



# Israel Turns to Idols

## *Lesson Focus*

During the 300-year period of judges, Israel repeated a cycle of idolatry and disobedience to God. God punished Israel, and they cried out to him. Each time they repented, God delivered Israel with judges, proving his faithfulness.

## *Key Passages*

Joshua 21:43–45; Judges 2:1–3:15; Luke 18:18–23

## *What You Will Learn*

- Israel's cycle of disobedience that led to punishment.
- How God delivered Israel when they repented.

## *Memory Verse*

**Joshua 1:9** Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

# Prepare to Learn

## Scriptural Background

Joshua's conquest of the land of Canaan was complete, although pockets of Canaanite people remained within certain areas of the land. God had fulfilled all his promises to give Israel victory and their inheritance of land. The people enjoyed peace and rest (Joshua 21:43–44). But the people still had a responsibility to God, who had rescued them from Egypt and given them the land of Canaan. They were commanded to love and obey God and serve him only.

Judges chapter 1 gives a summary of the last part of the land's conquest and the failure of Israel to completely cast out the idolatrous inhabitants. Judges 2:1–3 records the angel of the Lord warning Israel that this failure would have bitter consequences. He would no longer drive out the people of the land, and their gods would become a snare to the Israelites. Joshua's generation seemed to take the warning to heart. Judges 2:7 says that the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and the elders of that generation who outlived him. However, after that generation's death, the people became idolatrous and did not know the Lord or the miracles he had done for Israel (Judges 2:10). Their idolatry took the form of worshipping the gods of the Canaanites, the conquered people that were not completely destroyed by the previous generation. These gods

were the Baals, gods associated with fertility and prosperity (Judges 2:11).

The rest of Judges 2 describes the anger of the Lord against Israel's idolatry and disobedience as he delivered them into the hands of the surrounding nations (Judges 2:14). But we also see the undeserved compassion that God exercised again and again (Judges 2:16). Judges 2:11–23 gives a general description of the cycle of Israel during the era of the judges. The recurring pattern included the Israelites turning to idolatry, angering the true God; God bringing punishment in the form of oppression by idolatrous nations; the Israelites crying out to God for deliverance; God showing mercy on them and providing a deliverer by raising up a judge; and after deliverance, the Israelites turning again to idolatry and beginning the cycle again. Clearly, this period was not a highlight of Israel's history.

Israel's quick fall into idolatry may seem far removed from us. In our culture, there is little temptation to actually worship a Baal or to make an idol and bow down to it. The root of the Israelites' idolatry, however, was that instead of trusting and serving the true God, they chose to worship gods whose claim to deity lay in their willingness to serve the desires of the people. In this, we are much like the Israelites, and we are warned by Paul in the book of

Colossians to “put to death” selfish and impure desires, including “covetousness, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5). In this exhortation, we see the common ground of our own sin with the idolatry of Israel—covetousness: a selfish, sinful desire for what God has not given. The

Apostle Paul warns that no person who is immoral, impure, or covetous (an idolater) will inherit the kingdom of God (Ephesians 5:5). If we aren’t fighting this sin of covetousness, it is evidence that we may not be a true believer.

## Historical/Apologetics Background

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones defined an idol this way: “An idol is anything in my life that occupies a place that should be occupied by God alone. Anything that holds my life and my devotion, anything that is central in my life, anything that seems to be vital, anything that is essential to me; an idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend. Anything that moves and rouses and attracts and stimulates me is an idol. An idol is anything that I worship, anything to which I give much of my time and attention, my energy and my money; anything that holds a controlling position in my life is an idol.”<sup>1</sup> Anything can become an idol—money, sex, power, control, comfort, pleasure, entertainment, and the list goes on and on. And it’s not just “bad” things that can turn into idols, but “good” things like family and ministry and work can become so central to our lives that they take the place of God.

The root of the Israelites’ disobedience was always their failure to trust that the true God was caring for their best interests. Idolatry is never a

matter of obedience alone; it reveals a heart that does not have faith and trust in God and all his purposes. Idolatry puts our selfish desires above the one true God. As we read Israel’s history and see blessings for obedience and consequences for disobedience, the root issue is always faith. Would Israel trust that God is faithful to his promises and that his promises are the true prosperity of his people? Will we trust that God is faithful to his promises and that his promises are the true prosperity of his people? Whenever disobedience occurs, the answer to this question is no, whether we are talking of Israel or ourselves.

Luke 18:18–24, the account of the rich young ruler and Jesus, gives a New Testament illustration of the struggle we often encounter between loyalty toward God and love for the world. Like the rich young ruler, we want eternal life and all the blessings that God provides through Christ’s sacrifice, and yet we often have conflicting desires to hold onto the immediate blessings we can obtain in this life. God does not demand of his followers that they avoid all worldly blessings, but he clearly commands us to value Christ to the

<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 196.

extent that worldly blessings have no hold on our hearts. Our failure to let go of worldly desires may keep us from him (Mark 8:34–38; Luke 16:13). What our hearts trust and value will ultimately lead us to obey or disobey the Lord.

The Apostle John closes his first letter with a warning against idolatry: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” It was a temptation then, and it is still a temptation today. May we not be like the rich young ruler and walk away from Jesus because we refuse to let go and follow him wholeheartedly.

## Studying God’s Word

What idols are you tempted to worship?

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Take notes as you study the following passages.

### ***In One Generation***

**Judges 2:1–15**

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**Exodus 20:2–6**

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### ***Identifying Idols Activity***

Complete the Identifying Idols worksheet.

Take notes as you study the following passage.

## ***The Cycle of Judgment***

**Judges 2:16–3:15**

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### ***Application***

1. Where do we see worship of physical idols in the world today, and how could we use that as an opportunity to share the gospel?
2. Where do we see the worship of idols of the heart in our culture, and why don't they ever satisfy the worshippers?
3. In what ways are we just like the Israelites?
4. How does our understanding of this cycle of sin in the Israelites find a parallel in our individual lives?
5. What are some strategies that we can use to help keep ourselves from falling into worshipping idols?

6. What advantage do we have over the Israelites in overcoming our sinful idolatry?

## Prayer Requests

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