

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, ⁷ he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, ⁸ who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. ⁹ The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress. ¹⁰ Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.”

¹¹ The LORD replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, ¹² the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? ¹³ But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. ¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”

¹⁵ But the Israelites said to the LORD, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” ¹⁶ Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel’s misery no longer. (NIV84)

Theme: God’s mercy is “Foolishness”

1. He saves us from our enemies.
2. He forgives the repentant.

There are many different adjectives we could use to describe God. But one you probably don’t use that often, or are even offended when someone uses it is: foolish. But in a way, to our sinful-feeble minds, that is what God is—foolish. After all if we knew someone was constantly helping and forgiving those who did him wrong, we would call him foolish. But that’s exactly what God does. He constantly takes care of and helps out his children. But time and time again it comes back to bite him.

Foolish from our point of view, but not God’s. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, **The foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom.** God knows full-well what he is doing when he delivers us. We might describe God’s mercy as foolishness; but in his foolishness he is wiser than us. For he saves us from our enemies and he forgives the repentant.

The period of the judges was over 300 years. It was the period of time after Joshua, who led the people into the Promised Land and Saul, the first king of Israel. During that time God appointed Judges to rule over the people. It’s not exactly a high point in time in the history of the Israelites. Everyone did as they saw fit. And many of them saw fit to rebel against God. They turned after false gods. They stopped worshiping the one true God.

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him. Baal and Ashtorah can refer to any number of different, yet similar, Canaanite idols. They were sibling-spouse, fertility gods. Last week we mentioned Baal and Ashtorah worship. It included religious ritual sex with shrine prostitutes. And from time to time human sacrifice accompanied Baal worship. The gods of the countries around them varied greatly. One god the people of Ammon worshiped was the false god Molech. A major part of Molech worship was human sacrifice. Often young sons and daughters were burned in a fire before this idol. From ritual orgies to child sacrifice—that is how far the Israelites rebelled against God.

We often look down upon the Israelites. And for good reason. What they did was despicable and disgusting. But we often commit the same sins. True, I don’t think any of you are bowing down to false gods. I don’t see you worshiping Buddha or Allah. To my knowledge there is no one here who practices ritual orgies. And no one has sacrificed their children in a fire.

Yet we still commit sins against the first commandment all the time. But instead of open idolatry—that is openly worshiping a false god, more often we fall into secret idolatry. That means, putting things

ahead of Christ. Any time we fail to put God first in our lives, when we choose things ahead of Christ, then we are guilty of committing idolatry. We essentially make ourselves into gods. We serve our wants and our desires. Our happiness comes first in our lives. So we serve our money. We bow down at the altar of our kids sport's schedules, our hobbies, or our favorite TV shows. Whenever we choose our money, happiness, family, or whatever ahead of God, we sin against him. We commit the same sin of idolatry as the Israelites.

Again and again the Israelites turned away from God. And they went after false gods. The writer of this book mentions seven groups of false gods they served. That is the number of times God mentions that he saved the Israelites. **When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands?** It's not a coincidence that God mentions saving the Israelites the same amount of false gods they pursued. Time and time again God saved his people. From many different enemies he rescued them.

Seems kind of foolish doesn't? They again and again went after false gods. They rejected the Lord constantly. And yet God saved his people time and time again. Foolish or loving? Why would God show love and give help to those who constantly sinned against him? It's not because he is stupid or foolish. But rather because he is a God of mercy and compassion. A God who loves, saves, and forgives again and again.

He saves us just like he saved the Israelites. Again and again he saves us from our spiritual enemies. Even though we rebel against him and serve ourselves again and again God saves us again and again. It's seems foolish, but it's actually loving. He showed us his love by sending his Son. And Jesus lived a perfect life in our place. He suffered and died on the cross. So that he could become guilty of all the times we pursued other gods. So that he could pay the price of all the times we failed to put God first our lives. And so he could make us pure and holy in the eyes of God. Not sinful rebels, but his own dear children.

And so God saved us from all our spiritual enemies. He saved us from sin by removing it. He saved us from death by rising from the dead.

His resurrection assures us that we too will rise from the dead. And all who believe in him will live forever even though they die. And he saved us from curse of the devil. He no longer has any control over us. He cannot condemn us for Christ has defeated him and removed our sins.

God's so-called "foolish" mercy is not just how he saved us from our enemies, but it is also seen in how he forgives sinners.

God saved his children time and time again. But this time was different. He had enough of their sin and rebellion. So he allowed the Ammonites to inflict pain on the Israelites for 18 years. Eventually they cried out for help. It took them 18 years for them to finally turn to the Lord. They must have exhausted all other options. And once they realized that no one else not even themselves could deliver them, they turned to God. **The Israelites cried out to the LORD, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."** But God wasn't about to save them this time. **You have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you.** He saved them time and time again and time and time again they went after other gods. Finally, he had enough. They had made a fool of him too many times; now God was taking a stand. Maybe it seems harsh, maybe it seems fair. But God is really doing what we would have decided long ago—he refused to help those who sinned against him.

But God had a good reason for refusing to save them. They weren't really repentant. Listen to what God tells them in verse 14. **Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!** If God told them to ask their false gods that means they still had their false gods. They weren't truly repentant—they weren't truly sorry for worshiping false gods. They just turned to God in hopes that he could save them from misery. They wanted deliverance without repentance. They wanted God to help them even though they were still sinning against him. They longed for the blessings of God without having to worship or serve him. And God said, "No."

He says the same to us when we try to do the same thing. There may be times when we say we are sorry. When we act repentant—but we really aren't. We say we're sorry, but we don't really mean it. We

tell others we won't do it again. We give our sibling a hug when our parents force us to—but we really don't feel all that bad about what we have done. And we don't plan on changing our sinful ways. We act then, just like the Israelites. So God refuses to forgive us just as he refused to forgive the Israelites.

It wasn't until they truly repented that God decided to save them. True repentance is more than simply saying you're sorry. To be truly repentant is to have true sorrow over your sins. It is to have a deep feeling of regret over what you have done. It is to have remorse and guilt. It is knowing that you are a horrible miserable creature. That for your actions you deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment. Feeling sorry for your sins means a feeling of dread because of your actions. You have sinned against God and done wrong against the one who loves you. So you confess your sins and admit that you deserve God's wrath and punishment. But repentance also includes faith in Jesus Christ to forgive you. Repentance is knowing that even though you deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment, through the work of Christ your sins have been removed.

And if you are truly repentant that you are not going to keep on doing what you had been doing. You would change your sinful ways. And follow God. As Peter said in Acts, **Repent...and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.** When you truly repent you obey God by striving not to sin. And so what we do proves that we are truly repentant. In Acts 26 Paul describes how he preached about repentance, **I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.** Our actions, or lack-there-of shows others if we are repentant or not. What we do shows our heart.

And that is what the Israelites did. They truly repented. And so they turned from their evil ways and turned to the Lord. **Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD.** After that notice what the Writer of this book says next. **Then he could bear Israel's misery no longer.** God had mercy and compassion on his people and delivered them from the hands of their enemies. He would choose a man name Jephthah who would lead his people to destroy the Ammonites. God saved the Israelites who repented. He took care of his children.

He does the same for us. When we repent over our sins, when we turn away from what we have done wrong and turn instead to him, God forgives us. He takes away all that we have done wrong. And he doesn't hold our sins against us. He completely removes them as far as east is from west. They can't come back to haunt or condemn us. They will never be counted against us. For doesn't want us to be miserable. He doesn't want us to suffer for our sins. That is why he sent his son to remove them. And through him he remembers our sins no more.

Seems foolish, though, doesn't it, that God would again and again save and forgive those who rebel and sin against him? Yes, it seems foolish to us. but it's an act of love. And if God didn't act foolish in our minds, than we wouldn't have the forgiveness of sins and we wouldn't live with him forever. So we are glad that his mercy is foolish, otherwise we wouldn't be saved. Amen.