



It's both tragic and ridiculous, but it happened again. Someone wandered too far. He was taking pictures of the Grand Canyon earlier this week when suddenly he ventured too far and fell off the edge, over 1000 feet down. On average two or three people die every year at the Grand Canyon because they wander too close to the edge. It happens again and again year after year. You can only stray so far, and you reach the point of no return. Today we consider an even more dangerous type of wandering. Could you imagine what dangers await when you wander too far away from God? What happens then? We see the answer this morning in Judges chapter 10 as we continue our series on "Fighting Temptation."

The people of ancient Israel were **supposed to stay close to their God**. He had made a special covenant with them. This covenant is sometimes described in Scripture like a marriage. God calls himself the husband of Israel, his bride. They were to serve him and worship him only. He had helped them escape the slavery of Egypt and had been at their side as they marched into the land of Canaan. He would bless them and be with them as they served him in the land and prospered.

But they had wandered away. "Again the people of Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord." This was unfortunately a common occurrence. It says "again" because this phrase occurs forty times in the Old Testament; seven of these are in the book of Judges. But it is only in Judges that this phrase is applied to all the "people of Israel. In their minds the people of Israel thought they were doing no wrong. The world around them and their own sinful hearts considered them in the right. But this expression helps us to identify what sin really is. It doesn't matter what the world around us considers right. It doesn't matter what we consider is right. Instead what really matters is, "What is good and evil in the Lord's eyes?" In this case the evil should have been obvious to Israel. Isn't the list staggering? "They served the Baals and the Ashtoreth, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines."

They wanted to leave, so God let them. A most frightening thought! You see, God desires his people to have a relationship with him. But when his people continually wander it is as if God says, "You don't want to be mine? Then go!" At the Grand Canyon there are many places where you can get too close to the edge without anyone stopping you. Sure, there will be warning signs saying "danger." But there's not a ranger there to stop every foolish step in the park. This is the same thing we read about earlier in Luke's gospel account. The son basically said to his father, "I don't want anything to do with you, I'm leaving." One of the worst things God can say to us when we sin is "It's your choice" and let us leave.

The people of Israel left God and were left with something awful in his place. That's what happens when someone leaves God. The Hebrew phrase for what happens is literally, "God surrendered or sold them" into the hands of their enemies. Since the ancient Israelites did not want to belong to him, God handed them over to their enemies. Ironically, the nations of the very same gods they now served were oppressing them and turning on them. That is a scary thought! God surrendering us to our enemies! If we don't belong to God, we belong to the devil, we face our guilt, our grave, and we face all our enemies alone.

You and I belong to God. So do all who are united to him through faith in his promises for us. But **we are still tempted to wander away from him to serve other gods**. And it doesn't have to be the gods of the Amorites or the gods of the Philistines. What are the gods of this land? "It's your life. Don't let anyone tell you that you are to live for and serve Jesus, that you belong to him." The believer gives into to serving themselves as their own god when they live to consume food and spend wealth. Their god is their stomach as they search to fill it with overeating, alcohol, or other substances. They turn to the gods of the supermarket, the gods of the liquor store, or the gods of the expensive and wasteful dining, and the gods of pornographic websites and games. Believers turn aside to serve the idol of sports, the idol of hunting, and the idol of entertainment.

Then they no longer have time for the Word of the Lord. Rather than listening to the voice of the one true God they do what the world and their own sinful hearts think is right. Soon they separate themselves from their God and from his Word. To be a Christian disciple is to follow his Word, not the sinful world, not our enemy the devil, not our own sinful desires. The one who stops reading or listening to the Bible wanders from their God. The one who stops gathering with fellow believers forsakes the Lord. As Jesus declared to those who despised his Word that they no longer belonged to their God: "He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." ^{John 8:47}

And this isn't a one-time struggle. It is ongoing. Just as the Israelites again and again turned aside and wandered from the Lord, so do we constantly struggle with the temptation to wander away. *We wander in our hearts again and again.*

How long should God put up with it? The people of Israel continued to forsake the Lord for over eighteen years! When they finally begin to realize their suffering and their guilt the Lord tells them, "When you had trouble in the past, haven't I always delivered you? When all these enemies harmed you, didn't I save you from them? Have I ever failed you? But you have abandoned me!" Ouch! God had not abandoned them. They abandoned a God who faithfully did everything for them! Then he adds a painful remark of rebuke on the people, "You left me to serve those other gods. Let them save you now!" How long ought he put up with our wandering? Imagine getting this message from God? "You chose to trust in riches; you chose to trust in beauty; you chose to serve the gods of the people around you instead of me. Let that God save you."

The Israelites were in great distress, but deserved it, didn't they? Eighteen years of stubbornly turning away from the Lord. Eighteen years of worshipping and calling on the other gods. Forsaking the God who had never done them any wrong or

forsaken them! Let me just put this into perspective. What if you were married and had a special covenant to be faithful for all your life? And what if you found that your spouse was cheating on you with one other person? (Israel was cheating on the Lord with several other gods!) How many years would you put up with it? Would you even for one day? How long until you would say, "I've had it. I'm never going to take you back?" Finally, God has a right to say, "enough is enough" and abandon those who abandon him. He tells those who leave him what they need to hear, "you don't belong to me anymore. You left me."

What do we deserve for the times we've wandered from listening to him, loving him, and serving him? The Scriptures warn regarding those who turn aside from the living God to serve other gods. "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received forgiveness, there is no longer any forgiveness.... but only a fearful expectation of judgment...our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 10) Could we expect any less from a just and holy God? If someone shuts out his voice, turns away from him, shouldn't God hand them over to their enemies? Why should God take them back? Why should he rescue them?

When do you give up on someone? When do you say to someone who has rejected the Lord that there simply is no turning back? I've had people curse at me for telling them they have abandoned their God. Do I write them off? Maybe you know of someone who stopped listening to the Lord and is "doing evil in the eyes of the Lord". Maybe that person you know has been avoiding the Lord for over eighteen years. When do you decide they've wandered too far for too long? Does the alcoholic who has served his addiction for 20 years have to remain serving his belly as his god? Will he have to die condemned and lost? Has the former confirmation student who hasn't been to church or worshipped Jesus or heard God's voice for over a decade spent his or her time card so that there is no longer any admittance? When do you say, "you've gone too far?"

God never does. The Lord told the people what they needed to hear. "You don't belong to me. You left me." This was a call to repentance. But it wasn't a closed door. It was a real rebuke to show the people the great need for repentance.

When they heard this stinging rebuke, they woke up. They didn't just cry for help; they repented. "We've sinned." They turned away from their sin to the Lord. Like that lost son who said to his Father, "I've sinned against heaven and against you, I'm no longer worthy to be called your child." The people said to the Lord, "we are guilty." Repentance is more than sorry over the suffering sin brings, it is desiring to leave that sin and to be with God. Like the son who left behind his miserable life to be with his father they left behind their false worship to come and serve their Lord. But what they say next is said in faith, "Do what you think is right with us in your eyes! Only help us today!" Repentance isn't just saying, "Sorry! Help!" it is by faith, putting yourself into the hands of the Lord, at his mercy.

And there is no better place to be than with the Lord, the God of mercy. The Lord couldn't bear any more of the toil that was upon Israel. He didn't desire they suffer. He desired they be his own and he be their savior God! And so, again, he delivered them from their enemies. And so we see again, it happens seven times in the book of Judges, the people turned back to the Lord, and the Lord received them back in love. God never spurns the repentant sinner. We saw that in Jesus' parable this morning. The son could only say, "I've sinned against heaven I'm not worthy to be called your son." But the Father rejoiced to have his son back in his arms. He longed for his return.

It's the same with every sinner who has abandoned the Lord. His heart yearns for their return. No matter how far they have gone, no matter how long or how often they have wandered, he desires their return. If you've ever struggled with wondering if God would receive you, don't. He always saves. The man who struggled with pornography for years and years and left the Lord to chase after other gods is welcomed back when he turns to the Lord for mercy. The alcoholic who had given up on God for years and given up all hope and thought he was left to die under his own devices hears that the Lord is eager to receive him back. The one who has in foolishness left their Bible closed for years and stopped coming to worship for years is welcomed back by the Lord with a loving embrace the very moment they turn back to him for mercy and listen to his Word. Again and again Jesus who died for the sinner forgives the sinner who comes to him seeking mercy.

No matter how often or how long we have left him, he never left us. This is the love of our God. He tells you and I and all his people "In the past when you strayed and were left to die, did I not save you? Did I not rescue you from the curse of your own sin? Did I not deliver you from the clutches of death and the grave? Did I not triumph over the devil and rescue you from his grasp? In the past when you turned to me, did I ever fail you?" He never did fail us.

He sent his Son to fight on our behalf. And so that we might never be forsaken for going too far Jesus came to rescue. What does God do when someone has gone too far? There was no limit on how far he'd go to rescue them in his mercy and love. He was spurned and forsaken on the cross in our place. He took the guilt that was ours on his shoulders and rescued us from our own devices. And he who lives sends out the good news: The Lord never spurns the repentant sinner.

What would you do if you saw someone wandering too far and near the edge? You would speak up to warn them, right? This is the message God sends you to share. If you know a believer who has turned aside from the Lord and forsaken him, who no longer listens to Jesus' voice, **let them hear the Word of the Lord** "You don't belong to me. You have forsaken me. Let the gods you now serve save you." It is a truth that the Lord himself said to all his people. But remind them God is faithful and always has been merciful. "When you trusted in the Lord in the past, he always was your Savior. He is the God who always saves those who cry out to him for rescue." So that instead of perishing apart from the Lord they would once again hear with all who are Israel in faith. The Lord welcomes back the repentant with a loving embrace.