

Consequences

AFTER JOSHUA'S DEATH, ISRAEL FELL INTO A CYCLE OF SIN, JUDGMENT, CONFESSION, AND RESTORATION.

When I was young I had a Big Wheel toy. It was basically a fancy-looking tricycle made out of plastic. I loved to ride it and, in my mind at least, it definitely made me look cooler than riding a tricycle would have.

One day, I attempted to jump the Big Wheel off of a relatively high curb. The front wheel and handlebar broke off the bike completely. I went to my dad to see if he could fix it. He examined the damage and said he would do what he could. The next day I found my Big Wheel rebuilt and sitting in the garage. However, my father told me that under no circumstances was I to get on the Big Wheel or try to move it; he was fixing it in stages and the glue needed 24 hours to dry between each stage. I promised to wait until my dad said it was okay to ride again.

After about a week of waiting, I decided to check on my beloved vehicle. It looked perfect. I wanted to ride it. Dad's words of warning echoed in my mind, but I justified my imminent disobedience by telling myself that he had simply not remembered to tell me that the Big Wheel was good to go. So, of course, I got on. With a loud snap, the wheel and handlebars came off again. I knew I was in trouble. My impatience and my desire to get my way immediately had destroyed the very thing I wanted.

I went to my father and told him what had happened. He looked at me sternly and asked if I had not understood his instructions. I replied that I had but the trike looked like it was fixed. He shook his head sadly as he looked at me. My dad's judgment was swift and terrible (or at least it seemed that way to me): the Big Wheel would be relegated to the trash pile. I was devastated. I pleaded and cried, but my dad was resolute. My disobedience had consequences.

When I had calmed down and apologize for my disobedience, that which was most valuable—my relationship with my father—was restored and he forgave me. As a child, I had been much more focused on the loss of my favorite toy. My desire was misplaced, and that led to disobedience and the resulting consequences.

The book of Judges contains a series of stories that follow a similar pattern, but with much more dire consequences. After the death of

Joshua, the Israelites repeatedly abandoned God’s commands and followed their own desires first and foremost. When the judgment from God came for their disobedience, they realized the folly of what they had done. They cried out to God to relieve them from the punishment they were under. Sadly, however, their repentance was only temporary. As soon as life got easier again, they went back to choosing their own path. Throughout the book of Judges we see Israel making the same mistake that I did as a child. Just as I did not understand that my relationship with my father was much more important than a toy, the Israelites did not value their relationship with God as they should have. As a result, their repentance and renewed obedience did not typically last long after the punishment was removed.



Judges 1:1–3:6

The book of Judges illustrates the period after the Israelites had come out of the wilderness under Moses and begun the conquest under Joshua but had not completed that conquest. After Joshua’s death, there was no one central figure who stepped in or who was hand-picked to be a mediator between God and the people. In many ways, this lack of a central figure served as an early warning of the bad news that would follow throughout the book of Judges. When people are left on their own to make decisions without a godly leader, they tend to abandon God relatively quickly. The golden calf incident when Moses was absent from the people while he spoke with God on a mountain illustrates this well (Ex. 32).

With that being said, this lack of a central go-between for the people did not doom the Israelites to failure; they were provided with an opportunity to follow God faithfully anyway. When the Israelites inquired of the Lord at the beginning of the book of Judges, He responded with instructions (Judg. 1:1-2). Even though they didn’t have a central leader, they were still seeking the Lord’s guidance and wanting to fulfill His commands. The problem was that this early reliance on God was fleeting; very soon they went their own way rather than seeking the Lord’s will.

Chapter 1 speaks of the successes and failures of the people in the conquest of the land. The failures become more frequent as the narrative progresses. An example of the Israelites’ failure to stay faithful shows up in Judges 2:1-10. The angel of the Lord came to condemn the people for

their lack of obedience. If they had remained faithful, God would have helped the Israelites successfully remove the Canaanites. However, their disobedience had led to God’s judgment. They had turned away from their God, and so God left them with the consequences of that decision.

Judges 2:11-23 provides a summary of what was about to happen because of the people’s disobedience. While the strong leadership of Joshua and his commitment to God had kept the baser instincts of the people in check, the trend after Joshua was a progressively negative downward spiral for the people of God.

Before his death, Joshua had warned the people of the consequences of failure to be all in on the worship of the God of Israel alone (Josh. 24). The people had vowed that they would remain faithful to God and acknowledged the penalties that would come from God Himself if they failed (vv. 19-20). Judges is a record of their failures and the penalties that followed.



The Evil (Judg. 2:11-15)

All actions matter to God. The whole of Scripture boils everything down to two choices: obedience or disobedience. Faithfulness or faithlessness. Life or death. For God or against God. The book of Judges illustrates, for the most part, the results of rejecting God—choosing disobedience and faithlessness instead of walking with Him. While we see moments when Israel repents and God displays mercy, these are the exceptions in the book rather than the rule. Judges 2:11-23 introduces the destructive cycle that will make up the rest of the book.

VERSE 11

**The Israelites did what was evil in the LORD’s sight.
They worshiped the Baals**

This passage starts off by declaring **the Israelites did what was evil in the LORD’s sight**. Unfortunately, this phrase would be a recurring refrain throughout the book of Judges. It did not take long after the Israelites had entered the land before they started abandoning God and His commands. While it is easy to condemn the Israelites for this failure,

we must acknowledge that Israel was demonstrating typical human behavior. Any parent who has sent a child off to college knows this fact intimately. As parents, we strive to bring up our children to share our values and to act according to these values. Once children are on their own at college, though, they are faced with a choice: to practice these values and make them their own, or to forget and abandon them as they are subjected to competing ideas and temptations. Israel, as God’s child, was no different.

VERSES 12-13

and abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed other gods from the surrounding peoples and bowed down to them. They angered the LORD, for they abandoned him and worshiped Baal and the Ashtoreths.

Verse 12 expounds on the nature of the evil actions of the Israelites. Specifically, they **abandoned the LORD**. The Hebrew word translated *abandoned* is often used to indicate a change in the status of a relationship. It is the same word used to describe a man switching his primary allegiance from his father and mother to his wife when he gets married (“leaves,” Gen. 2:24; see Eph. 5:31). The word is repeated in verse 13 for emphasis. The message is clear: the Israelites changed their allegiance, favoring a new relationship with the pagan gods of the Canaanites over their relationship with the Lord. Note that if the Israelites had obeyed God in the first place, these other peoples and their gods would not have been present in the land and the temptation would have been avoided!

The text notes that the Israelites’ abandonment of God was particularly heinous since He was **the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt**. In other words, the people of Israel had an established relationship with the Lord that went back a long time. They had witnessed God’s saving acts on their behalf. They had every reason to be faithful to Him. Yet they chose the gods of the other peoples—gods with whom they had no relationship at all, gods who had done nothing for them. Therefore the term “evil” (Judg. 2:11) goes beyond individual acts of disobedience; it describes relational betrayal. Given this history, it is easy to see why God was angry with His people.

The specific pagan deities that the Israelites **worshiped** during this time were **Baal** and the **Ashtoreths**. *Baal* was a Canaanite god that was worshiped in various forms among the peoples of Canaan and further north. He bore certain similarities to the Greek god Zeus, being

associated with the sky and with thunderstorms. *Ashtoreth*, on the other hand, was the Canaanite goddess of love and war. Because different aspects of her character were emphasized in different places, the Bible often refers to her in the plural *Ashtoreths*. *Baal* and *Ashtoreth* were also often listed together, which indicates that they were viewed as a divine couple.

VERSE 14

The LORD’s anger burned against Israel, and he handed them over to marauders who raided them. He sold them to the enemies around them, and they could no longer resist their enemies.

As a result of Israel’s betrayal, **the LORD’s anger burned against** His people. Sin requires punishment, and it is easy to think of such things only in theological terms. Yet this passage shows God was deeply hurt and frustrated by His loving care being rejected. The betrayal was personal, and the Israelites’ punishment was appropriate. God **handed them over to marauders who raided them. He sold them to the enemies around them.** The word *marauders* is sometimes translated as “plunderers” (NASB). In other words, the Israelites fell victim to groups who would defeat them and then cart off their food and worldly goods. If allowed to continue, such a situation would be a threat to survival. A significant word in this verse is (perhaps surprisingly) *around*. The marauders and enemies *around them* were the same people whose gods the Israelites had chosen to worship instead of their own God!

VERSE 15

Whenever the Israelites went out, the LORD was against them and brought disaster on them, just as he had promised and sworn to them. So they suffered greatly.

If the Israelites thought that worshipping the gods of their new home would gain them favor, they soon realized their mistake. **The LORD was against them**, and they would lose in every military encounter they had with the peoples of Canaan. God had **promised** the Israelites that He would turn against them if they betrayed Him (Lev. 26:17; Deut. 28:25; Josh. 24:19-20). Israel now experienced God as their enemy. The other gods could not save them from their own God. And yet they pursued the pagan gods nonetheless. The net result of their decision was obvious: **So they suffered greatly.**



Explore Further

Read the articles “Baal” on page 156 and “Ashtaroth” on page 129 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

How is the God of Israel different from these Canaanite gods?

- What might have attracted the Israelites to these foreign gods?

The Cycle (Judg. 2:16-19)

This section provides an overview of the way the rest of the book of Judges plays out because of the Israelites’ tendency to betray God. We see a repeating cycle: (1) Israel fell into sin and betrayed the Lord; (2) God allowed Israel to be oppressed as punishment; (3) God provided rescue from oppression through a judge; and (4) Israel fell into sin and betrayal once again. With that context, a few key phrases are worth examining in detail.

VERSE 16

The LORD raised up judges, who saved them from the power of their marauders,

Modern readers naturally think of **judges** as people who sit behind a bench, wearing black robes, and issuing legal verdicts. The Hebrew word, however, refers more to a temporary, and often charismatic, military leader. God would appoint these leaders to deliver Israel from **the power of their marauders** when the people cried out and showed repentance for abandoning Him. Sadly the repentance was almost always short-lived. While oppression made their lives difficult, they would turn to **the LORD**. Soon after He delivered them from their oppressors and life got easier again, they would once again rebel and abandon their God.

VERSE 17

but they did not listen to their judges. Instead, they prostituted themselves with other gods, bowing down to them. They quickly turned from the way of their ancestors, who had walked in obedience to the LORD’s commands. They did not do as their ancestors did.

This verse points out that the people often failed to **listen to their judges** that God provided. In other words, even during the redemption part of the cycle, the Israelites failed to fully commit to God. The Israelites **prostituted themselves with other gods** (“committed infidelity,” NASB). Such language is intentionally strong and once again captures the idea of relational abandonment and betrayal. Even further, it illustrates that this abandonment was done for self-serving gratification. One does not abandon a spouse to sleep with a prostitute for any other reason than self-gratification. The selfishness of the Israelites of this era set them apart from their ancestors who did stay faithful to the Lord. The primary difference between Israel and the patriarchs was **obedience to the LORD’s commands**. Such adherence to rules showed a devotion to God, something the Israelites during the period of the judges lacked.

VERSE 18

Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for the Israelites, the LORD was with him and saved the people from the power of their enemies while the judge was still alive. The LORD was moved to pity whenever they groaned because of those who were oppressing and afflicting them.

The LORD raised up a judge for the Israelites in response to their cries to Him because of the oppression. Since the judges were established by God, they represented God’s power to deliver the people from their enemies. The judge was successful because **the LORD was with him**. Without the support of God, the judge had no power to deliver. Yet many of the judges themselves were less than noble when it came to their relationships with the Lord. The fact that God would use them to deliver His wayward people anyway showed His tremendous grace. His desire was for the people to return to Him, and He accepted even the smallest of movements in that direction by the people. Indeed, **the LORD was moved to pity whenever they groaned**. God’s compassion for His people was immense. We see a striking parallel in the New Testament when Jesus stood overlooking Jerusalem and wept because He knew the suffering that would come upon the people (Luke 19:41-44). God has never delighted in the suffering of His people, even when that suffering is a result of their betrayal of Him.

VERSE 19

Whenever the judge died, the Israelites would act even more corruptly than their ancestors, following other gods to serve them and bow in worship to them. They did not turn from their evil practices or their obstinate ways.

In spite of God's provision and mercy, we see another pattern throughout the book of Judges: as soon as the judge that helped deliver Israel from their oppressors **died, the Israelites would act even more corruptly than their ancestors**. The term *ancestors* is most likely a reference to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). These men certainly had their ups and downs, but the overall trend was faithfulness to God; they followed the Lord and trusted His promises. The Israelites in Judges, on the other hand, got progressively worse. Each new rebellion and venture into idolatry took them deeper and deeper into sin. By the end of the book, they had little in common with the faith of the patriarchs. In other words, the repeated pattern throughout Judges is not just a level cycle (meaning a pattern that repeats but gets no worse over time). Instead, we see a downward trend with each subsequent cycle as the Israelites strayed further and further from the Lord.

After each act of redemption by God and His appointed judge, the people would return to their evil rejection of Him with gusto. Instead of turning back to God with genuine repentance, their only goal was to be free from their suffering. As a result, as soon as their oppression was relieved, **they did not turn from their evil practices or their obstinate ways**, but rather they returned to their evil and became even worse. This trend had an increasingly negative impact on their relationship with God and with each other. By the end of the book, the Israelites do not remotely reflect the character of God, and they were actively destroying each other.

Explore Further

What negative cycles do you have in your life? Do you have something that tempts you to ignore God's commands and that you subsequently need to repent of? Do you find yourself only turning to God during difficult times and then forgetting Him when life gets easier? How can the pattern in the book of Judges encourage you to break this cycle?

The Declaration (Judg. 2:20-23)

Because the Israelites violated their covenant with God, the Lord declared He would no longer drive out their enemies. He did this to test whether Israel would be obedient to Him.

VERSE 20

The LORD’s anger burned against Israel, and he declared, “Because this nation has violated my covenant that I made with their ancestors and disobeyed me,”

God reasserted His anger with Israel: **“Because this nation has violated my covenant.”** Covenants were formal agreements between two parties in which each party agreed to certain actions and responsibilities. Keeping the covenant led to blessings and peace. A breach of this contract, however, had serious consequences—punishments, sometimes known as covenantal curses. Deuteronomy is patterned after the style of the covenants of the ancient world. Yet it would be incorrect to think of the biblical covenants as mere contracts. At their core, biblical covenants were relational; they centered around the relationship between the two parties involved. Even though the covenant was made with the **ancestors** of the current generation of Israelites, the people were still responsible for staying true to that relational agreement. So when God mentioned the Israelites’ *ancestors* here, He was holding the current generation responsible for the covenant agreement. The Israelites of the book of Judges had committed to the same relational covenant that God had made with their forebearers.

VERSE 21

“I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died”

God stated, **“I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations,”** referring to the Canaanite groups who remained in the land after Joshua died. The Israelites’ primary sin against God was disobeying what He had commanded them to do. While the Israelites followed God in a limited sense, they failed to see a problem with limited commitment to Him. God’s people adopted the pagan idea that one could worship other gods while still worshiping the one true God.

God’s response to the Israelites’ disobedience was to give them what they wanted. They would have to live with the pagan peoples and beliefs

that had enamored them. Sometimes, the worst thing that can happen to us is to get what we want.

VERSE 22

“I did this to test Israel and to see whether or not they would keep the LORD’s way by walking in it, as their ancestors had.”

The Canaanite peoples that remained after Joshua’s death had been left as a **test** of Israel’s faithfulness. The Israelites had a chance to prove that they were fully committed to loving God by being obedient to Him. The Israelites failed the test.

To **keep the LORD’s way** is to live in a manner that is consistent with God’s own character and heart. All of one’s actions are governed by a love for God and desire to please Him. Rejection of the way, then, is a rejection of God Himself. While it might be tempting to view the Lord’s way as a set of rules, it has more to do with how those rules reflect the underlying relationship between the believer and the Lord, and that idea ties into the phrase **by walking in it**. In the Bible, the idea of being in consistent day-to-day relationship with God is described as walking in the way of the Lord.

VERSE 23

The LORD left these nations and did not drive them out immediately. He did not hand them over to Joshua.

Instead of leading Israel into battle and giving them victory, God left them to their own devices. The **nations** that were a threat to Israel would remain in the land of Canaan. They would have a corrupting influence on the Israelites and turn them further from the Lord. Israel went from God leading them in victory to self-induced victimhood. The rest of the book plays out this sad story.



Explore Further

What are the differences between understanding our relationship with God in terms of rules to be obeyed versus a loving relationship to be lived out in our daily lives? (See 1 John 4:10.) How do you view your own relationship with God through Jesus Christ?