

Two decades ago, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article called “Redefining God.” In the story, the reporter described a new trend – people were now defining their *god*. “Across the country, the faithful are redefining God. Dissatisfied with conventional images of an authoritarian or paternalistic deity, people are embracing quirky, individualistic conceptions of God to suit their own spiritual needs...They are cobbling together a spiritual life from a variety of religious influences, along with a dash of yoga and psychotherapy or whatever else moves them” (Lisa Miller, “Redefining God” WSJ, April 21, 2000).

Practically, what this meant for people was some interesting notions of God. For Rev. James Forbes, a NY minister, God is ‘a force field of positive energy.’ For Danny Goldberg, CEO of a record company and a self-professing Jew, God is ‘pure love, intense feelings of love.’ Dana Buchman, a fashion designer and Presbyterian, described what she believed this way: “I don’t believe in God, but I think often of close relatives who’ve had an effect on my life and values. It’s like ancestor worship.”

The book of Judges describes how a society gets to this place. When ideas about God become highly individualistic, a culture soon and everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Judges 2 is a summary of the entire book. It describes the pattern of Israel’s decline. While the people served the Lord throughout Joshua’s life (2:7), what follows after Joshua is a downward spiral. Judges describes for us is how a society falls apart and answers if there any hope.

Don’t forget the Lord (2:10-15)

The people that had come into the Promised Land with Joshua would have included some who grew up in the wilderness under Moses’ leadership. Some of them would have been young children who had been present when they fled Egypt on that terrible night when the angel of the Lord had passed over their homes because of the blood of the lamb marking their homes, passing through the Red Sea, wandering in the wilderness, seeing the glory of God at Mt. Sinai, and coming in to conquer the land under Joshua’s leadership. They would have seen the miraculous fall of the walls of Jericho, and how God had given them a good land. They had told Joshua that they would obey the Lord and be committed to him.

Eventually, that generation would die (2:10), and their children and grandchildren would grow up who were different (2:10). They didn’t know the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. What does this mean? Judges 2:10 does not mean that they didn’t know any of the facts of the Exodus, the Red Sea, the Ten Commandments, the wilderness experience. What Judges tells us is that they did not have a relationship with the God of Israel. This is what it means to know the Lord – to personally know his saving power in your life.

The Story of Everything: Deliverer – Judges 2

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Andrew Hall
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How did this happen? Judges 1 tells us how the people conquered the land. They began in the southern regions and moved north; the further north they moved, their desire to fully obey the Lord grew less and less. They became more and more casual about obedience. At first, the southern tribe of Judah conquers their territory, but they are not able to get rid of the inhabitants of the land. By the time the northern tribe of Dan attempts to settle their territory, they are forced into the hills by the Amorites, using the Amorites as slaves to do their work.

God had told the people to devote to destruction everything that did not honour him as God. Yet from the earliest days, God's people allowed the ways of the world to stay among them, influence them, and eventually it caught up to them. Their neighbours were having a party with Ba'al, and they invited them to come to their fun get together. Over time, the Israelites learned that these Canaanites were nice people and had some practical suggestions on how they could grow their crops better and see their business flourish. Ba'al could really help them out with some of their practical needs, and quite honestly find that Ba'al's ways would make them happy, but they would need to understand how things work in this part of the world. And over time, the Israelites did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. The gods whom they were to destroy became their masters, and they served these gods.

You don't forget God by waking up one day and having spiritual amnesia. Over years and years, little compromises become bigger compromises. God's ways seem too difficult and restrictive, and he doesn't seem to allow you to have fun. Besides, your friends have so much, and look at how nice they are! And after years of the temperature being raised slowly, slowly, slowly, like a frog in the kettle, you suddenly find that you have adapted your ways to the boiling water and you are cooked. And over time, an entire society becomes enamoured with their definition of their own personal god.

The result of serving other gods is that they will enslave you. The people who had been in slavery and had been miraculously delivered willingly chose to be enslaved again. And the result, v. 14 tells us, is that they became oppressed. The freedom that they wanted was no freedom at all.

This cycle is true of every society. Choose your own adventure. Forget God by not wanting to relate to him. And over time, the gift of God's prosperity is not enough. You've got to have it all. NOW. But nothing satisfies. Anxiety builds. Corruption grows. Morals collapse. Economies fall. And just like that – people wonder, "Where is God?" And people come to distress.

God has designed the world so that you cannot live without him. You might think you can for a while. But over time, God has made life so that it has a circuit breaker. You don't live with God and you try to live without him? Verse 15 makes it clear that God will not be forgotten. He has sworn. He has warned. He will not let people enjoy his good gifts without him.

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Cry Out to God (2:16-23)

God, however, is merciful. There is always hope. No matter how bleak and black things get, there is always a way back. Verse 15 ends with the people being in distress, and Psalm 107 tells us how Israel repeatedly cried out to the Lord in their anguish and distress, and he answered them. Throughout the book of Judges, we hear about these military leaders and their heroic accomplishments. Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Barak, Gideon, and Samson are all raised up and bring remarkable victories to free God's people. Next week we will look closely at the last of these Deliverers – Samson – and we will see how these military leaders, as successful as they were to deliver Israel, were incredibly flawed. They would lead God's people to a new victory, but vv. 16-23 tells us that over and over the people would follow their leader for all the days of that military commander. But once that commander was gone, the people went back to their old ways. And not only did they go back, but they spiralled further downward. Israel was only as good as their military commanders; but their commanders were never enough. Though their commanders could change their circumstances, the problem of Israel was not outward but inward. What Israel needed was not a new leader, but a new heart.

When Lisa Miller concluded her article in the Wall Street Journal on how people redefine God, she said, "These gentler, almost mystical forms of theology have found a receptive audience in today's affluent society....These are relatively peaceful and prosperous times. So even as many Americans search for deeper connections with God, they aren't facing the kinds of crises that often prompt people to seek protection or salvation from above....Tough times or sudden hardships could change all this in a hurry...no matter how broad or far flung people's conceptions of God, they revert to God the Father when the going gets tough."

Tough times, trials, and difficulties all remind us that what we need is more than a change of circumstances. We need a new heart, and that comes when we...

See the Glory of Christ

Fast forward in the Bible story – 1200 years later and you find God's people oppressed. This time, it's not the Amorites, but the Romans. During this time, the people riot, trying to overthrow bad government. They were hoping for another Deliverer to come. And come he did.

But Jesus' ministry did not overthrow Rome. He came as a deliverer, victorious and mighty. From his birth, his father was told, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Here was a new Joshua – Yeshua – Jesus. He was constantly challenged by the religious leaders, questioned if taxes should be paid to Rome, criticized for saying he could rebuild worship by destroying the temple and raising it in three days. And at the

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THE STORY OF
Everything
LUKE 24:27

height of his ministry, he was nailed to a cross. All hopes of a revolution, a change of circumstances seemed lost. But on the third day after his death, he was raised from the dead. And for the first time in history, God had provided a Deliverer who would not die and leave his people in the downward cycle of sin and oppression.

The god who you define, who you make up in your mind cannot deliver you, make you happy. He can't make your life better. But the One who tasted death for us, overthrowing it by coming back to life – this living God says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13). And when we do, the life we now live is lived in the freedom of the Son of God who loves us and gave himself for us, giving us strength for today and hope for tomorrow!