

Creekside Community Church  
*Strange Tales, "American Idols"* (Judges 2:6-3:6)  
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The Candy Compay announcement reminded me of a story my friend, Eric, told me about a Halloween party his church did for the kids. Kids could wear costumes but could only come as biblical characters; no vampires or witches or monsters – which to Eric's kids, seemed to take the fun out of the whole thing. So Eric's daughter went to the party dressed as the witch of Endor, one son went as Lazarus, directly out of the tomb and his other son went as John the Baptist after his head was cut off. The Bible isn't necessarily the best place to go if you don't want scary stories. In fact, for the next three months, we're going to spend some time in the Old Testament book where a lot of those scary stories are found; the unusual book of Judges in a series which I'm calling, "Strange Tales." The Book of Judges is essentially "despicable people doing deplorable things." Even the heroes are flawed, do appalling things and ultimately fail; because Judges, like the rest of the Bible, is about the gospel and how the God of mercy and long suffering pours out His grace on people who do not deserve it. Specifically Judges is about our need for a savior and a leader who can deliver us from the enemies who oppress us; and the point of Judges is that no human can fill the role of Savior and King, that God alone is able to save us. The book opens with "After the death of Joshua..." and closes with, "In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes," covering the 400 years between Joshua and King David. After Joshua died, there were no great leaders and Israel's society progressively deteriorated as everyone pursued their own interests rather than God's or their community's – and paralleling our own "You're-not-the-boss-of-me, nobody-can-tell-me-what-to-do" culture. The book of Judges helps us to understand why our culture is where it is today and how as disciples of Jesus we should live in this culture. The first two chapters of Judges introduce the rest of the book and give us a picture of what will happen over the next 400 years between Joshua and King David. And unless we understand these two chapters, the strange tales to follow won't make sense. Chapter 1 which we looked at last week records the partial obedience of the generation who followed Joshua into the land. They conquered much of the land but then they quit fighting, choosing co-existence with the pagan tribes who lived there instead of completing the conquest which God commanded, setting Israel on a course which guaranteed their future failure. The second chapter and second part of the introduction focuses on their children and on the impact the parent's partial obedience has on their kids.

Chapter 2 begins like chapter 1 with the death of Joshua. The theme of Judges is that Israel will not follow God fully without the leadership of a righteous king. As long as Joshua lived, Israel obeyed God, but once Joshua died, Israel stopped obeying. *"When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land."* Once the big battles have been fought and won, Joshua disbands the army and each tribe goes to its own allotted portion of the Promised Land to finish the job of liberating it from the Canaanites who live there. *The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel. Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred and ten. And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.* (Judges 2:6-10) Last week we talked about the generation who followed Joshua into the land, a faithful yet flawed and only partially obedient generation. This week, we'll focus on the generation which followed that generation, a generation who did not know the Lord. When vs. 10 says that the children of Joshua's generation did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel in rescuing them from Egypt and fighting their battles for them in the Promised Land, it doesn't mean they didn't know anything about Him but that they didn't know Him personally and forgot about all He had done for their parents; which is why we emphasize around here that the church is never more than one generation from extinction. The parents of Joshua's generation failed to pass on their faith in God to their children. One generation's half-hearted faith becomes a complete absence of faith in the next generation. Who is responsible for the spiritual development of our children? Look at what Moses says in Deut 6:4-7: *"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might,"* which is exactly what Joshua's generation failed to do. They were half-hearted in their relationship with God. Notice what a whole-

hearted love for God looks like. *“These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. (I cannot separate my relationship with God from my relationship with the Bible. If His words aren’t on my heart, if I’m not reading and mediating on them regularly, if I’m not thinking about the Scriptures, I’m not thinking about God.)* *“You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”* Notice the connection between loving God with all our heart, loving His word, and teaching His word to our children. God isn’t only concerned about our relationship with Him; He’s concerned about our children’s relationship with Him and He gives parents the responsibility to pass on their faith to their kids. If His word is on my heart, then I will teach it diligently to my children both formally and informally; when we sit around the house, when we’re out walking, when we end the day and when we begin the day. The word of God is passed on from life to life, not institutionally. God doesn’t instruct Israel to organize classes or schools or institutions for the training of the next generation. He gives that responsibility to parents and says that we pass on our faith in God in the course of everyday life. Watching their parents live out their faith in God is far more influential in the development of those children’s faith than any class they might take.

Let’s go back to Judges 2. According to vs. 10, an entire generation failed to pass on their faith to the next and this has been a common problem throughout history. The gospel is proclaimed and embraced by one generation, is assumed by the next and forgotten by the next. We see this over and over in American history. In New England, nearly all the settlers between 1620-1640 were bible-believing Christians who came to America to create an authentically Christian culture, a “city on a hill” as they called it. But by 1662, that generation realized that many of their children and grand-children were only nominal believers and they had to institute what they called, “the half-way Covenant” allowing people to vote who were baptized as infants but who were not church members. It wasn’t too many generations later that cults like Christian Science, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism were born in New England. The vision of a truly Christian society failed because so many parents failed to pass on a whole-hearted, vital faith to their children. That’s what happened in Israel and that failure is the reason for the strange tails of the next 400 years. By the way, we’re talking about trends here and trajectories – not individual cases. There are children raised in unbelieving families who become strong believers. Many of you had that experience. And there are children raised in godly, believing families who want nothing to do with Christ. Children have wills of their own and no one can blame their parents for their own lack of faith. Even God has prodigals and He is *the perfect father*. But typically, the half-hearted faith of one generation produces a generation without faith in the next.

Now beginning with vs. 11, we find a cycle we will see repeat time after time in Judges. The cycle begins as God’s people turn from serving the living God to serving idols. *“Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger.”* So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.” (Judges 2:11-13) “Baal” means lord and the Baals of Canaan were the gods of the Canaanites. Last week, we learned in chapter 1 that when God’s people disobeyed God, He stopped driving their enemies out of the land and said that the Canaanites would be thorns in their sides and their gods would become a snare to the Israelites. God didn’t tell Israel to drive the nations of Canaan out of the land as some arbitrary test of faith. Driving those nations out was essential for Israel’s to thrive as God’s people because if they remained, their gods would seduce Israel away from the living God, the source of their health, safety and strength – which is exactly what happened. Baal and Ashtaroth were the principal god and goddess of the Canaanites. Baal was the god of the sun and of storms and Ashtaroth the goddess of sex and fertility. The worship of each was both licentious and cruel, involving child sacrifice and ritual sex. But the motivation for their worship was primarily economic. Canaan was dependent upon rain for agriculture and a drought meant famine, economic loss and possibly death. So the Canaanites worshiped and sacrificed to the Baals and to the Ashtaroth in an attempt to control the weather and to guarantee a good harvest each year. Israel followed their lead. Instead of trusting the Lord who promised to send rains and to bless their harvest abundantly if they would simply obey Him, Israel turned to the gods of their neighbors; and that happens over and over throughout the book of Judges. God’s people forsake Him to worship false gods, looking somewhere else for what they should trust God for. That’s the first step in the cycle which repeats itself throughout Judges.

Now notice the second step in the cycle; idolatry is always followed by bondage. (vs. 14) *"The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies."* Repeatedly in the book of Judges, we will see Israel conquered and oppressed by the surrounding nations. In chapter 3, they are in bondage for 8 years to Mesopotamia, followed by 18 years of bondage to Moab. In chapters 4-5, they spend 20 years in bondage to Canaan. In chapters 6-8, they spend 7 years in bondage to Midian. In chapters 10-12, they spend 18 years in bondage to Ammon and in chapters 13-16, they spend 40 years in bondage to the Philistines. And the same verse introduces each of those sections. *"Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord."* Israel's idolatry always leads to bondage. Vs. 14 says that the anger of the Lord burned against Israel. Anger is not the opposite of love – as any parent can tell you. God's anger is an expression of His love for Israel – just like a loving husband is jealous for the affection and loyalty of his wife. If God were unaffected by Israel's adultery and turning to other gods, would He really love her? Absolutely not; God is jealous for His people and when they turn from Him, He turns them over to the rule of their enemies to drive them back to Himself. Israel's problems in the book of Judges aren't political or military or social; they're spiritual. It's not that the other nations are more powerful than they are; it is that God has set His face against them and has made them the slaves of their enemies – not because He doesn't love them but because He does.

Notice the next step in the cycle. As a result of their bondage, the Israelites are miserable. *"Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed,"* (2:15) and because of their misery, Israel finally turns from the idols and calls upon the Lord. And each time they call, God, in His great compassion, sends a judge, a leader who delivers them. *"Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them."* (2:16) We will see this cycle repeated over and over in the book of Judges: idolatry which leads to bondage which leads to misery and turning to God to God sending a deliverer and God's people once again serving Him rather than the idols. Yet as soon as that deliverer dies, Israel will turn back again to the idols. *"Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers. When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from 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 and afflicted them. But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways."* (2:17-19) That's the recurring cycle of the book of Judges: idolatry, bondage, misery, deliverance, more idolatry, more bondage, with each generation becoming progressively more corrupt than the last. In the beginning of Judges, Israel is faithful yet flawed. By the end, they're just flawed. *"So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers and has not listened to My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk in it as their fathers did, or not." So the LORD allowed those nations to remain, not driving them out quickly; and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua."* (2:20-23) Vs. 20-23 repeats what we saw last Sunday; God did not drive the nations out of Canaan for the Israelites because the Israelites refused to obey Him. But these verses add another reason there are Canaanites still living in the Promised Land; to test Israel to see if they will follow God or not. Why would God want to test Israel? Chapter 3 explains, *"Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them (that is, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly). These nations are: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. They were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses. The sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods."* (Judges 3:1-6) Ever wondered why God doesn't free you from all temptation and defeat all your enemies all at once? If He did, we wouldn't have to trust Him any longer. God's people do better in times of war than in times of peace. In war, we have to depend on Him. In peace, we think we can handle everything ourselves. In war, we find out where our relationship really is. Somebody said that for many Christians, virtue is simply lack of opportunity.

Virtue isn't the absence of temptation. Virtue is being tempted and saying, "I will not." The only way we learn to trust God and to obey God is in the midst of temptation and conflict. That's why God left Israel's enemies in the land; to teach them to trust Him, to depend on Him and to fight against evil. But Israel disobeyed God, intermarried with the pagan nations God had told them not to assimilate into.

Chapter 2:6-3:6 of Judges is an overview of the strange tales we'll be looking at for the next three months and we'll see this cycle repeated over and over. And there are three important lessons we can learn from this recurring cycle because the same cycle still occurs today in our lives. Lesson one: idolatry is at the root of all our sins and that's where I want to spend the rest of our time this morning. Notice that the cycle of Judges always begins with Israel doing evil in God's sight. What evil? Did they refuse to pay their taxes? Stopped observing the Sabbath? Stole what didn't belong to them? Look at vs. 11-12 again. *"Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger." So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroath.* Each time the cycle begins again in Judges, it begins with idolatry; Israel forsaking God to worship things which are not God. Idolatry is the root of all sin. Sinful behaviors are just the symptoms. Idolatry is the disease. And until we pull out the root, we'll never conquer the disease. When we think of idolatry, we may think of people bowing before a statue of a god, something few people do today. So how can idolatry be at the root of sins today? In Romans 1:18-23. Paul is explaining why the gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes in Jesus and he begins with why we need to be saved in the first place. *"For the wrath of God (that's the same anger of God we just read about in Judges 2 when Israel provoked Him by worshiping idols) is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..."* "who exploit their fellow men? No. Who commit acts of violence? No. Who indulge their filthy desires? That's what we'd expect to read. But that's not what Paul writes, *"...who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.* Sin is not just sensuality or self-centeredness, or being mean or a bigot or unloving. Those are just symptoms of the disease. The root of our problem is our refusal to let God be God. We replace the worship of the God who created us with the worship of a god we create; substituting something else for God Himself and putting our trust in that god rather than in the God. *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.* Know what's at the root of all of our sins? Paul says it's living in denial. Denying that there is a God who created us and who deserves our trust and obedience, a fact that God has made evident to all through creation itself. *"For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."* People knew God through creation. They didn't know Him exhaustively or personally but they knew enough. But in spite of what they knew about God, they didn't give Him honor or thanks, *"and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."* Idolatry wasn't just Israel's problem, idolatry is a universal problem. John Calvin said that the human hearts is an idol-making factory. That's why Paul says that our fundamental problem as human beings is theological. We have replaced the true God with gods of our own design. We were created for worship and if we don't worship God, we worship something else. And if we don't worship the Creator, the only thing left to worship is His creation. We serve things instead of God. We trust things instead of God. We look for satisfaction and happiness from things instead of God. For some people, it's money or possessions. For some, it's pleasure. For others, it is escape. For others, it's false religions. And the biggest idol we worship is ourselves. When are we ever free from our desire for glory, recognition and control? That's why we get upset when we feel corrected or slighted by somebody – because we think the universe revolves around us. Everybody has a god whom we serve. What we all have in common is that it is the wrong god. Idolatry is at the root of all our sins because what we truly believe about God determines the way we behave. Martin Luther married a former nun named Katherine von Bora who was 16 years younger than he was, but in every way his equal, intellectually and spiritually. They had six children and were happily married for over 20 years until Luther died at age 62. Katie was a loving but also a very direct woman. One day Luther was depressed and so Katie put on a black dress. Luther asked, "Are you going to a funeral?" "No," she answered, "but since you act as though God is dead, I wanted to join you in the mourning!" My wife does the same thing to me. I'll get mad or down about something, and Laurie will ask, "How do you think God fits into this situation? Do you

think He has anything to say about this?" And I'll remember, "Oh yeah, God. I forgot about Him." What comes into my mind when I think about God is the single most important thing about me. Because what I believe about God will determine who I am and what I do. The commands of the Bible are simply our response to God. God says be holy. Why? Because He is holy. God says love one another. Why? Because He loves us. God says don't worry. Why? Because He's in control. The commands make perfect sense if I believe in the God of the Bible. They make no sense at all if I don't. Every problem we have in living the way God want us to live is rooted in the fact that we don't believe in God as He has revealed Himself. Idolatry - worshiping the wrong God - is the disease. Everything else is just a symptom.

So how do I identify my idols? Ask yourself two questions. Who is my savior? Who is my lord? First, who is my savior? What is the hell I need to be saved from? Hell for the Canaanites was drought and famine and so they looked to Baal to save them. What do you need to be saved from? If you're single, the hell you fear is being alone for the rest of your life. And your savior is whoever will keep that from happening, regardless of whether he or she is a good match otherwise. If you are insecure, your savior is whatever or whoever will make you feel special. If you're bored, your savior is whatever will bring excitement into your life. Look at what you fear and ask yourself, "Am I trusting God to save me or am I trusting something or someone else?" Who or what can I not live without? Who do I run to in times of need? What gives me the greatest joy and the most intense grief? That's my god. For example, why do I worry about what people think of me? Why do I long for their recognition? Because I believe that I need their approval to be happy rather than only the approval of God. If I look anywhere but to God to give me relief or security or identity, I'm as much of an idolater as the Israelite sacrificing to Baal. Second question, who is my lord? Whose authority do I live under? Whom do I obey? Am I willing to do whatever God tells me to do? Am I willing to accept whatever God sends? What does my schedule and my budget orbit around? That's my god. And as long as I worship the creation instead of the Creator, I will find myself in the same bondage Israel found itself to the nations surrounding it. The result of idolatry is bondage because when we refuse to worship God, according to Paul in Romans 1, He turns us over to the rule of our desires, drives and fears; not because He doesn't love us but because He does and the only way we'll realize that what we're worshiping isn't god is by experiencing the bondage that comes from idolatry. I can't be victor over the things which enslave me until God is victor over me. Sometimes we want freedom more than we want God but God will not free us until we put Him first. That's why our enemies are actually are friends because our enemies drive us back to the only one who can truly satisfy us. Idols can only enslave. Only God can give us life. Augustine said, "You have made us for Yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." We were created for God and life doesn't work until we worship and serve only Him. If you have identified idols in your life today, you only need to do what Israel did; repent and put your trust wholly in the living God and He will free you from the bondage of idolatry. Jesus is the only Savior and Deliverer. By His death on the cross in our place and His resurrection from the dead, He frees us from the penalty for our sins, the present power of our sins and the future presence of sin in a new heavens and new earth. He will deliver you today.