

Living Among Idols

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Preacher: Mike Parker

[0 : 00] And reflecting with our friends about what looks like a chaotic, pressured, difficult situation is that God is at work.

Sometimes despite what's happening, sometimes through what is happening. And in our reading this morning, we're going to go right back into Judges.

And we're going to see some of the patterns that God was involved with, with his people at this time in their life. So Helen, give us chapter 2, verses 6 to 10 to start with.

Disobedience and defeat. After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land.

Each to their own inheritance. The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel.

[1 : 13] Joshua, son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance at Timnath-Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gash.

After that whole generation had gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

Shall we pray? Lord, as we start to reflect on these words, as we explore them together, speak to us, we ask.

And show us what it means to be your people here and now in 21st century Glasgow. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is a long flashback story. You might remember in chapter 1, Joshua has died. So we're looking back now.

[2 : 22] And in one sense, it's a great story of a great heritage. Joshua and all the elders, there was continuity for a time, had done well.

As we say in Scottish football terms, the boys done good. 110, that's not bad. And faithful service, good foundations, shaping the people of God, leading them in to their new place.

Not without complication, but a great heritage, a great history. And indeed, we're told in verse 6 to 9 there, that that first generation served the Lord and got involved in taking the land.

But then comes verse 10, which is a huge shock. People in the Middle East, and of course this is where it was written, this is where it happened, define themselves by their roots, by their family, by their history, by their background.

So, sometimes if you greet somebody, they will say, oh, hello, whose son are you? Whose daughter are you? In other words, that's what shapes you.

[3 : 49] Where you come from. We have something like it in Scots, but it's not quite as encouraging, isn't it? I can't hear further. And it's usually, I know where you came from, and I'm watching you, and I'll knock you down if you're not careful.

I can't hear further, right? Think of that mother more positively, and that's what our friends have here. And we noticed, certainly when we were living there all the time, as well as visiting now, that Middle East people remember everything.

All those cultural gaffes and mistakes that foreigners make that we made so many times. I made more mistakes culturally in Egypt in those four and a half years than in the whole of the rest of my life put together.

The embarrassment built, but they were forgiving, but they didn't forget. Sometimes they would remind us. By the way, that's a really important thing to understand when you're reading the Gospels and the New Testament.

Because they don't forget. Well, for sure, those Gospels were not written down for a number of years, maybe 30 or more, after Jesus died and was raised again.

[5 : 07] And you often hear people say, ah, well, yes, but you can't believe it, Chinese whispers, you know. The story got twisted in the telling, right? Well, not right, no.

Because Middle East people remember. And every story that is told, especially the stories of Jesus and his teaching and the facts of his life and the impact of his ministry, those are all stored and collected and guarded by the community.

You cannot go offline. You can tell them in a different order. You can tell them slightly different ways. That's why we've got four Gospels. But you can't change the facts, the main line, if you like. Because the community will correct you. Because they remember. And then eventually they wrote it down for poor people like us, whose memories are not so good. Our memories in the West. We're overwhelmed, as Martin was saying, by messages and by communication. But how much of it do you remember? Helen was telling me the other night. She longs sometimes to listen, to book at bedtime.

[6 : 12] So she endures all the politics and the news and the arguments, longing to get to that quarter to 11 slot when book at bedtime comes on. And then, you know, by the end of it, when she wakes up in the morning, she can't remember it because she fell asleep.

She couldn't keep listening. And she couldn't remember it even in her sleep. The Gospels are reliable, you see, because they're controlled communication.

If you talk with Muslims, within a few moments, I can almost guarantee you that the issue of the Crusades will come up.

They'll say, what about the Crusades? And you'll say, as a Westerner, as a Christian, you'll say, oh, well, yeah, but that was a long, long time ago. And things have changed, and it wasn't our responsibility.

We didn't do it. And as the kids sometimes say, it wasn't in me, it was him as well. But our Muslim friends, it's like yesterday.

[7 : 13] And it's still alive. And it's still there, and you have to face it. You have to deal with it. So think about this, and then think about verse 10.

Then, this generation, who don't know the Lord, or what he'd done for his people, after all that good stuff, they forget it almost instantly.

Do you get the shock? Do you get how astonishing this is? How can this be? How could something like this happen?

They want independence. Instead of dependence on God and his leaders. So they deliberately choose not to remember.

You know, that's quite difficult when you try to push things out of your mind. They keep coming back, don't they? But they somehow managed to choose not to remember. And shockingly, the God who is in control gives them what they want.

[8 : 21] That takes you right back to Genesis. Right back to the creation and then the fall. And people say, sorry God, we want to do things our way. And God says, off you go.

Now you'll see the consequences. That's quite a thing, isn't it? And what comes from it is simply this. Every generation has to learn for itself what it means to follow God's ways.

Every generation. There are no spiritual grandchildren in Christian faith like there are in Islam. You identify, you are defined by your grandfatherly roots.

In Jewish culture, by your grandmotherly roots. It goes the other way. But in Christian faith, every generation has to learn for themselves what it means to trust God, to go his way, to be his people, and to follow him.

This is true for us in the mission world. I've been leading this small mission. We've been around 156 years. 1860 was when the first people went to Lebanon to reach out to people who'd been caught up in a massacre for religious reasons.

[9 : 41] So we go back a long way. It would be easy to be proud of that heritage, wouldn't it? The challenge is, are you sticking to it? Are you learning in this generation?

What it means to reach out to people? SIM, who we're joining with, they've only been around 125 years. And they're going to celebrate that next year.

But this question is the same for them. That's great history, but what about now? And it's true for us, isn't it? We want to be Bible-shaped Christians in the 21st century in Scotland, in Glasgow, in Europe, in the world as we find it now.

So what does it mean for us to be those people, to be faithful witnesses in the 21st century? Step 2. Step 2.

Step 2. Step 2. Step 2. That was an up, if you like, with a shock at the end. Step 2 is a down.

Chapter 2, from verse 11.

[10:53] Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors who had brought them out of Egypt.

They followed and worshipped various gods of the people around them. They aroused the Lord's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.

In his anger against Israel, the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist.

Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them.

They were in great distress. A great heritage, an ominous warning, and now the consequences of going after other gods.

[12:13] Three times we're told tersely, they went after other gods. In other words, they did their own thing. They made their own choices rather than godly choices.

And these gods, we haven't time to unpack the names. And particularly the character of these gods, they were dreadful characters.

Make no mistake, this is not just using the same word for a slightly different aspect. Lots of people talk like that, don't they? They say the picture of God is like a shattered mirror and everybody picks up a piece and everybody makes their contribution.

And we get a big picture somehow of God together because we're assuming that they all mean the same thing by God. But they're not. And these characters are dreadful. That would be another story to investigate another day.

But they forgot deliberately and they went after other gods. Perhaps you can feel the distress in this writing. And judge is this hard work.

[13:18] But occasionally you get that real sense of moving, powerful writing. My dad died five years ago, more, of Alzheimer's.

My mum is struggling with her memory now and is afraid that it's coming to her. And I'm thinking, gosh, dad and mum, oh gosh, what's going to happen to me? Forgetting things are really difficult. But mum is struggling because she can't remember the names of the people she meets. So she can't invite anybody. And she's in a group but doesn't know how to start with it. It's poignant to watch and to listen.

For her, the present is slipping. But for these people, the past slipped away and the present filled up the gap. That's what happened to them.

The present has rushed in to replace the past. And the present is independence. Choosing gods that you can see and touch.

[14:20] Because it's too difficult to believe in a god you can't see and touch. We live in a material world. And we want to hold and to handle.

And more than that, we want people around us, whether they be neighbours or nations, to think well of us. Because we want to be like them.

We don't like being different. It's difficult. And you can see what is driving these people. But the consequences are disastrous.

Displacing God catapults them into losing their culture and losing the very thing that made them distinctive and special and different.

We're told that their assets and their resources were plundered, stripped, we would say, in commercial language. We're told that they lost control of their lives and they were taken by their enemies.

[15:29] That's bad enough. But the worst of it was, they ended up making an enemy of God himself. The God who had rescued them.

The God who had called them together. The God who had shaped them. And they ended up making God their enemy.

So we're told, astonishingly in verse 14, he gave them over to that. You want it? You got it? He delivered, in another translation, he sold them. He'd warned them, we're told in verse 15.

But now the strangest thing is, they want to do it themselves and they've settled for terrible distress. We need to hear some better news.

Let's hear verse 16 to 23. Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them out of the hands of these raiders.

[16:40] Yet they would not listen to their judges, but prostituted themselves to other gods and worship them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors who had been obedient to the Lord's commands.

Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived.

For the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them.

They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. Therefore, the Lord was very angry with Israel and said, Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died.

I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their ancestors did.

[18:14] The Lord had allowed those nations to remain. He did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.

A glimmer of hope then. But notice what's happening. What is to be done with consequences like those we've seen here? Is there any way for people to recover?

Well, humanly speaking, actually no. It's too hard to pull yourself up and out of that situation. You can't break out of it.

But just as God was involved in allowing the consequences of their rebellion, so God is involved in involving himself in their rescue.

Did you see that as we read it? God is, as we might say, in the midst of it all. He is in the mess, at work. In the hymn, he is working his purpose out.

[19:21] Despite the chaos, despite the confusion, even using elements of it to fulfill his purposes for his people and for his world.

He gives them leaders. They're called judges. People who can deal with distress and get them back on track again. For a time, at least, as long as they live.

And then, of course, we see the pattern resets. Did you notice that the deal here is between God and the judges? The people, the underlying issues, are still there.

And it looks like, despite the fact that we're going up and down, we're slipping down and the people are not changing yet. The people are still on the same tack, determined to do their own thing, refusing to listen.

Listen, I was thinking about how to illustrate this. And there are friends from Preston here this morning. You know that in the northwest of England, they play bowls.

[20:28] We play bowls all over the country. It's a great game, fascinating game. Not the old guys game that you would think of. It's a very skillful game. But in Lancashire, they play it different.

Not only does the ball have a weight on the side, so you have to bowl the ball to get it to go where you want it. When given half a chance, it'll go where it wants, right? But also, they bend the pitch. It's called crown green bowling. So think of your head, and think of bowling across your head. And that's the skill. You've not only got to get the ball to go, but you've got to beat the ground as well. Something like that. Underneath it all, the people keep going back, keep going their way. God has a deal with leaders, and the leaders rescue them for a time.

That's God's mercy. But underneath, it's difficult still. It's a kind of a thumbs up, but it's kind of difficult. And God knows about the bias, which is why we're told in verse 22 that he leaves obstacles in the way for his people to bump into and to learn from.

[21:38] Because he is looking for people who will learn, who will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did.

But actually, by the time we get to the end of this, it's still not looking very good. Let's hear these last six verses, shall we? From chapter three. These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan.

He did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience. The five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites, living in the Lebanon mountains, from Mount Baal-Hermon to Lebo-Hamath. They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands which he had given their ancestors through Moses.

The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. [23 : 08] They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons and served their gods. All of which means that at this point, God's people are stuck.

Oh, they learn war all right, and God intends them to learn to defend themselves. But it's quite clear that they don't want to learn to be godly people.

They are determined not to be different. They settle and stay, and as we might say, that's us. Dale Ralph Davis sums it up like this.

We're left waiting, wondering how all this is going to turn out. We're on a downward slope. Some high points, some rescues, some lifts, but actually the trend is down. He says, we're left working as well as God teaches his people the hard way here.

[24 : 20] Just as a good teacher will stretch their students to know them and to help them learn, the Lord leaves perpetual Canaanite thorns in his people's sides.

And they have to deal with them. They have to work. They have to battle. And to claim that they've been released from them at this time is to claim too much.

And to miss the blessing that comes by no other way than the hard way. My word, this is heavy stuff for half term, isn't it? But I hope you're beginning to see, as I hope you've been seeing through judges, how this big picture is unfolding and how we find our place in the big picture even here and even now.

Certainly how God's people did then and how God's people make sense of their situations in parts of the world now like the Middle East. We've gone up, we've gone down, we've gone up, we've gone down, we're on a slide altogether.

So we're asking at the end, what does all this mean? What does this pattern mean for us? Some of you here today are medics. Some of us here today are patients.

[25 : 37] We all know together that the really, really important thing in getting the right treatment and getting healthy is to get the diagnosis right.

If you get the wrong thing, then you'll use the wrong treatment very likely and you won't get better as you should do. It's a really key skill. For me, as somebody who's been a Christian now, for many decades, I've become more and more persuaded about trusting God like this, believing in Jesus, being a Christian because of the diagnosis here.

It's so honest. It's so true to life. It's so clear then as now. What's going on in our society and what's going on amongst God's people?

This all rings bells, doesn't it, in our society as it drifts further from God's will and God's ways. Scotland, faster than most at the moment, it seems.

And the challenges for us as God's people, sharing with God's people all over the world, will we run our lives our way or will we dare to be different and go God's way?

[26 : 53] Joshua was a great leader, a God-appointed leader, but even he couldn't put this right. While his people struggle, God is working out his purpose.

So in Judges and right through the Old Testament, we are moved down that slope towards Christ. Just as this service is moving us in a moment towards the elements on this table, the bread broken to symbolize the body of Christ, the wine, the red wine poured out, remembering his blood shed for us, only Jesus can show us God's way.

Only he will sacrifice himself willingly in control of that sacrifice to bring the forgiveness that no other can bring and to break patterns like these which are so clear and so painful in the Old Testament, so painful among us even now.

Only he can introduce us to the God who can transform us, both us and our churches and, please God, our societies and our world.

May God do what he does. May he do it in us. May he do it through us. And may he assure us as we share this bread and this wine of his great love for us and his willingness to come to us even in a mess like this.

[28 : 45] Amen? Let's pray. Lord, we've been on a roller coaster for these last few minutes. We thank you for your word still.

We thank you for what you reveal to us here and now in the 21st century through what your people went through hundreds of years before Jesus.

Thank you that you were at work then amongst your people and in your world. and thank you that you are at work now amongst us and in this world.

And we pray, Lord, please, that you will do your work in us. That you will lead us to trust you. That we will be unashamed to be different. And that we will be bold witnesses to the transforming power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray in his name. Amen. Amen.