey and sin, we begin drifting down the river of immorality - each sin leads to more sin and dire consequences. And so, we each have to ask ourselves this morning: what are areas in your life where you are tempted to morally compromise? Is there any area of your life where you are tempted to think that you know better than God? Where you are deliberately living in a way that is *contrary* to what God demands because you just don't think obeying God would be convenient, practical, or good for you and the people you care about? Are there clear biblical commands that you are only *partially* obeying? At work, compromising morality so you can get a paycheck? At school or around friends, drifting away from the faith and becoming like the world, so you fit in and aren't made fun of? In a romantic relationship? In the privacy of your bedroom? In politics? If so, brothers and sisters, let us confess such compromise and partial obedience for what it is - full disobedience and sin - and let us repent before the Lord.

And the reason why it is so important that we do so is because the *moral drift* of our actions is always driven by *spiritual drift* in our hearts. Which we see in point number two...

II. Spiritual Drift: The Danger of Drifting into Idolatry and Unbelief (2:6-13)

In chapter 2, verse 6, the narrative backs up in time back to Joshua's death (where chapter 1 began). We see the timeline repeated, only this time, the focus is on the spiritual realities at play here. In verses 6-9, we're told of the faithfulness of Joshua's generation. Verse 7 says, "And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel." That is, this generation *knew the Lord*. They had experienced His faithfulness, they feared Him, and strove to

be faithful and obedient. But then, after that generation passes, we see a seismic shift in the spiritual condition of the people. We read in verse 10: “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.*” This verse is profoundly important for understanding the first two chapters of Judges - and the book as a whole. The explanation for the gradual moral drift into disobedience we see in chapter 1 is because, at the exact same time, there is a profound *spiritual drift* occurring in the hearts of the people. They began to doubt and disobey God because they *did not know God or trust him*. They knew *about* God, what He had said and done for their fathers, but they didn’t personally know Him. They forgot the faithfulness of God and did not trust Him. That is, their hearts drifted into unbelief; their outward faithlessness was a direct result of their inward lack of faith and belief in their hearts. The first generation knew God, but the next forgot God and drifted away from Him.

And they continued to drift away from Him. In fact, the more they sinned, the more hardened their hearts became, the more sin and unbelief they descended into. Remember, one of the biggest reasons why God commanded them to completely drive out the idolatrous nations of the land was so that Israel would not live with them, intermarry, and start to worship their gods. But since they didn’t drive them out, this is exactly what happened. We see this in vv.11-13: “And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. 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 peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.” Israel, who was supposed to be distinct from the nations, the one people of the one true God, kept drifting away from God, through their sin, disobedience, and unbelief, until *they looked just like the pagan, idolatrous nations around them*. Israel was supposed to drive out the pagan Canaanites, but instead, they were “Canaanized” - they became just like them, both in their immoral practices and in their idolatrous, unbelieving hearts.

The spiritual drift we see here in Israel is not some abnormal exception: it is the default setting of sinful humanity. We do not drift toward holiness, but because we each have a sin nature, we naturally drift towards sin and idolatry, away from the Lord. When we sin, it hardens our heart in unbelief, leading to greater sin, less faith, and more idolatry in our hearts. We, just like Israel, are tempted to gradually drift away from the Lord, our hearts becoming more and

more hardened by sin and unbelief, until we become just like the unbelieving world around us - particularly by the nation and culture that we live in.

Everyone is going to be disciplined into some kind of system of beliefs - the question is, will you be disciplined by God through His Word and Church? Or will you be disciplined by the unbelieving world? We are constantly being bombarded with worldly influences that are contrary to the truth of the Bible and tempt us to embrace lifestyles of sin and ungodly beliefs. Schools, TV, music, advertisements, news, politics, and a host of other things all compete for our minds and hearts, trying to make us disciples of worldly ways of thinking - especially in terms of sexual immorality, rejecting God's authority, even rejecting truths like what marriage, men, women, and unborn babies are. We are fooling ourselves if we think that we are immune to the ungodly influences of the world and culture all around us. We, like Israel, are susceptible to drifting along the spiritual currents of our culture until we become just like the unbelieving world - claiming to be Christian while we embrace ungodly lifestyles and beliefs.

We must take this warning seriously, for none of our hearts are spiritually neutral; we are all constantly tempted to drift along the currents into greater sin and unbelief, which is exactly what happens everytime we give into sinful ways of living and thinking. Therefore, we don't just play defense - we play spiritual offense. We must actively pursue faith and holiness. And this must be a communal effort. In fact, one of the ways we do this is by making sure we are plugged into a church community that will be committed towards our own personal repentance, holiness, and perseverance in faith in the gospel. But the only way that we can help each other do that is by being able to *keep each other accountable*. And that means, you need to submit yourself to a church that will love you enough to keep you accountable, gently rebuke, and restore you when you begin to drift and gradually slip away spiritually.

And this warning against spiritual drift isn't just for us as individuals, but for us as a church. It is sobering to think about one generation in the church being faithful, and the next falling away from the Lord. As a church, we must take discipleship seriously, in order to pass on the faith. We must diligently seek to disciple others, and especially our kids, to teach them and pray for them to personally know the Lord. We cannot assume the gospel but must faithfully pass it on. And this means, we must make sure we are passing on the *right faith* - the right gospel. We must be on guard against *gospel drift*. Which brings us to our final point...

III. Gospel Drift: The Danger of Forgetting Both God's Judgment and Grace (2:14 - 3:6)

Israel's disobedience, sin, and idolatry leads to the Lord responding in anger, wrath, and judgment against them, as we see in 2:1-5, and again in verses 14-15. The Lord gives them over to their enemies and no longer grants them victory in battle. They receive a stern warning of their sin and their condemnation before God. But that isn't the only way God responds: he also shows them incredible mercy and grace. V.14 tells us that "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel," but then, in v.16, we read: "Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them." God proclaimed his wrath and judgment against them for their sin and unbelief; he even gave them over to the consequences of their sin so that they would learn the fear of the Lord, being convicted of their guilt, and repent! AND then, He even shows them mercy, raising up "judges," meant to save Israel from their enemies and lead them back to God. God shows them both his wrathful, holy judgment and his merciful salvation, so that they would repent and turn back to Him in faith.

And yet, sadly, they don't do that. V.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." And as verse 18 and following show us, this is a pattern that continued to repeat itself; the very pattern that we see played out, again and again, throughout the book of Judges. The people sin, the Lord brings judgment, and then merciful deliverance, both intended for ISrael to repent and turn back to God in faith and yet, everytime, they just go right back into sin and idolatry - and in fact, that keep getting worse and worse, more pagan, sinful, unbelieving, and idolatrous. The end of our passage, vv.20 through chapter 3:6, make it clear that this is "in order to test Israel... whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their father did, or not." Israel failed the test; but it serves as a *warning* to us today. We, as Christians, must not forget the Lord, but must *remember* that GOd has promised *both* judgment against our sin if we do not repent, *and* merciful grace and salvation for all who do repent. In other words: we can't forget but must steadfastly remember, belief, and proclaim *the full truth of the gospel*: including both the bad news of the judgment we all deserve in Hell, and the gloriously good news of GOd's grace and merciful salvation for *all* who repent and trust in Christ as Lord and savior! There is no gospel without *both realities*.

Just like Israel ignored God's warnings of judgment and consequences for sin, so we face the danger of ignoring and forgetting God's judgment as well. This happens when Christians and churches become ashamed of God's judgment and wrath, so they stop preaching and teaching about it. The reality of God's wrath and judgment against our sin, and the Hell we deserve, can be a very uncomfortable reality. We might even feel ashamed of them, or worry that our friends and family will think that it isn't loving for us to talk about them. But if we just *assume* the truth of God's judgment against sin, but don't ever talk about it, teach, or preach it, then soon enough, people will no longer *believe* it. Without the bad news - that we are all wicked sinners who deserve God's wrath and judgment in Hell because of our sin - there is no need for the good news of the gospel.

And this means, obviously, that as we recognize, believe, and proclaim the reality of God's judgment against sin, we must also never forget the reality of God's grace in the gospel of Christ! Yet just like Israel spurned God's mercy and took it for granted, and soon forgot it, so we are prone to do so as well. Our idolatrous hearts can quickly drift away from the grace of God and take it for granted, presuming on God's mercy all the while we harbor sin and secret idols in our hearts. This happens when we forget GOD's mercy and leave him for the false hopes of this world, chasing after sin and idols. This happens when we forget GOD's grace and slink back into the old idols of legalism and works-based righteousness. This happens anytime we're tempted to *assume* the gospel, but no longer keep the gospel primary. But if we assume the gospel, we will lose the gospel. And without the gospel, there is no salvation.

THat means that we can't afford to miss the warning this text gives us. Moral drift and spiritual drift lead to gospel drift. The more we go on disobeying God and excusing sin without repenting, the more we harden our hearts in unbelief, turning away from God to the sinful idolatry of our hearts. And the reason this is the case is because the "moral drift" of our outward disobedience really just reveals the "spiritual drift" in our hearts: if someone gradually slipping into a lifestyle of unrepentant sin, it shows that their hearts have slipped away from the Lord, that they might not truly have faith in the gospel. But thankfully, there's a solution! THE antidote for our sin-sick, idolatrous hearts is *remembering and believing the gospel*. Therefore, we must remember, believe, preach, teach, and pass on the truth of GOD's grace - the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ! Every consequence for our sin in this life just reminds us of the coming day of judgment where God will punish all sin and evildoers in Hell, for eternity - and that this is

exactly what each one of us deserves! And yet, GOD is *rich in mercy* to all who turn to Him in faith! We are all sinners, all guilty of distrusting and disobeying God, all guilty of moral compromise - we're all guilty of idolatry! Everytime we sin, we're saying we don't trust God, that we're trusting in ourselves, our flesh, the ways and idols of this world - we're drifting into spiritual darkness and idolatry. And that's why every single one of us need to continually *repent and believe* - to confess our sin, believe God's warnings of coming judgment against our wickedness, and also *believe His promises of mercy and grace* in Christ Jesus! Every single day, everytime we're aware of our sinfulness, we need to turn to Christ and *believe the gospel* - that Jesus lived the perfect life we couldn't, in our place - and *bore the fullness of God's wrath, anger, and judgment that we deserve!* He died on the cross and rose again, for us! And the Lord raised him up to be our savior - *if we repent and believe, if we turn and trust in Christ alone for salvation.* So let us all repent and believe, both that we deserve God's wrath, *and* that we are completely forgiven purely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ! Let us cling to this gospel, let us cling to Christ - because that is the *only way* we guard against morally and spiritually drifting away from the Lord. Our only hope is that the Lord will hold us fast - and he's promised to do just that, so long as we don't forget the gospel but keep trusting Him.

And one of the beautiful gifts God has given us in remembering the gospel is the Lord's Supper. In a few moments, we're going to come to the table, where we proclaim the Lord's death and resurrection for our sins until He comes again. If you're a baptized believer in good standing with a gospel preaching church, we invite you to come to the table with us this morning.

But if you're not a believer, then there's a *different way* for you to respond. We invite you to repent from your sins, for the first time, and *truly believe in the good news of God's mercy and grace!* Trust that Jesus did everything necessary, by dying on the cross for your sins and being raised again, to save you from your sins - and you will be saved! And then, publicly profess your faith in baptism. If that's you this morning, please come and speak with me as soon as the service is over. Let us pray.