

Time of the Judges

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Date: 14 March 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Now we are in a sermon series called The Story of the Old Testament, and we're right in the middle of the series, really. And so we're in the book of Judges.

This is the seventh book of the Bible, and honestly, it's one of the most difficult and one of the bloodiest books of the whole Old Testament. But it's an important book.

Now I think of it as kind of a prelude to a king, because Judges explains what happens in that space of time between Moses and Joshua and David and Saul, the first kings of Israel.

It's a carefully crafted series of historical stories that leave us, the reader, longing for a king.

Now the story of the Old Testament is actually kind of a story about a king, or a story anticipating a greater king, isn't it? It's a story of the kingdom of God, and we get this story in bits and pieces, in shadows, in fragments.

[1 : 0 6] And of course we see the full reality in the person of Jesus Christ. Now the kingdom of God, I think it was Alistair Begg that had this helpful way of remembering it.

It's really about God's people and God's place under God's rule. And that's a helpful framework to bring when you're reading the Old Testament. So in Genesis we saw Adam and Eve, God's people, in the Garden of Eden, which was God's place, and they were at peace, they were innocent with God.

They were under God's rule. But they rejected God's rule, and he expelled them from his place. He sent them out of the garden. But in his mercy and in his determination to bless humanity that he had created, God chose new people, Abraham.

And he called him out of the land of Ur, and he called him to the land of Canaan, God's new place that would come to be called the Promised Land, because God said, in this place, I'm going to give this to you and all of your descendants.

Now, in the book of Exodus, which comes after Genesis, Abraham's descendants have multiplied, as God said they would. They're a huge, great nation now, the people of Israel.

[2 : 2 5] But they're not in God's place, they're in Egypt. And they're not really under God's rule, they're actually under pharaohs, they're slaves. So God raises up for them, Moses, to deliver them, to free them from Egypt and take them through the wilderness to God's place, the Promised Land.

And on the way, as we heard last week in Derek's sermon, he gives them rules, the Ten Commandments, and many other rules of how you live as God's people in God's place.

It's a story of the Kingdom of God in its early stages. So Moses dies in Deuteronomy and passes the baton of leadership as it were to Joshua, who was kind of his protege.

And Joshua, the book of Joshua, which bears his name, is really about his leadership when they actually get to the land of Canaan. And all things considered, he does pretty well.

Joshua's a pretty decent leader. He's a very good leader, he's a very good leader. Joshua's a pretty decent leader. But the book of Judges begins with the death of Joshua, and everything just tanks.

[3 : 40] It's all downhill from there. Now if you grew up with the Bible, these are probably some familiar stories, right? You've heard about some of the well-known judges like Gideon or Samson.

And there are other less well-known judges in this book whose stories are confusing or too brutal to put in a children's storybook. Judges like Ehud or Jephtha or the story of the concubine in Gibeon.

These stories are Israel at their worst. It's just rock bottom. Now Moses had warned the people. He said, when you get into that promised land, don't become like the other nations, because God's actually sending you there in judgment against them.

They're so wicked, they're so evil, they need to be purged from the land. So don't become like them. But that's exactly what they did.

Each story in Judges goes further into spiritual and moral decline. Jephtha sacrifices his daughter. Gideon's a coward.

[4 : 53] Samson is just ruled by lust. And the people just get caught up in revenge and in senseless slaughter.

It's a dismal book. Now the first couple of chapters of Judges are a bit of an introduction to the rest of the book, and they give us a preview of what's to come.

And then after that introduction are a series of stories where God raises up a judge to deliver the people of Israel from their enemies. Now they do judge the people, but don't think of a courtroom so much as of a tribal warlord.

That's what these judges really were. Now the whole book, after that introduction, goes in a series of cycles. So the people of God reject God's rule.

God gives them over to their enemies. They cry out for help. God raises up a judge to deliver them, but when the judge dies, they go right back to their old ways, rinse and repeat.

[6 : 03] But every story gets worse and worse and worse. Now again, Alistair Begg, who I promise I'll stop quoting at some point, has a helpful way of remembering this cycle with four S's.

Sin, servitude, supplication, salvation. The people sin, God judges them with servitude. They become slaves and oppressed.

Then they cry out in supplication and he saves them. So sin, servitude, supplication, salvation. So every story gets worse. It goes from really out of the frying pan and into the fire.

And by the end of the book of judges, there are stories I would blush to read in front of children. They're so horrifying and graphic. And the people of Israel become completely unrecognizable from those evil nations that they were meant to conquer.

Why did God allow these brutal things to take place? For that matter, why is the book of judges in the Bible if it's so dismal?

[7 : 11] Because we need to learn that what's wrong with us won't be fixed by a plaster. We need an organ transplant.

Think of the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter five. He says, if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. Now, is it your eye that causes you to sin? Is it your hand? No, of course, Jesus knows that your eye can't make you sin and your hand can't make you sin.

The problem's not the eye or the hand, the problem's the heart. Jesus wants us to see that our chief need is not behavior modification or accountability partners.

Our chief need is an organ transplant. We need to be given a new heart. That's why judges is in the Bible, so that we really come to grips with that reality.

[8 : 15] And remember, if you're a Christian, you're a child of Abraham, which means this isn't just some interesting story of remote people. This is your family history that kind of brings it home.

And if we're to climb out of that same kind of deadly spiral into moral spiritual decay, we have to come to grips with the difficult reality that we are not the solution.

We are the problem. That's the great takeaway from judges. But there's three lessons we need to learn from this, and those will be the three points in the sermon today.

Number one, God is serious about sin. Two, God is serious about mercy. And three, Jesus is the king we need. So number one, God is serious about sin.

Now, I wonder if you've read Mary Shelley's book, Frankenstein. You know, there's a statue of the monster just down the street from the church building here that I pass from time to time.

[9 : 19] And it always reminds me of this thing that I heard, that knowledge is knowing that Frankenstein isn't the monster, but wisdom is knowing that Frankenstein is the monster.

Right? So there's a common misconception that Frankenstein is the name, actually, of the monster in the story, but it's not. It's Dr. Frankenstein who actually pieces together this monster out of, you know, pieces of dead corpses or something.

It's quite gross, actually. So there's the bear facts, and then there's the deeper truth in Frankenstein. The bear facts is that Frankenstein's not the monster. But the deeper truth is that by playing God, Dr. Frankenstein actually does become a moral monster.

Why do I mention that? Well, the story of judges is a bit like that. The bear facts are that the people of Israel have actually been freed from slavery.

But the deeper truth is that they're actually still in slavery. They've been freed from Egypt, haven't they? Moses, the Lord freed them through Moses in the book of Exodus.

[10 : 29] But what do they do with that freedom? Remember, Derek told us about these 10 words, these 10 commandments. God's rule for God's people in God's place. Here's how you're to live, not to get free, but because you've been freed.

Rules for God's free people. And in judges, they broke every one of those laws. Time and again, they refused to live God's way.

Israel was free, but they were actually still in slavery. Not to Egypt, but to sin. A musician in Nashville called Andrew Peterson wrote a song called Deliver Us.

In the first verse, he says, Our enemy, our captor, is no pharaoh on the Nile. Our toil is neither mud nor brick nor sand. Our ankles bear no calluses from chains, yet, Lord, we're bound.

Imprisoned here, we dwell in our own land. Do you see it? Israel's been freed from Egypt, but they're still in slavery to their sin.

[11 : 38] God's given them everything they need. He provided for them. He gave them rules for how to live, how to flourish. He brought them to the promised land. He even made a way for himself, the holy God, to dwell with his people and be among them to bless them.

But although they were free in their external circumstances, they were enslaved in their interiority.

Now, as a kind of a sidebar, there's something that we need to see here. Your circumstances are not determinative.

Poverty doesn't mean discontent. It doesn't need to. Unemployment doesn't need to mean hopelessness. Grief doesn't need to mean despair.

Pressure doesn't need to mean pleasure seeking. And stress doesn't need to mean selfish anger. Your circumstances are not determinative.

[12 : 44] It is possible for a slave to be the freest human in the world and for a free person to be deep in slavery.

The apostle Paul knew this, and he said in Philippians, I think, I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Paul knew that his circumstances were not the determining factor on how he lives. His heart was. Does his heart belong to Jesus or not?

But that was not how the people of Israel lived in the time of the judges. They still lived like they were deep in that slavery to sin. That's why there's this constant repeated phrase, the end of the book of judges, it says, in those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. And that's sin. And Israel's sins made God angry.

[13 : 51] Now remember our cycle, right? The four S's, sin. Now I need to remember the four S's, sin, servitude, supplication and salvation, right?

So when that cycle kicks in, the people sin, they chase after foreign gods, what does God do? Does he just look the other way? Does he say, ah, it's all right?

No. Judges 2.14, when the people sinned, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them.

That raises a very important question, doesn't it? Does that mean that if I'm a Christian and I sin, that God will punish me?

In other words, is the pain, the suffering, the loss that I'm experiencing right now, is it punishment from God, from my sins?

[14 : 54] Well, in Judges, this is not actually a case of punitive justice. This isn't about punishment. It's father-to-child discipline at the national level.

Hebrews 10 in the New Testament shows us that Jesus on the cross took our punishment for our sins once and for all.

And Hebrews 12 shows that if we're Christians, that what we tend to think of as God's punishment in our lives is really God's loving discipline and that our good father disciplines his sons because he loves them.

So God's discipline is actually meant to encourage us of God's love. And even the book of Judges with all of the Lord's anger against Israel's sins, even this book is an encouragement that he never left them.

He never turned his back on them. And he'll never give up on you. Now, another valid question.

[15 : 59] When I sin, does God get angry at me? Is the anger of the Lord kindled against John Watson? Well, God hates sin, and he has a righteous anger when we sin against him, when we rebel against him.

But God's anger is not like our anger. God's anger is productive. He has a productive anger. He doesn't punish his kids because he's fuming mad.

He firmly and wisely disciplines his children so that we might turn back to him and ask him for help. Now, you've read that God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, but also God's firm hand is meant to lead us to repentance.

God's anger is productive. And God's anger is loving. Several times in Judges, as I said, there's that phrase, each person did what was right in his own eyes. That's self-destructive.

What good parent would willingly let their child walk down a path that leads to death?

[17 : 10] This book is a vital part of the Old Testament because it shows what happens when we try to rule ourselves, when we decide what's right and wrong, when we decide what's good and evil.

Who made us God to be arbiters of morality? That's not our place. Each person did what was right in his own eyes.

That is so relevant. It's such an apt description of the age we live in. You have to live your own truth.

Follow your heart. You've got to do what's right for you. Haven't we heard that a million times? But the Holy Spirit teaches us through Judges that when we reject God's rule and self-rule instead, we do what's right in our own eyes, that it's harmful to us.

And it brings dire consequences. So if we live like we have no king with a capital K and we do whatever seems right to us, we'll experience three things.

[18 : 19] First, we'll experience the consequences of our sin. Sometimes that's in our bodies. Often it's in broken relationships with people around us. We'll experience the discipline of the Lord, which can be painful.

And we will all certainly experience the judgment seat of Christ. Now, I love preaching God's grace and God's mercy and His great love, but none of that is good news unless we understand, unless we come to grips with how seriously God takes our sin.

So even though it's hard, we have to wrestle with this, that we will stand. I will stand. You will stand before King Jesus on His throne one day.

And we will give an account of everything we've done, good and bad. We're going to have to look Jesus in the eye and go over everything we've done.

Do we live like that's true? The apostle Paul calls that in 2 Corinthians 5, the fear of the Lord.

[19 : 40] It's the beginning of wisdom. So God is serious about sin. Number two, God is serious about mercy.

Think back to the pattern again. The people rebel against God's rule. His anger is kindled and He gives them over to their enemies. And then they cry out in their suffering. Then what happens?

The cold shoulder? Does God say, you've gone too far this time. I'm done with you. No. Oh, the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

He hears their cry. Even though they had it coming, He still is moved to compassion. And He raises up for them a deliverer.

In other words, no matter how far you've fallen, you are never too far from the mercy of God.

[20 : 48] Even in their absolute worst idolatry, in the worst of the violence, the worst of the rebellion, God has mercy and He saves His people. He gives them a deliverer. Now let's think together.

What were those people in the book of Judges delivered from? Because you might say, well, that's good for them. You know, I'm glad that they got some judges, but God hasn't given me over to plunderers.

My life's not in mortal danger. But their real danger, it wasn't really their enemies. Their real danger was their sin, and so was ours.

In Ephesians 6, Paul says, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Our real danger today is not at the national level of war. It's not the wrong political party being in power, and it is not the decline of Christendom or the rise of secularism.

[21 : 50] Our real danger is the spiritual darkness that tempts us every day, the spiritual darkness that threatens to chill our hearts toward God.

That's our enemy. And in that great struggle for our very souls, God has raised up for us a once and for all deliverer.

Now let's think again how were they delivered, and what way did the deliverer bring about the deliverance? It was the Spirit of the Lord. Judges 3,10.

The Spirit of the Lord was upon Othniel, and he went out to war and prevailed. Judges 6,34. The Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon, and he had victory of the Midianites in war.

Judges 11,29. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephtha, and he defeated the Ammonites. Judges 14,6. The Spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson, and he began to defeat the Philistines.

[22 : 54] Notice two things about how the Spirit of the Lord comes upon these deliverers and judges. First, it's temporary. And second, it's for war.

It's for military conquest. But in contrast, think in the New Testament, in the Gospels, when Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends visibly from heaven and rests on him and never leaves.

Now, Jesus not only reigns as king, full of the Holy Spirit forever, but he sends the Spirit of the Lord to us, to make his home in us, to clothe us as it were.

And when the Spirit makes you a new creation in Christ, he makes his home with you, and he never leaves.

And the Spirit of the Lord did not come upon Jesus for war and military conquest. Let me read to you from Luke chapter 4, starting in verse 16. And he came to Nazareth where he'd been brought up, this is Jesus, and as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and he stood up to read.

[24 : 17] And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll, found the place where it was written, quote, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to, what, do battle?

Because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him and he began to say, Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

Point number three, Jesus is the king we need. Near the end of the book of Judges, when things are at their worst, three different times the author says, in those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes because there was no king. But the next few books, this is a bit of a preview because we're going to talk about the kingship in future weeks.

[25 : 39] The next few books of the Bible, first and second Samuel, first and second Kings, they tell the story of centuries of failure of the kings.

And by the end of second Kings, if we know one thing for certain, it's that no human king can save us. Not even King David himself. We don't just need any king. We need King Jesus.

King Jesus shows us how serious God is about sin and how serious God is about mercy. He embodies it. He didn't save us by winning wars. Not the kind that we think of.

He saved us by living out these two truths, that God is serious about sin and mercy. We know God is serious about sin because he didn't just look the other way on our sins.

He's righteous. God is holy. God is just. It would be an abomination for him to ignore our own evils and wickedness.

[26 : 51] So he didn't ignore it. He punished it. But he took our evil on himself. And then he took our punishment on himself so that we wouldn't have to.

And that's how we know that God is serious about mercy. In our slavery to sin, when we had nothing to offer him, we had no hope of saving ourselves.

He sent us a once and for all deliverer full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the better off-nail, the better Gideon, the better Jefta, the better Samson.

And he is your King. Are you living like that's true? Am I?

My prayer for you today is that your heart by God's grace will be gripped with the seriousness of your sin. And that by God's grace, you will throw yourself on his mercy and never look back.

[28 : 00] Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we come to you not just as our big brother in the faith, though you are.

We come to you not just as our deliverer from sin and from the powers of darkness, though you are. We come to you this morning and we submit ourselves to you as our King.

Lord, would you please help us to live as your people in your way for your glory and our good?

Would you forgive us of our many sins against you and wash us again with that precious blood that you spilled for us on the cross, which reminds us both of our worthlessness and our worth to you.

We're humbled and we worship you and we love you. Help us to follow you and serve you well. Amen.