



## THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF SIN

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General Douglas B. McArthur once wrote an article entitled “Requisites for Military Success” in which he identified the four things that he felt were necessary to victory in battle. First, he wrote, an army must have the will to win, an *esprit de corps*, a cause worth dying for. Secondly, an army must have adequately trained and well-equipped personnel. Thirdly, there must be an adequate source of supply; supply lines must be kept open. And fourthly (most of the article was devoted to this) an army must have knowledge of the enemy. The greater the knowledge of the enemy, wrote the famous general, the greater the potential for victory.

Knowledge of the enemy is vital in many spheres in life. Politicians certainly make use of it. It’s useful in business, and it is absolutely a prerequisite in the sporting world. What we want to do today is apply this concept to the Christian life. As we’ve seen in our study in the book of Judges, Christians have an enemy—and, as our friend Pogo reminded us, that enemy is us. One of the most stubborn and persistent enemies we face is what the Bible calls “the flesh,” the seat of sin. As believers in Jesus Christ we have a new spirit. We are born of God; we are indwelt with God himself. Yet we have the same old body; the same old smelly flesh will be with us until the day we go home to be with the Lord. We are new creatures in Christ, but we still have this hangover in Adam, so to speak. We’re prone to listen to its voice; we’re tempted to walk in its ways. But, if we can learn to understand how the flesh operates, and if we can discern the patterns and cycles of sin in our life—if we can understand the enemy—then, the greater our potential for victory will be.

Today we’re going to look at what we could call the summation of the entire book of Judges. We will find this in 2:6–3:6. (Last week we looked at the preamble, 1:1–2:5.) Chapter 3 verse 7 through the end of chapter 16 forms the main body of the book, and this is where we encounter the thirteen judges; while chapters 17–21 form the appendix. The appendix is not actually chronological, yet it gives a close-up look at the moral and spiritual decline of the nation of Israel during the time of the Judges. Our study will be in two parts. First, we’ll observe the pattern of sin among the nation, and then, God’s response to Israel’s disobedience. Judges 2:6–19,

**When Joshua had dismissed the people, the sons of Israel went each to his inheritance to possess the land. And 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. And 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. 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. And 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. 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. Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. And 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. And 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. (2:6–19, NASB)**

Here we find that the cycle of sin breaks down into four specific stages. The first stage is apostasy. Verse 11: “The sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals.” They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroath. This phrase marks the transition, the bookmark for the entire text. It’s repeated six more times in the narrative, and thus we could say that it forms the outline for chapters 3–16. We have already seen that several things influenced this apostasy. First, Israel grew complacent—they did not drive their enemies out of the land. They had enjoyed great victories while Joshua was alive and leading them, but now a new generation was in charge and they failed to drive the enemies out of the land.

The second thing that influenced their apostasy was neglect: “There arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD.” We learned last week that each generation must enter into battle and capture territory for themselves. Israel could not rest upon the victory or suc-

cess of their predecessors. They could not inherit the faith; they had to enter into battle themselves. God has no grandchildren. He has sons and daughters, yes, but no grandchildren. Israel, we read, “forsook” the Lord. They left, they deserted the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the Canaanite gods of their enemies. Israel’s relationship with God was not strong enough to counter the influence of these people whom they allowed to live in their land. This is why God wanted them to drive them out completely.

We suffer from the same problem, don’t we? As the hymn says, we are “prone to wander.” We allow our relationship with God slip. We forget about him. We stop praying. We stop reading the Word. We stop worshiping regularly and hearing the scriptures taught. Slowly, we begin to forget God. That is when we begin to become influenced by the gods around us, and that is when we start to worship them. They may not be the Baals and the Ashtaroth, but they are idols nevertheless; idols like money, power, ambition. Like the nation of Israel we fall into apostasy. Instead of worshiping our heavenly Father we begin to worship idols.

What caused this to happen to Israel? It was because they thought they were secure from sin and temptation. This is what happens to us, too. When we think we are strong, then we are at our weakest. Proverbs says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (16:18). Pride goes before a fall. Israel had had great victories under Joshua. They had defeated 31 kings! They thought they were safe and secure, but it was at this very point that they became prideful and started doing what was right in their own eyes. This was what led them into apostasy. I have learned that I am most vulnerable to sin after God has given me a victory. It’s when I finish teaching and I am tempted to say, “At last, now I can relax. I fought these enemies, now, rather than serving, I can be served. I can let down and do whatever I want.” Following a victory is when we tend to forget God and leave ourselves vulnerable to sin. Thus the first stage in the cycle of sin is apostasy.

The second stage is servitude, or slavery. Verse 14: “He sold them into the hands of their enemies.” Israel became a slave of their enemies. God would make sure of that. He would sell them and deliver them over into the hands of the Canaanites. Forgetting God and not driving out the enemy leads to idolatry, and idolatry leads to slavery. Three times in the first chapter of the book of Romans, Paul repeats the phrase “God gave them over” when he is referring to the natural consequences of people’s sin. He puts this even more graphically later, in Romans 6:16, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?” The fact is, we cannot decide to sin just once. Have you ever tried to eat just one potato chip? If you try to sin just once, you will enter into slavery. Sin begins to take control of your life. It happened with Israel and it will happen with us. We become slaves to sin—restricted, confined, limited.

Notice what the text says here: “God gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them.” This is exactly what happens when we become slaves to sin. We are plundered, robbed of our sense of well-being and joy. Our time is wasted, frittered away. We don’t enjoy relationships

with our spouses, our families or friends because we’re caught up in bondage, in slavery to sin.

Thus we come to the third stage in the cycle of sin, and that is supplication. The nation became “severely distressed” (v.15). Later on, we will see that it is at this point that they cried out to God. This was what David did, as we read in Psalm 32:3-4,

**When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away**

**Through my groaning all day long.**

**For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me;**

**My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.**

When sin has a hammer-lock on us, we grow “severely distressed.” It’s as if God puts us in a full Nelson until we’re willing to cry “Uncle!” Sometimes we have to be in a lot of pain before we’re willing to give up and look to God. This third stage, therefore, is when we become so miserable that we cry out to God.

Finally, the fourth stage is salvation. Verse 16: “Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them.” These thirteen judges were not magistrates, as judges are in our modern society. Rather, in this context they were leaders, rulers, deliverers. It was they who led the nation to victory, overthrowing enemies that held the nation in slavery. A judge not only ruled over the whole nation, but over a territory, a tribe, or a group of tribes. This is why, as we will see, some of their tenure in leadership overlaps.

In this fourth stage we learn two important truths. First, just as Israel could not deliver themselves from bondage, so we, too, cannot deliver ourselves from the power and dominion of sin. The flesh is too strong; sin is too controlling. Just like Israel, we need a deliverer. God, of course, has provided that deliverer for us: His name is Jesus. Matthew writes, “You shall call his name Jesus, for it is he who will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). And Paul says, “For he delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). The judges are a type of Christ. They picture how Christ delivers his own.

And secondly, God is faithful to his covenant. He does not leave us or forsake us. We may desert God to serve an idol, but God never leaves us. If a friend or relative crosses us just one time, we are tempted to write them off, but God does not do that. He is merciful and compassionate. Our text says, “The LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.” (2:18.) He is always there, ready to deliver us from the bondage of sin.

Parents grow to understand this attribute of God when they see their children hurting. Children, especially teenagers, can frustrate and cause their parents to grow weary. My 14-year-old daughter and I have all the normal conflicts of a parent and teenager—probably more than normal. We know how to push each other’s buttons, and we do. Last week, she broke her leg playing soccer, and as I drove her to the clinic, seeing her completely helpless and in so much pain, suddenly none of that conflict mattered. Her groaning moved me to a sense of pity. It pains me to see her limited, not being able to enjoy the sport she loves, not being able to go on the high school ski trip next week. When I took her to the x-ray room at the clinic, she couldn’t even move into one position, so I held the photo-

plate because I didn't want her to have to move and experience any more pain than was necessary. I realized that I would do anything for her. I would gladly have traded places with her. I would have taken the broken leg if I could so that she could be free, but I could not. But that is exactly what God did for us. He took our place. He died on the cross that we might not be limited or restricted. He died to free us from the vice-like grip that sin holds on our lives. God wants to set us free!

But, for Israel, victory and deliverance was followed by tragedy, as we see in verses 17-19. God would raise up a judge, and yet after the judge died, the nation would act more corruptly than their fathers in following other gods, once more "doing what was right in their own eyes." This cycle repeats itself time and time again in the book of Judges, and each time the apostasy is more corrupt, the slavery lasts longer, the bondage to sin more pronounced.

The same can hold true for us. When the problem goes away, when we start trusting in ourselves again and doing what is right in our own eyes, then we think we can coast. If we don't deal with the root problems of sin in our lives, however, if we deal with the symptoms only, then sin returns and the pattern repeats itself all over again. And, as was the case with Israel, each time the cycle can grow more intense, more severe. The more entrenched sin becomes, the more difficult it is for us to remove.

Lately, I have begun to notice weeds growing in my driveway. Each day I drive up it seems there are more and more of them. If I don't begin to do a little weeding soon, eventually it's going to take a concerted effort as weeds will have taken control of the yard. It's the same with sin. If we allow it to grow, it will take over more and more of our lives. The longer we wait, the more difficult it will be to root it out. If we merely deal with the symptoms and not the basic problems, then the cycle will repeat itself over and over again. This is the pattern of sin. Can you identify with it? We forget God; we sin and become a slave to sin; then, when we've had enough, we cry out to God; and finally, God delivers us and brings salvation.

It's easy to see how this pattern operates in practice. Take resentment, for example. If you allow resentment to live in your life, sooner or later you will forget God; you will walk in the flesh, and sin. Perhaps you will express your resentment in anger toward someone. This unchecked anger will take control of your life; it will dominate you and hold you captive. You become a slave to your emotions, and you are miserable. You cry out to God, and he is faithful to deliver you through the work of Jesus Christ. But if you do not deal with the root problem of the resentment, sooner or later you will forget God once again; you will walk in the flesh, and whole pattern will be repeated.

Take sexual sin. If you allow lust to live in your life, then, one day when you are weak, you will forget God and walk in the flesh. Your sin will manifest itself in pornography, or sexual immorality, or lust, and it will gain control of you and hold you in slavery. You will become addicted to someone or something, and you will feel miserable. You cry out to the Lord, and he is faithful to deliver you. But, if you don't deal with the lust that's in your heart, then the pattern will be repeated and the second time will be worse than the first.

All of us are addicted to someone or something. The

flesh is addictive! It may be alcohol, drugs, sex, power, or food. We can be addicted to another person if we are seeking our sense of approval or acceptance from that person. We can be addicted to controlling other people; and if we don't have someone to control in our life, we're miserable. We can become enslaved to television, to eating disorders. Our flesh is very addictive. When you think about it, it is easy to see the patterns that each of us develop in our flesh.

Now the question is, can these patterns be broken? Can this cycle be stopped? The Simon and Garfunkel song lamented, "Like a rat in a maze, the path before me lies, / And the pattern never alters until the rat dies." Are we destined to slavery? No! The Bible says that these patterns of sin and addiction can be broken. Paul writes in Romans 6:2, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" The rat died! No longer does your flesh have to control your life. Once we come to Christ we are no longer under the power and the dominion of sin. That relationship has been severed. The truth has set us free. Now when sin tells us what to do, we no longer have to do it. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death," says Paul (Rom. 8:2). Galatians says, "If we walk by the Spirit we will not carry out the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). And again, Romans 6:12-13 says, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." The good news is that this pattern, these addictions, can be broken.

"How does all this work out?" you ask. Let me suggest three things. This is a good place to start. First, we need to figure out the various patterns in our lives. That's not hard to do if we're willing to look. We've repeated them so many times they're like second nature. We need to know ourselves—to know our moods, know where the ruts are dug, analyze what triggers or stimulates our flesh. We should know our physical makeup, for example. Are we a morning or an evening person? The flesh is boring and repetitive; it does the same thing every time.

Secondly, we must realize that knowing the pattern is not enough. We cannot deliver ourselves; we cannot do this in our own strength. Oh, we might have success for a time, but eventually it's going to crop up again. Remember the warning given on the screen following the television stunt specials: "Don't try this on your own. Though it may look easy it's very dangerous. This should only be attempted by a trained professional."

Thirdly, as we stop trusting in ourselves and start trusting in God, then we can start having victory. As we recognize these patterns, and realize that we cannot deliver ourselves, the Holy Spirit illuminates our mind and, as it were, freezes the action. We stand there at the brink of the cycle and the Spirit gives us time to think about it. Has that ever happened to you? The older you grow in the Lord, it seems, the more time you have and the clearer the choice becomes about what is going to take place. The Spirit, in effect, lets you play through the tape of what's going to occur. You put the tape in the VCR and watch what happens. You don't have to watch the whole thing; you just fast-forward to the end because you've seen the tape so many times.

Suddenly, the Spirit presents us with a choice. We don't have the power to do, but we have the power to choose. And the Spirit makes it clear that we have a choice. We can choose to walk in the flesh and experience the cycle of sin again, or we can choose to walk in the Spirit and do what is pleasing to God and joyful for us. Then it's time to take a step of faith, believing that God will provide the resources and strength to overcome. And, as you take that step of faith, that's exactly what God does. It is then that we are freed from the power of sin. We have said no to the flesh and yes to the Spirit. Perhaps this is a bit simplistic, but I think that is how we can start to break down these patterns in our lives. If we know the enemy, and how he works, the greater is our potential for victory. Through the grace and strength of our Deliverer, Jesus Christ, we have the hope of breaking these patterns.

Now in the second part of our text we will look at God's response to Israel's disobedience. As each judge died, the nation would forsake the Lord again. They would begin to serve the Baals, returning again to stage one in the cycle. Verse 20:

**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. 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. And 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. (2:20-3:4)**

God is saying to Israel, "I'm not going to drive any more of these enemies out from your land. You didn't drive them out, so I'm going to let them live. I have a two-fold purpose in doing this. First, it is in order to test you to see if you will keep my ways." This was a reminder of Deuteronomy 8:2: "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not." God allowed the enemies to live in the land to test Israel to see what was in their heart, to see if they would obey him.

Secondly, God allowed some enemies to remain so that the nation might learn how to make war, as previous generations had done. God wanted to see if Israel would confront these enemies, take them on and learn how to do battle against them.

The same is true for believers. The flesh hangs around

for the same two-fold purpose: to test us, and to help us learn how to make war against it. Now there are some things that God might remove supernaturally. This happened to me when I first became a Christian. Suddenly, just like that, they were gone. And there are some habits and patterns that, as we mature in Christ, we'll naturally grow out of. But there are other things in our flesh that we may well have to battle until the day we die. That's hard for us to accept, but it can be a good thing. For instance, these enemies reveal our heart. Every time we are confronted with sin and temptation we're made aware of how we're doing with God as that relationship is brought to the forefront of our minds. Hopefully, when we face these sins and temptations, we're driven back to God on our knees, not because we're afraid of being a slave, but because we love and appreciate him.

A second thing these enemies do is teach us how to fight. We're to learn to hate evil and sin the way God does, and to love holiness the way he does. So God wants each one of us to become a warrior against sin. In this war we cannot be pacifists or conscientious objectors. We can't pack our bags and go to Canada. If we do, we'll just take our flesh with us and the enemy will be waiting for us.

There's no "neutral" in the Christian life. If we're not taking on new territory, we're losing ground. If we're not going forward, we're going backward. God designed it that way. We have to keep battling the flesh so that we might learn how to be a warrior and further our relationship and our dependence upon him. The weeds don't go away completely because God wants us to keep them under control. The temptations don't go away completely because he wants us to be warriors. I know that some of the areas that I struggle with have been around for a long time. Some patterns became entrenched in my youth, before I became a Christian. When I'm 80 years old, my flesh is going to look the same as when I was 8 or 18 or 28. If I choose to walk in the flesh, it's going to be the same result. It's not curable. The only cure is to choose not to walk in the flesh, and to walk in the Spirit. And the more I choose to walk in the Spirit the less I will experience the enslavement of the flesh.

This then is the cycle, the pattern of sin: apostasy, servitude, supplication, salvation. If we don't deal with the root problems, the cycle will repeat itself over and over. We will face these enemies of our flesh as long as we have the flesh. But God wants us to be warriors. There's no easy way out. We are going to fail, we are going to get clobbered a lot, but God says, "Get back up and get back into the fight. I'm going to deliver you. I will get you home. I will finish what I began in your life."

The good news is that God has raised up a Deliverer. If we are willing to take a hard look at the patterns in our own lives; if we are willing to trust in the power and the strength of this Deliverer, Jesus Christ; and if we are willing to walk in the Spirit and not walk in the flesh, then each and every one of us can and will experience a victorious life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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