

The lives of some people seem to be so tragic, one cycle of sin after another, taking the person lower and lower and lower. Sin, unchecked in our lives, has a way of doing that to us. It is possible to begin brilliantly and end a terrible failure. Some Christians are like the Russian satellite in the late 1960s or early 1970s that went up on the back of a rocket, but came down like a rock and required a team of searchers in northern Canada to find the fragments. A good start does not assure a successful conclusion.

But the downward spiral of sin does not function only in the lives of individuals. It also operates in groups and nations. We see it vividly illustrated in the life of the nation of Israel during the time of the judges. Here were a people who had experienced a great beginning as God worked in a mighty way in their midst, but, as time went on, they moved further and further away from the living God. Finally, they bore almost no resemblance to the people God had liberated from Egypt, kept in the desert under Moses, and led into Canaan under Joshua in triumph.

At the beginning of the book of Judges, God gives us a preview of the time of the judges in Israel. A pattern is repeated 7 times in that 350-year period which gives the key to understanding God's dealing with his people. The pattern is revealed in Judges 2: 11-23. And it points out a principle of sowing and reaping that will be reproduced in our lives, if we do not guard against it.

Five terms, simply but concisely, capture the pattern of these verses - and also summarize the period of the judges because they describe the repeated cycle of 350 years. They are - sin, slavery, supplication, salvation and spiral downward. It is as if the children of Israel refused to acknowledge the truth that God was teaching them, and, because they would not learn from the past, they were forced to relive it, time and time again.

1. The Sin of Israel

In vv. 11-13 of chapter 2, we have the first part of the pattern. To evaluate it properly we must remember all that God had already done for the people of Israel. The nature of Israel's sin can be measured only against the abundance of the grace of God toward her. Verse 12 points back to the Exodus, God's supernatural deliverance from hopeless bondage in Egypt. But God's grace is not only a saving grace, it is also a preserving grace. Despite Israel's rebellion, God had kept and cared for them during 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Then, in grace, he had raised up Joshua and brought Israel into the land of Canaan, where he had driven out their enemies and given them the land. As Joshua acknowledged, "It was the Lord your God who fought for you" (Joshua 23: 3b). The book of Joshua summarizes God's grace in one simple statement: "Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; everyone was fulfilled" (Joshua 21: 45).

Israel had experienced another side to the grace of God. At Mount Sinai, the nation had entered into a solemn covenant with God. They had acknowledged him as their great King and accepted the conditions of the covenant he made with them. They were to be faithful to him, obey his laws, do his will, and reject all alliances with the false gods of Canaan. Israel's marching orders were to destroy the Canaanites and demolish their pagan worship. At Mount Sinai and again, east of the Jordan River, in the territory of Moab just before entering Canaan, the people enthusiastically accepted God's demands.

But it was another matter when the land was theirs. As we saw last time we looked at Judges, with the death of Joshua and his generation, "another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel" (Judges 2: 10). And the result was gross sin - "the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (v. 11). Israel did not merely fall into sin and break some of God's law. They threw themselves into the supreme sin, the sin of all sins - they served the Baals and forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers. Take note. The greatest sin a human being can commit is not murder or rape or some other despicable crime. No, it is to turn your back on the true and living God to serve man-made gods.

They turned their back on the beauty and perfection of God and chose instead the stinking and degrading Baal worship. The Canaanites did not believe in one true God. Instead they believed in a number of local gods. The chief god was Baal, the god of the storm and rains, and the god of fertility, who controlled all forms of reproduction. Ashtoreth was a female deity - goddess of sensual love, fertility and maternity. In her, violence and sexual depravity mingled together, and she became the patron of sex and war. The Canaanite religion was based on the concept of sympathetic worship - that is, you worship your god by behaving as he does. The result was that

Baalism was perhaps the most degraded and degrading form of worship ever practised on earth. The Canaanites engaged in temple prostitution, fertility rites, drunken sexual orgies, snake worship, homosexuality and even human sacrifice. Everything about Baal worship stood in absolute and total contradiction to everything God had revealed about himself to his people.

However, the Israelites did the unthinkable. They borrowed the rites, the practices and idols of this Canaanite paganism and grafted them into their existing worship of Yahweh, their God, in a new syncretistic religion. They accepted what God called them to hate, and they compromised when God called them to wholehearted obedience. Why?

Over a period of time they drifted away from God for 3 main reasons. First, they lost fellowship with God by incomplete obedience. When they did not drive out the people as God commanded, they were sowing the seeds of their own spiritual failure. Secondly, they did not consciously remind themselves of the grace of God. They forsook God, when they forgot all that he had done for them. Each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper it reminds us of the great things God has done for us in the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. Thirdly, they rejected the Word of God. Israel began to look at life the way the Canaanites did. Instead of being controlled by the truths of God's Word, they were controlled by the opinions and impulses of their sinful natures.

We face exactly the same problem today in our Australian society as the Israelites did in Canaan. The greatest danger - because it is such a subtle temptation which enables us to continue as church members and feel that nothing is wrong - is not that we become atheists, but that we ask God to co-exist with idols in our hearts. How can we know if Christ is truly Lord of every area of our lives? First, we need to identify the false gods in our society. For Christians in the West, a statue which promises fertility is unlikely to attract us. But living in a city in which money and possessions are so important because they provide people with identity and security, the danger is that a Christian maintains his or her doctrinal beliefs and ethical practices, but divides the worship of his or her heart between the Lord and money/career. Second, we need to look honestly at each area of our lives - our families, our careers, our possessions, our ambitions, our time, and so on - and ask two questions of them: Am I willing to do whatever God says about this area? Am I willing to accept whatever God sends in this area? Where either answer is "No", there is the area of our lives and hearts which we have opened up, or already given over, to another god.

2. The Slavery of Israel

But sin is not the end of the process. Galatians 6: 8 reminds us that when we sow to please our sinful nature, we reap from that nature - and the harvest is corruption, decay and destruction. For Israel, the harvest was political bondage. And so we read in verse 14 that "in his anger against Israel the Lord gave them" over to be plundered, to be enslaved, to be oppressed. This is not the petty anger of hurt feelings. No, this is the holy anger of a righteous God against sin. It is the revulsion of a perfect God against evil, wickedness and sinful rebellion. As Christians, we must not forget that God and evil cannot coexist. Because of the Lord Jesus, we know that God's anger was poured out at Calvary - and our Lord took the punishment that should have been ours, and we have been saved from God's wrath. But it is impossible for us to live in sin and have fellowship with God. The disciplining hand of God will work in our lives if we choose sin in deliberate disobedience to him. Sin that is not confessed to the Lord brings slavery and bondage in our lives. The joy fades, and the frustration builds.

A favourite hymn of many is "Come, O Fount of Every Blessing". But there is a sad story related to it. Two strangers were riding in a coach - a miserable man and a happy-faced woman, who was reading the hymn. She showed the hymn to her unknown companion and told him how much the words meant to her. The man looked at it and suddenly broke into tears. Sobbing, he said to her, "Madam, I am the poor, unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feeling I had then". Robert Robinson had drifted out of fellowship with God, and he knew the awful bondage that sin brings.

God promised victory to Israel if they would trust him. But when they turned away from God, they inevitably condemned themselves to defeat and bondage. Six different times, for a total of 114 years, they knew bondage under foreign rulers. In addition, to external oppression, they were afflicted with inner decay. Sin produces slavery. That is the fact of Judges.

3. The Supplication of Israel

But although God allowed his people to experience slavery, he did not abandon them to it. In chapter 2, there is no direct reference to the fact that Israel, in its distress, called out to God.

Verse 18 does tell us that, “the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them” but that is not an explicit reference to prayer. However, 5 times within the book of Judges, the people cry out to the Lord in their bondage, and each time that supplication marks the beginning of the end of their servitude.

How often it is only when things get really desperate that we call out to God? Our need of God is not any greater in that situation than it always is, but we sense our need more. So we beg God to intervene and put the pieces back together again. That kind of prayer can be a life-changing experience which turns everything around. Or it can be a shallow, superficial call for help, which we forget as soon as things improve. The amazing thing is that, no matter how deep our sin or how shallow our prayer, God hears us. In Judges, each time his people call, God hears and intervenes. Not once does he refuse or turn his back. His help is not conditional on their improvement or on their past record, but on their need. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that the throne we approach in prayer is a throne of grace, where we will receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4: 16).

4. The Salvation of Israel

God does not simply hear our prayers, he answers them. When Israel turned to him in their bondage, he intervened to bring about their deliverance, their salvation. He did so by raising up twelve men and one woman who are called judges. They led the people against the enemy securing God’s victory over them - then they provided civil justice and leadership, settled disputes, and trusted God to deal with problems. God also intended them to be spiritual leaders within the nation.

Three significant facts about the judges are stated in verse 18. First, God raised them up. They were divinely appointed. Second, God was with them. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the judges is one of the major concepts of the book. God empowered them to carry out the task he gave them. Third, God worked through the judges. They were channels of his presence. As long as the individual judge was alive, God brought freedom and victory to his people. There are judges who can be designated “major judges” because they served as political liberators and civil leaders. Into this category fall Othniel, Ehud, Deborah and Barak, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. Other judges served as local leaders or as preservers of the peace, and they received only passing mention. The judges were not always national leaders. Sometimes God raised them up to deal with a specific enemy, which was troubling one group of tribes. Thus Jephthah and Samson were probably serving at about the same time.

Why did God raise up the judges? It would have been much easier to discard a people with a record of consistent failure. But God is a covenant God. He was their God, they were his people. His people sin against him. They rebel, reject him and spurn his love. If God said, “That’s enough”, justice would have no complaint. But as God saw Israel wallowing in their bondage of sin, he had compassion on them in their groaning - his heart was moved with pity and love. Judges is full of the grace of God, the same grace and love which ultimately sent the Lord Jesus to the cross. If God allowed men and women to be destroyed in their sin, the angels would keep on singing their eternal song: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts”. But God’s love keeps reaching out and reaching out, even to the uttermost cost of Calvary.

5. The Spiral into Deeper Sin

Sadly, the cycle does not end with the love of God. That love is accepted and used, then discarded like a worn-out item of clothing. The judge dies, but the people have not learned their lesson. So, “the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshipping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways” (v. 19). Once again the whole pattern repeats itself. That is the incessant pattern of Judges - sin, slavery, supplication, salvation and spiral downward.

What is the great lesson in all this? It is an eloquent reminder that sin is always a very serious matter to the children of God. If we do not deal decisively with sin in our lives - by true repentance, confession and turning from that sin - we will never experience the fullness of God’s blessing. There can be no compromise, no peaceful coexistence with sin. If we try to go partway in our commitment to the Lord Jesus, we will find ourselves bound up in a spiral that is taking us quickly downhill. Sin is a power that holds you in its grip. Only Jesus can deliver us from that power.

The early verses of Judges 3 show us that God's mercy was to use the nations around Israel to bring them moments when all seemed lost, and so drive them into greater dependence on him. Surrounded by idol-worshipping peoples, Israel would face the constant question: "Will you obey the Lord's commands?" (Judges 3: 4). Tragically Israel failed to learn the lesson or pass the test. They lived among the other nations (v. 5). They became like the other nations (v. 6). They gave in to their sinful desires, and lived lives indistinguishable from the pagans around them, doing evil and glorifying idols. The challenge to us as God's people today is to do the opposite - namely, to recognize that we are "aliens and strangers in the world", and so to "abstain from sinful desires" and "live such good lives among the pagans that.....they may see your good deeds and glorify God" (1 Peter 2: 11-12). If we hide God's word in our hearts and trust in the Spirit within, we can do it!

Amen

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