

The Judge's Cycle

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[0 : 0 0] be seated. Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome. If you're new or visiting with us, we're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we've become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word. We're continuing this week our series in the book of Judges, and you'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things. It's about the need for constant revival and renewal among God's people. It's about the need for a true and faithful king, a king who can do what no human king can do, which is to change the hearts of men, and it's about the power of spirit-enabled leadership. You'll also remember that the Judges, as we think about the story of God's people in the Old Testament, come after they've been rescued from Egypt, but before God gives them kings. So this is before King Saul, after their wanderings in the wilderness, after God's brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and they are supposed to be doing what was started in the book of Joshua. Joshua went with them to take the promised land, and so they're supposed to finish what they started of clearing out the nations.

Two weeks ago, at the very beginning, we saw the first introduction to the book of Judges, and the problem there was that there was partial, not complete obedience. God's people failed to remember His power in the past, and they also failed to trust His promises for the present in the future. In other words, they refused to take God at His word. And then last week, we saw the second introduction where we had the lost generation. Things were good as long as Joshua and the elders with him were alive, but as soon as they died, things went off the rails.

And so we talked about the challenge and the opportunity and the responsibility of passing on our faith to the next generation. Now, that catches us up to where we are at this week, and we left on an ominous note last week.

You may remember verse 15 said this, And they were in terrible distress, which is a little bit of a cliffhanger. And you'll remember they're in terrible distress for a variety of reasons. They're in terrible distress because they had forsaken the Lord. And then in that same verse, verse 15, it says, the hand of the Lord was against them. That means that the question this week is, how is Israel going to get out of this mess? They are in terrible distress.

How are they going to get out of it? What's going to be the solution to their problem? And we're going to see three things this morning. We're going to talk about first, hard hearts.

[3 : 0 2] We're going to see a merciful God. And then we will also at the end see a greater judge. Hard hearts, merciful God, and greater judge. It's with that I invite you to turn with me now to God's Word. You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn on your phone. You can open up your Bible.

No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word. And God reminds us that His Word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold. And it's sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb, which is why we read now Judges 2, starting at verse 16.

Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them.

They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. Verse 18. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and He saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge.

For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them, and bowing down to them.

[4 : 24] They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And He said, Because this people have transgressed My covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed My voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did or not.

So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

Before the testing of Israel to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.

I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's Word. Our Father in Heaven, we thank You again, as we do every week, that You speak to us in Your Word.

[6 : 09] We ask that You would do it again this week, that You would show us clearly and precisely our need for Your mercy and Your grace. And You would also show us that You meet us at that very same need, that You would challenge us and encourage us, that we would see Your love and Your power and Your authority and Your mercy towards men and women like us.

Most of all, we ask that You would show us Jesus Christ, that we would see and know His glory and His beauty. And we ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen. In 1999, a young man named Christopher Miller decided to walk into Stride Wright, a shoe store, on Hooper Avenue in Toms River, New Jersey, because he wanted to steal.

So he did that. He tied up the employees, he put them in the back room, and he made out with some cash. Now, he was arrested shortly thereafter, and he ended up serving 15 years in prison.

Now, that's relatively boring. Robbery happens all the time. People end up in prison all the time. What's interesting about this story is not how it began, but how it ended. So, 1999, he starts his 15-year prison sentence.

[7 : 30] He's released in 2014, 15 years later. He is now not 25 years old, he is 40 years old. What is the first thing that he does when he's released from prison?

Well, he takes a bus. He goes to the Stride Wright shoe store on Hooper Avenue in Toms River, New Jersey, and robs it again.

In fact, he tries to have an almost identical robbery. And just like the previous robbery, he's quickly arrested again. And so they ask the police chief, why do you think this happened?

And he said, well, maybe that's the only life he knows. Maybe he's become so used to prison, he wants to return again. Of course, that's simply a guess, right?

That's a theory. That's why the police chief says maybe. There's one thing we know for sure. Prison restrained him. It did not change him.

[8 : 28] Prison restrained him. It did not change them. Remember, I told you the question of this passage is, what is going to happen to Israel? They are in a mess. How are they going to get out?

And the answer is this. They're not. Israel is not going to get out of their mess, at least not permanently, because they are going to return to the same thing over and over and over.

In fact, it's such a pattern that it's become known in the studies of Judges as the Judges cycle. God's people will be restrained. They will not be changed.

We're reminded of the problem at the very end of last week's passage. Remember verse 15? And they were in great distress. Of course, this is because they were passed by the nations around them.

And so that problem requires a solution. We meet the solution at the very beginning of this passage. Verse 16, Then the Lord raised up Judges. Now, when we talk about Judges, it's important to have clarity on what they are and what they are not.

[9 : 31] You have a quote on the back of your worship guide, which I'll briefly summarize for you, which is this. When we think about Judges in the Old Testament, we are not talking about people in black robes who sit in courtrooms.

When we talk about Judges in the Old Testament, we are talking about military leaders. And that makes sense, because the problem and the solution need to go together. The problem is that they are oppressed by other nations.

What would the solution then be? It would be that they would have someone to rescue them from that oppression. They would have a military leader who would be able to rise up and fight against the nations that are holding them down.

So the solution fits the problem, right? You're oppressed. You need a rescuer to deliver you. Notice, though, that we're not told about a judge.

We are told about Judges, plural. In fact, that occurs in three verses in a row. Verse 16, Judges. Verse 17, Judges. Verse 18, Judges. Which is to tell us the author is not describing one event.

[10 : 34] He is describing many events. He is telling us about what happened over and over again. Because, of course, these judges were not all serving simultaneously. It's not as if Deborah was doing her thing, and at the exact same time Othniel was working, and then also Shamgar was doing something.

No. These are judges that serve at different places in different times. In fact, the book of Judges covers at least 200 years of history. So the author is telling us here this is a pattern.

This is what happens over and over again. We are getting, at the very beginning, before we talk about any individual judge, an overview. We are getting a look at what the rest of the book is going to show us.

And, in fact, it is not encouraging or heartening. Because the pattern is this. Verse 17 tells us, Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them.

Didn't listen. Went after other gods. Now, we talked about this a little bit a week or two ago. If you are not a Christian, you might be wondering, Okay, well, why should we really be that worried that they are turning after other gods?

[11 : 47] Some people are religious. Some people are not religious. And maybe Christians should be a little less uptight about who worships what God. Because really, we are all just trying to get along.

And to that, I will tell you the same thing I told you last week, which is this. Everyone worships something. We cannot escape the reality of religion.

We are told, verse 11 from last week, They did evil in the sight of the Lord. When we worship anyone other than the triune God, the true and living God of the Bible, it will lead to evil.

It will lead to destruction. If you worship money, you will choose profit over people. You will destroy those around you.

In fact, you only need to look at the news to see this happening all the time. If you worship sexual experiences, you will choose pleasure over respect for other people.

[12 : 59] You will choose the convenience of adults over the needs of children, sometimes over their lives. You will idolize the young, and you'll discard the old.

If you worship radical autonomy, then you'll get to experience incredible isolation. You'll see deaths of despair, and at its most extreme, we get to see the mutilation of people's bodies.

When we worship anything other than the true God, destruction and evil follow. And so that's what Israel experiences over and over.

They cannot, you cannot, worship other gods and expect everything to turn out fine. Other gods can't and won't deliver on their promises, and so we talked about this last week.

Verse 14, what happened? Plunderers came and plundered them. That's what always happens when we turn away from the true God. If you don't worship God, what do you worship?

[14 : 18] Because I guarantee you that you worship something. If this is not your religion, what are you religious about?

Because I know you are religious. Everyone worships something.

And so that's the problem that the Israelites have worked themselves into. It's a problem, in fact, that's even worse than that. A couple commentators point out, really, pattern is not the right word to use for what happens in the judges.

It is not, in fact, a pattern. It is a spiral. And it's a spiral that heads down. We see this in verse 19. Whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt.

They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. In other words, things get worse every cycle. Things become more wicked, judge after judge.

[15 : 21] We'll come back to that next week. We're going to see Othniel as the first judge. He's the best judge. That's not a coincidence. Because things start out good and they get worse.

The worst chapters of judges are going to be at the very end. And so chapter 2, verse 19, is a critical verse for understanding how the book of Judges functions. It starts out not so great and ends up really terrible.

And it's going to get worse judge after judge after judge. And so that's an interpretive key. It's a paradigm for understanding the entire book.

They're more corrupt. They did not drop their practices or their stubborn ways. So what do we learn? What does this teach us at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3?

First, it shows us this. We need a leader who is more powerful than a mere man.

[16 : 28] We need a leader who is more powerful than a mere man. Because these judges, they're able, again, remember, they're able to restrain. They're not able to change. The judges are able to hold things back.

They're not able to fix the problem. That's why I told you earlier, what is the solution to Israel's problem? There isn't ultimately a fix. Things actually get worse. And so as we look at these judges, as we head through the book, in what sense are we going to see these men as models?

Well, we're going to see them as models in a certain sense, but a very narrow sense. We're going to see them as models in as much as they rely on God. Okay?

In as much as they cling to God and His power. In fact, we see that in verse 18 here. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge. These men are not powerful enough, and they are only powerful as God is with them.

These men are not powerful enough, and they are only powerful when God is with them. In other words, we don't and we cannot put our hope in men.

[17 : 46] We don't and we cannot put our hope in earthly leaders. We don't and we cannot put our hope in pastors and elders and deacons and our women leaders.

leaders. Because no matter how good we might be, we cannot change the hearts of men. We are not powerful enough.

And so we see first that men, that leaders, that humans are insufficient. The judges are not going to be enough to fix Israel.

Second thing we see is this. we must have radical heart change. We must have radical heart change or we will keep destroying ourselves.

In fact, this cuts against the religious mindset. One summary of the gospel goes like this. If you are religious, then you'll say, be good like I'm good.

[18 : 58] be good like I'm good. If you're not religious, you might say, well, we just each need to find our own good. The gospel says something quite different.

It says, no one is good, only God is good. No one is good, only God is good. We're reminded of our need for a radical heart change.

The religious person says, be good like I'm good. The non-religious person says, find your own good. The gospel says, no one is good, only God is good.

I've told you before, embracing the gospel means admitting two things. First, I know I must change, and second, I cannot change myself.

I know I must change, and I cannot change myself. The book of Judges shows us that with tremendous clarity. Verse 19, they became more corrupt.

[20 : 00] They kept to their stubborn ways. They did not drop any of their practices. Do you know that you need a radical change in your heart?

do you know that you cannot bring about that change yourself? You must know those two things to be able to embrace the gospel.

You must know those two things for Jesus to be more than a good teacher. If you're not a Christian, are you honest enough to be able to say that the evil in the world is not just evil that's out there?

Are you honest enough to say that it's also evil that's in here? do you know that the problems of the world include you?

That's the bad news of the gospel. The bad news is that we must change and we cannot change ourselves. Being a Christian is not merely about believing certain things and it is not merely about living in a certain way.

[21 : 39] Although there are things we believe and there is a way of life to being a Christian. Being a Christian is about much more than that. It's something deeper than that. It is about recognizing that you need a supernatural work in your life that can only be brought about by God's power.

It is recognizing that only the Spirit of God is great enough to bring the change that you need. It is realizing that Paul is correct in Ephesians chapter 1 when he says the same power that raised Christ from the dead is the power that's at work in you.

And knowing that resurrection power is the only power that's enough to change our hearts. people of Israel must change.

People of Israel cannot change themselves and we don't see them admit that in this passage. In this whole book the people of Israel actually need more than a judge because a mere man is not powerful enough.

That brings us to our second point. Remember I told you first we would talk about hard hearts and second a merciful God. And our question at the beginning was what would be the solution to the problem in which Israel finds themselves?

[23 : 18] And we've seen verse 16 God giving the judges is actually not a solution. yes verse 15 and they were in great distress and for the rest of the book and especially at the end they are going to be in terrible distress.

And so what's God going to do? Well part of what we see here is what we don't see. Between verses 15 and 16 there is something that's missing.

Verse 15 and they were in terrible distress verse 16 God raised up judges. What step did we skip?

Nowhere does it say that Israel repented and turned from their sinful ways. In other words God shows mercy on his people because he's a merciful God.

God has mercy on his people even as they're turning away from him. We find out the reason in verse 18.

[24 : 31] Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them the Lord was with the judge and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge because they were really sorry and they repented.

No it doesn't say that. God rescues his people because of his mercy on them.

This groaning language appears only two other times in the Old Testament and it appears in the book of Exodus when God's people are crying out in Egypt. This is rescue from slavery language.

God rescues his people because and only because of his great love and his great mercy. God continues to pursue his people even when they are running from him.

And so what Paul says in 2 Timothy chapter 2 verse 13 is correct. If we are faithless he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself.

[25 : 42] God in his grace returns to his hard-hearted people over and over again.

Christian God returns to you in your hard-heartedness over and over again. We have hard hearts and we also have a merciful God.

Now this raises attention for us. If God is a God of justice how is it that he is able to show mercy for people with hard hearts?

One of the things we see in the judge's pattern or the judge's spiral is that the judges are able to tap the brakes. So if we think of Israel as a runaway car, the judges are able for a time to get in the driver's seat and slow things down.

Here's what the judges don't do though. They never turn the car around. I've told you before that's what repentance is.

[26 : 55] Repentance is a 180 degree turn. So that leaves us with another question. How is the car going to get turned around? If it starts out bad in Judges chapter 1 and gets extremely terrible in chapters 19 through 21, what is the answer to the end of Judges?

The answer is simple. We need a greater judge. We need a judge who is more powerful than a mere man.

We need a judge who can do more than tap the brakes. We need a judge who can turn around the car. And it's not until long after Judges is over and the period of the Kings has passed that we meet the true and greater judge.

Of course, the true and greater judge is our Lord Jesus. He comes and shows mercy in the way that God shows mercy in this passage. He comes for those who need to change but are unable to change themselves.

That's why Jesus told us in Mark 2, those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous but sinners. sinners.

[28 : 19] And it's in Jesus that we see how God has mercy on those who have not yet repented. That's what Paul tells us in Romans chapter 5.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And how does Jesus do it?

how does he have mercy on stubborn people who are running away? How does he change hearts that are hearts of stone and make them into hearts of flesh?

Well, he does it in the way we looked at in the Gospel of Mark. He comes, he becomes not just God but also man, 100% God and 100% man. He lives the perfect life that we should have lived and he takes the punishment that we deserved.

He does not leave things hanging in injustice. He does not let the guilty get away. Instead, he takes the punishment himself on the cross.

[29 : 28] Jesus is the greater judge that's able to bring together people with hard hearts, people like you and me, and God's great mercy.

will you ask him to change your heart? Will you trust a judge who is more powerful than any man?

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you that you have not left us to our own devices. You haven't left us to our hard hearts as we return to sin over and over again, but instead you've sent Jesus who's more powerful than a judge or a mere man, and who's more loving, who has compassion on the groanings of his people and comes and dies on their behalf.

We ask that you would be at work in this community, that you would change our hearts and make them ever true, that they would be soft and tender towards you and your word, that we would be quick to repent and fast to follow you, that we do this because of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We ask these things in his mighty name. Amen.