

# JUDGES—WEEK 2

## PUNISHMENT



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)  
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

God punishes Israel's apostasy by refusing to drive out the other nations. They will be a thorn in the Israelis' side. Israel quickly forgets their tears over this and starts worshipping other gods.

God responds by setting things up so Israel will always know war. That'll teach them.

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Joshua, Week 2 — Punishment  
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1 Judges 2:1–5 (ESV)

*Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.” As soon as the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim. And they sacrificed there to the LORD.*

The Hebrew word that’s translated as angel (מַלְאָךְ, mal-akh) literally means messenger. That’s what angels are—messengers.

So, the angel speaks for the LORD in the first person, *“I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers.”*

Since they aren’t of the generation that left Egypt, “you” (which is plural in the Hebrew) must refer to the nation collectively. Their guilt is collective too, and so is their punishment.

But then we get the first of many plot twists. Their main failure wasn’t the failure we noted previously—failure to drive out the locals.

Instead, it was that they specifically broke their covenant with the LORD. That covenant was, *“you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.”* The failure to drive out the locals is now their punishment. *“I will not drive them out before you.”*

In a world of eye-for-an-eye, this one fits to a T.

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Notice what the LORD does not say. He does not say that He will break the covenant. The line, *“I will never break my covenant with you,”* stands. They will be punished, not abandoned.

That said, the punishment will be severe. *“I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.”*

And notice the time scale involved. The punishment is essentially permanent. The people hearing this weren’t in Egypt and weren’t even of age during the faithlessness in the desert.

So this spanned multiple generations leading up to this moment. Now the punishment spans many more. Their loss is enormous. They blew it.

They don’t just weep; they name the place after their tears. The Hebrew word Bochim is based on the verb (בכה, ba-kha) which means to weep. Naming a place is a form of monument. They want this to be remembered. They also *sacrificed there to the LORD.*

The Israelites are truly grieved over this—for the moment.

2 Judges 2:6–10

*And when Joshua had dismissed the people, the children of Israel went each to his own inheritance to possess the land.*

*So 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 works of the LORD which He had done for Israel. Now Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died when he was one hundred and ten years old. And they buried him within the border of his inheritance at Timnath Heres, in the mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount Gaash. When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel.*

One of my favorite sermon illustrations is about the founder of a company who is about to retire. He grew the company from nothing to a corporation so large it has its own magazine. A reporter for the magazine interviews the old boss and asks him, “So, what is the secret of your success?”

“Good decisions.”

“Great. And what’s the key to making good decisions?”

“Experience.”

“Ok. And what’s the key to gaining experience?”

“Bad decisions.”

The lesson Israel learned at Bochim lasts exactly one generation—just as long as the memories of those who saw it first-hand.

*So 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 works of the LORD which He had done for Israel. ... When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel.*

The eyewitnesses have the experience gained from their bad decisions. The next generation won’t.

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The Israelites failed to inculcate their faith in the next generation. But what does that mean? What exactly did they fail to do?

Surely they told their kids what happened at Bochim and said that’s why they named it Bochim. But somehow the lesson didn’t stick. Why? What got lost in translation?

Faith. The old NIV translated Hebrews 11:1 as, “*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*” Their kids knew the story but weren’t sure it was true. Their skepticism took over.

Kids are like that.

3 Judges 2:11–15 (ESV)

*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 gods of 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 Ashtaroath. 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. 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.*

How is this even possible? They should believe, right?

Even if the Israelites deny all the miracles, they have to know that they're immigrants. All the local graveyards are full of Canaanites. The locals can easily talk in long terms of time. The Israelites can't without talking about Egypt.

So they have to believe something about what their parents are saying. What they don't believe is the supernatural part. But it's not like modern skepticism, where all supernatural things are denied. Rather, they start worshipping other gods. That seems impossibly stupid. What would cause them to do that?

We already saw the answer.

*“So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.”* — Judges 2:3 (ESV)

The religion of the locals has sucked them in.

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The challenge for us is to fully grasp that they were actually this weak and that we're no better. Those words are easy to memorize, but they need to make sense or we won't really believe them.

Peer pressure can do incredible things. The pressures are different nowadays, but we still “go along to get along” all too often. Parents know, and fear, the incredible influence of the crowd their kids run with. Nothing we do can make them immune.

Who among us can hold their ground when their friends are mocking them for their faith?

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies, ...* — Rudyard Kipling

<https://poets.org/poem/if>

4 Judges 2:16–23

*Nevertheless, the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so. And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of 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 oppressed them and harassed them. And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.*

*Then the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; and He said, “Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not heeded My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the LORD, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not.” Therefore the LORD left those nations, without driving them out immediately; nor did He deliver them into the hand of Joshua.*

At last, we come to an overview of the book. For this portion of Israeli history, the LORD will use judges to both rescue Israel and to make their sin manifest. They’ll go through a lot of ups and downs amidst a long, slow decline. Here’s a good summary video: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/judges/>

At first glance, this looks like a struggle in the Israelite people’s minds between the LORD and other gods, but that’s not really it. This is a struggle between monotheism and polytheism. The LORD is offended by being thought of in polytheistic terms. He’s not the greatest god; He’s the only God.

The first Commandment “*You shall have no other gods before Me,*” can be misunderstood. The word “before” can be thought of as meaning first or higher priority. But the Hebrew (עַל-פָּנָי, al pa-na-ya) literally means “upon my face”. So, “before” means “in front of” visually, not in priority.

“You shall have no other gods before My face.”

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The ups and down in the book of Judges are like what Screwtape describes, in letter eight, as undulation.

*Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation — the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks. If you had watched your patient carefully you would have seen this undulation in every department of his life — his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites, all go up and down. As long as he lives on earth periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty. The dryness and dullness through which your patient is now going are not, as you fondly suppose, your workmanship; they are merely a natural phenomenon which will do us no good unless you make a good use of it.*

We undulate just like the Israelites. Learn and grow from it. It’s the long-term trend that matters.

5 Judges 3:1–6

*Now these are the nations which the LORD left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan (this was only so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it), namely, five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal Hermon to the entrance of Hamath. And they were left, that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*

*Thus the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods.*

God leaves these other nations in Canaan so *that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan ... so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it.*

Good grief! Why would God want the Israelites to “know war”?

*“It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell.” — William Tecumseh Sherman*

Because in war they will know weakness and failure. In their weakness and failure, they will discover that they are not the answer; the LORD is the answer.

They must be cured of their sense of self-sufficiency—at all cost.

This gets into a very deep and advanced subject. Why is their being cured of the sense of self-sufficiency so important? Even deeper, what’s the point of all this? Why did God create a nation of chosen people in the first place? Where’s He going with this?

This theme will continue to develop over our study of Judges, but it’s already clear from this passage that whatever it is that God is up to, His main purpose is something other than making the Israelites comfortable.

Learning is more important than happiness.

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This principle applies to us. We want to be happy. God wants us to be happy. But our spiritual growth is more important.

In fact, the main “plot line” in each of our lives is our spiritual growth. We may grow up, get educated, get married, have a career, even win a Nobel Prize, but our spiritual growth is what really matters—and the point of it all.

That’s why we have trials. We need them for the same reason the Israelites need war.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Have you seen God punish someone with their own sin?
2. How do you convince kids that God is real?
3. What's the worst thing you've seen peer pressure do?
4. Do we undulate?
5. What is your main "plot line"?

*Items for prayer:*