Lesson 2: The Cycle of the Judges

Teaching Outline — Forgetfulness, discipline, and the mercy of God
Passage: Judges 2 | **Suggested teaching time:** 45 minutes

Lesson objective

- Class will understand:
  - Israel's forgetfulness establishes the sin-discipline-deliverance pattern
- Class will be called to:
  - Steadfast faithfulness

Opening and background (0:00-0:04)

The theological doorway into the book

- Without this chapter, the judges' stories seem like disconnected episodes
- Here the Lord explains:
  - Why Israel repeatedly falls
  - Why enemies prevail
  - Why judges arise
  - Why the pattern returns
- Doesn't excuse Israel's sin
- Magnifies God's righteous discipline **and** His astonishing mercy

How the chapter is arranged

- Looks back to Joshua and the elders
- Then: a new generation's unfaithfulness
- The Lord's response
- The raising of judges
- The continued stubbornness of the people

- Read later accounts through this framework — Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson
  - Not simply collecting heroic stories
  - Seeing the covenant Lord confronting rebellion and showing mercy to a forgetful people

What “judge” means

- More than settling disputes in a courtroom
- Raised by God to lead and, in many instances, deliver Israel from oppression
- Not kings; not flawless moral examples
- Their limitations are part of the message
  - If the best temporary leader can’t secure lasting faithfulness, Israel needs more than a succession of capable human rescuers

Context from Judges 1

- At Bochim, the angel of the LORD:
  - Reminded Israel of God’s covenant faithfulness
  - Confronted their refusal to obey
- Judges 2 sets that failure beside the end of Joshua’s generation
- Not simply a change in leadership
  - A failure to know, remember, and serve the LORD faithfully

The cycle

- Often named: sin, oppression, cry, deliverance, rest
- Labels help, but the actual verses control our teaching
  - The Lord raises judges
  - He saves Israel while the judge lives
  - He is moved by their groaning
  - The people “would not hearken unto their judges” (v. 17)
- A chart must never soften the seriousness of that rebellion
  - Israel repeatedly refused to hearken because of [BLANK: rebellion]

“Cry” ≠ automatic deep repentance

- Israel groaned under oppression and cried; God mercifully raised deliverers
- Some accounts emphasize their distress more than a detailed confession

- That makes God's mercy brighter, not dimmer
  - He hears afflicted people who brought trouble on themselves
- It also warns us:
  - Wanting relief from consequences ≠ wanting the Lord Himself

> **Teacher note — board work:** Draw the sequence on a board only after reading the passage.
>
> - Label it "a downward spiral," not a neutral circle
> - Ask: "Which words in verses 17 and 19 show the people's rebellion grows rather than simply repeats?"

Read Judges 2:6-15 (0:04-0:08)

- **Read aloud**

Exposition of Judges 2:6-15 (0:08-0:17)

A generation that knew the Lord (2:6-10)

Service connected to remembrance

- Vv. 6-9 recall the end of Joshua's life
- "And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD, that he did for Israel" (v. 7)
  - They had seen; they had known the Lord's great works
  - Their service was tied to living remembrance of God's acts

The page turns (v. 10)

- Joshua dies at 110, buried in his inheritance
- "And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel."
- Doesn't necessarily mean they lacked information about the past
  - They didn't know the Lord in the covenantal, worshiping sense
  - They didn't live in faithful response to His works

The deliberate contrast with v. 7

- Earlier generation: “seen all the great works of the LORD”
- Later generation: defined by not knowing the Lord or His works
- Not a claim that every person was faithful, then every person ignorant
  - Describes the dominant spiritual condition of the nation
- Public memory of God’s acts failed to produce continuing covenant loyalty

Be careful with religious familiarity

- Can know Bible stories, church vocabulary, and family history without trusting and obeying the Lord
- Information matters — not the enemy of living faith
  - We need the true story of God’s works
  - It must be received with faith, gratitude, and submission
- A child who can recite the Exodus still needs to know the God who saves
- An adult who has heard the gospel for decades still needs to rest in Christ, not accumulated knowledge

Faith can’t be inherited by proximity

- Parents and churches must tell God’s mighty works
- Each generation must personally know and serve the Lord
- “We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.” (Ps 78:4)
- Goal: not nostalgia, but steadfast faithfulness
  - Biblical faithfulness requires intentional [BLANK: remembrance] of God’s works

A challenge to adults

- Can’t outsource biblical formation to a program
- Can’t assume children absorb the gospel by being near it
- In homes, classrooms, and congregations:
  - Speak of God’s Word
  - Explain the gospel
  - Pray
  - Model repentance
- Only God gives spiritual life — we faithfully proclaim; God makes Himself known

Tell it without being the hero

- Scripture's great acts: creation, the Exodus, the promises, the cross, the resurrection
- Our own lives: answered prayer, conversion, provision, correction
- Aim isn't a family legend
  - Direct attention to the Lord's faithfulness
  - Call hearers to trust Him
- Children need to see adults who confess sin as well as adults who instruct

The gathered church

- Singing, praying, hearing Scripture, baptism and the Lord's Supper, serving together
  - We rehearse a shared memory of grace
  - Not empty routines when received in faith
  - They keep the Lord's acts and promises before us
- A generation doesn't drift simply from lack of activity
  - It drifts when the living God and His gospel cease to shape the activity

Teach for more than review answers

- Clear answers are valuable
- We want learners to see how each lesson fits God's holiness, human sin, and Christ's saving mercy
- Be patient — can't manufacture conversion through urgency, emotion, or information alone
- Speak plainly enough that hearers know whom to trust and what faithful response looks like

Forgetfulness turns to idolatry (2:11-13)

The direct result

- "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim" (v. 11)
- "forsook the LORD God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods" (v. 12)
- Relational, covenantal language
  - Idolatry isn't a harmless preference added to worship
  - It's forsaking the God who redeemed them
- "And they forsook the LORD, and served Baal and Ashtaroth." (v. 13)
  - No need for sensational details beyond Scripture
  - Israel left the LORD; exchanged wholehearted allegiance for false worship

Modern idolatry

- Different names and images, same heart
- An idol: anything we trust, serve, fear, or love in the place that belongs to God
  - Comfort, success, political power, approval, pleasure, family, money, control
- Good gifts become idols when they become ruling masters
- Diagnostic question: not merely “Do I possess this?” but “What rules my obedience?”
- Forgetfulness of God turns the heart toward [BLANK: idolatry]

Idols make promises only God can keep

- Money promises security
- Approval promises identity
- Pleasure promises rest
- Control promises safety
- Convincing because they can be real gifts
  - Money meets needs; family brings joy; work can be a calling
- Problem begins when a gift becomes our ultimate confidence or a master we’ll sacrifice obedience for
- Discover an idol by asking:
  - What can’t I imagine losing?
  - What must I have to be content?
  - What command of God would I disobey to protect it?

Worship is never merely an hour or a song

- Serving Baal and Ashtaroth meant allegiance expressed in life
- Our true worship appears in habits, priorities, spending, speech, ambitions, responses to disappointment
- We can sing orthodox words while arranging life around a rival god
- Cure: not suspicion of every created good
  - Receive every good from God’s hand; hold it under His lordship

Forgetfulness is not an innocent mental lapse

- We forget God when His saving acts no longer govern our loves, decisions, worship, and hope
- Remedy: not vague spirituality, but regular, truth-shaped remembrance
  - Rehearse the gospel
  - Gather with God’s people

- Read Scripture, pray, sing
- Observe the ordinances
- Speak of the Lord's works

The righteous discipline of God (2:14-15)

Hard words, not arbitrary words

- "And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them" (v. 14)
- God "sold them into the hands of their enemies round about"
- "whithersoever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn unto them: and they were greatly distressed." (v. 15)
- The Lord had warned Israel in His covenant
- His discipline displays His holiness and the reality of sin
- A loving God doesn't treat rebellion as insignificant
  - Love doesn't celebrate destruction
  - A wise father disciplines because the child's path is deadly

The sobering verbs

- The Lord delivered Israel to spoilers and sold them to their enemies
- Israel sought security through other gods — those gods couldn't protect them
- "As the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn"
  - Covenant faithfulness, not divine moodiness
  - God keeps promises of blessing **and** warnings meant to turn His people from ruin

Handle it humbly with suffering people

- Wrong to declare confidently what sin God is punishing in someone's hardship
  - We aren't given that knowledge
  - Job exposes the cruelty of that approach
- Also wrong to deny God can use painful consequences to expose sin and bring us back
- When His Word identifies a pattern in us, invite examination rather than rush to defend ourselves

For believers (Heb 12:6)

- "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."
- Divine discipline is not payment for sins — Christ bore the judgment that saves His people

- Not every hardship is direct punishment for a specific sin (Job)
- When the Word exposes sin and the Lord uses painful consequences, don't harden
- God's loving correction is called [BLANK: discipline]

Severe mercy

- Distress meant to expose the emptiness of the gods they chose
- Sin promises freedom but becomes bondage
  - Says God's command is restrictive and its own path is life
  - Leaves us enslaved and empty
- The Lord's severe mercy interrupts that lie

Read Judges 2:16-23 (0:17-0:21)

- **Read aloud**

Exposition of Judges 2:16-23 (0:21-0:31)

The Lord raises deliverers (2:16-18)

"Nevertheless"

- "Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them" (v. 16)
- The word shines
  - Israel deserves judgment; nevertheless, God acts in mercy
- Judges aren't self-appointed heroes rescuing God from a difficult situation
- The LORD raised up [BLANK: deliverers], not human strength

God's compassion (v. 18)

- "And when the LORD raised them up judges, then the LORD was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented the LORD because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them."
- Real pity toward His suffering people — not cold toward their groaning

The judges aren’t the final answer

- Raised for a time; peace ends with their death
- They point beyond themselves to a greater, permanent Deliverer

“The LORD was with the judge”

- The decisive presence isn’t numbers, training, or national resolve
  - It’s the Lord’s presence with the one He raises
- The stories can’t be reduced to techniques for success
  - May imitate courage, strategy, or boldness and still miss the message
  - Deliverance comes because the Lord acts in faithfulness

Compassion isn’t indifference to truth

- He hears their groaning without calling idolatry harmless
- His mercy is designed to lead them back
- We often want mercy that removes pain while leaving our loves untouched
- Biblical mercy is better
  - Rescues us from the destructive path
  - Summons us to the God whose commands are good

Don’t give leaders ultimate credit

- Thank God for faithful pastors, teachers, parents, and leaders
- No human leader can be the foundation of our faithfulness
- The Lord is with the judge; the Lord delivers
- Confidence rests in God, not a personality, a familiar teacher, or a past season of blessing

A cycle that deepens (2:17-23)

Spiritual adultery (v. 17)

- “yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them”
- “turned quickly out of the way which their fathers walked in”
- Not ignorance alone — a refusing heart

A spiral downward (v. 19)

- “And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers.”
- Not a harmless circle returning to the same point
- “they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way”
  - Israel would not leave its [BLANK: stubborn] way

Don’t treat recurring sin casually

- A repeated temptation isn’t evidence grace is absent
- A repeated pattern we excuse can harden into a settled way
- “Their own doings,” “their stubborn way” — not helpless victims of surroundings
  - The nations test them; their response reveals what they choose
- Trials expose impatience, fear, pride, lust, or unbelief
  - The pressure may be real; our response still calls for repentance and faith

Ease isn’t the measure of spiritual health

- We assume an obstacle-free path is God’s best
- Sometimes He removes the obstacle
- Sometimes He leaves it to show whether we’ll trust and obey
- A test isn’t an invitation to despair; it’s an opportunity to:
  - Seek God
  - Use the means He provides
  - Discover His faithfulness where self-reliance fails
- Examples
  - A difficult workplace → do we value integrity when it costs us?
  - A season of uncertainty → do we trust God’s provision?
  - A disagreement → can we speak truth with patience?
- Don’t seek hardship to prove ourselves
- Don’t assume hardship has no spiritual purpose
- Bring it before God, ask for wisdom, measure our response by His Word — not the ease of the path

The nations as a test (v. 22)

- “That through them I may prove Israel, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk therein, as their fathers did keep it, or not.”

- The test doesn't manufacture sinful desires — it reveals whether they'll walk in God's way
- Trials expose what we love and trust
- That exposure can become an occasion for humble dependence and obedience

Steadfast faithfulness

- Not maintained by one emotional response at Bochim or one season under a godly leader
- [BLANK: steadfast] faithfulness is cultivated through daily, ordinary perseverance
    - Hear the Word
    - Obey it
    - Confess sin quickly
    - Remain among God's people
    - Remember Christ's mercy

Application: Breaking the pattern (0:31-0:38; with Christ and the gospel)

1. **Remember deliberately**
    - Israel forgot the LORD and His works — make remembrance part of the shape of your life
    - Read Scripture to meet the God who has acted in Christ, not merely to complete a task
    - Review answered prayer
    - Teach your household
    - Sing truth
    - The Lord's Supper is gospel remembrance — "this do in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24)
2. **Name your idols honestly**
    - Easier to condemn Baal than question our controlling loves
    - Ask:
        - What loss makes me feel life is no longer worth living?
        - What do I obey when it conflicts with Christ?
        - What do I run to for refuge before I pray?
    - Bring the answer into the light
    - Idols can't save; God alone is our true [BLANK: refuge]
3. **Receive correction as mercy**
    - When Scripture confronts you, don't bargain, delay, or blame
    - Confess. Turn. Seek help.

- Godly sorrow doesn't merely dislike consequences — it turns from sin toward God
- Don't mistake emotional distress for repentance
- Faithfulness has feet: it takes the next obedient step
- Make that step specific
  - Dishonest statement → correct it
  - Ungodly pattern on a screen → remove the access, ask for help
  - Fractured relationship → begin the hard conversation where safe and wise
  - Neglect of worship or Scripture → establish a concrete pattern; don't wait for a better feeling
- External actions alone can't change hearts, but genuine faith isn't content with general intentions

4. **Do not place your hope in a human judge**
   - The best teacher dies
   - The strongest parent fails
   - A church can have a fruitful season and then drift
   - Build on Christ and His Word — leaders are gifts; Jesus is the foundation
5. **Keep the TO/FOR distinction clear**
   - We don't remain faithful **for** God to accept us
   - We remain faithful **to** the God who accepted His people in Christ and commands our good
   - We obey from, not for, [BLANK: adoption], through the Spirit's power
   - Protects from despair after failure and presumption before temptation
   - Changes how we respond to a struggling believer
     - Not harsh supervisors demanding someone earn a place
     - Not empty reassurance that avoids the call to turn
     - Point one another to Christ's mercy and the obedience His grace produces
     - A community where truth is spoken, confession is possible, restoration is pursued
   - That community begins with humility
     - We treat others' visible struggles as proof we're stronger, overlooking our less visible idols
     - Judges 2 won't permit that pride
     - Every generation needs the Lord's mercy; every believer needs remembrance and correction
     - Fellow recipients of grace, not spiritual competitors

Christ and the gospel (0:31-0:38; with application)

The longing Judges 2 creates

- Israel needs a Deliverer:
  - Who will not die
  - Whose salvation will not expire
  - Who can change stubborn hearts
- Jesus Christ is that Deliverer

Greater than the judges

- Unlike Israel, Jesus didn't forsake the Father
- Unlike the judges, He didn't merely defeat a temporary enemy
- By His death and resurrection He deals decisively with sin and death
  - He "gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world" (Gal 1:4)
- The risen King who ever lives — His help doesn't end when his days end

Come to Him

- Come with your sin, not a record designed to impress Him
- "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9)
- In Christ repentant sinners receive [BLANK: forgiveness]
  - For the forgetful, the compromised, and the stubborn who repent and believe
- Then His grace trains us to deny ungodliness and live faithfully

Because Jesus lives

- The Christian life isn't maintained by nostalgia for a past leader or season
- The risen Christ is present through His Word and Spirit
- He doesn't begin salvation and leave us to repeat Israel's pattern in our own strength
  - He intercedes, corrects, sustains, and will complete His work
- Courage for steadfast obedience today

Discussion (0:38-0:43)

Discussion questions

1. What does it mean to know the Lord and His works, rather than merely know facts?
2. Why does forgetfulness so readily lead to idolatry?
3. How should we distinguish God's loving discipline from simplistic explanations of suffering?
4. Why is the judges pattern better described as a downward spiral than a neutral circle?
5. What practices can help you pursue steadfast faithfulness this week?

Closing prayer (0:43-0:45)

> **Closing prayer:** "Holy Father, we confess how quickly our hearts forget Thy works and turn to lesser loves. Forgive our idolatry and stubbornness. Thank Thee that Thou art righteous in discipline and rich in mercy. Fix our eyes on Jesus, our living Deliverer. Help us remember Thy gospel, receive Thy correction, and walk steadfastly in obedience, not for acceptance but from the grace given us in Christ. In His name, Amen."