

Thematic Overview

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Date: 02 July 2017

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[0 : 00] Amen. I'm pleased to have a seat. It is wonderful to be here this evening and it is great to welcome you to church. Tim, thank you so much for introducing me as the warm-up act to Charles Price at the Faith Mission.

I've been called worse than my time, but it is great to be together. And I do hope that this time together is profitable and it's encouraging and up-building for us as God's people.

As Tim said, we're beginning a new series this evening in the book of Judges. And the plan is that this series will take us through the summer and probably right through to the end of October.

But before jumping into the book, I thought it would be a good idea for us to do a little introduction and a little overview to the book. And to help us with that, you'll see there's a really useful handout and I think it's quite entertaining as well.

But the guys at the Bible Project, if you haven't got one of them, I'm sure if you stick up your hand, someone will get one to you. But just a really helpful and quite a witty and entertaining way to understand the book of Judges.

[1 : 03] And hopefully that's going to be helpful to us as we try and think about the big picture. And I guess my hope for this evening is that in our time together that we can get to grips with three things.

Firstly, with the big picture of the book. We were out as a family yesterday. We went to John Lewis. If anyone's been to the new coffee shop. This is free advertising for them, but we'll go with it. The coffee shop at the top of John Lewis. They've opened up the windows at the front and you get this massive and quite spectacular panoramic view of the north of the city.

So you can see the fourth road bridge at this end. And you can trace it all the way and you see your landmarks all the way. There's Easter Road. And then you get the Bass Rock, which is a way over here.

You see the whole thing right in front of you. Kind of what we're trying to do this evening. See the big picture of this book of Judges. It's content, it's divisions, it's characters.

[2 : 04] And I think most of all, it's big message. So the big picture of the book. Secondly, trying to get to grips with the big questions of the book. I think it's the questions that we're meant to ask as readers as we read through this book.

The questions that the author wants us to ask. And thirdly, to get to grips with the big answers that this book gives us. The big answers to those big questions.

Now I realize that an overview of a book like this, when you're trying to tackle a massive chunk of biblical history, it's a big ask. But what a comfort that we have a big God.

So why don't we, just before we begin, why don't we pause and pray to him now and ask that he, by his spirit, would help us. And would be with us as we come together to study his words.

Now here's what we're going to do. We're going to corporately pray. I thought it would be a great idea to pray some of the words from Psalm 119. Does that sound good? So we'll make this our prayer for this evening.

[3 : 05] So why don't you stand and let's read these words together. And let's make this our mindset and our prayer as we come to God's word this evening. So Psalm 119, verse 57 to 64.

You are my portion, Lord. I have promised to obey your words. I have sought your face with all my heart.

Be gracious to me according to your promise. I have considered my ways. I have turned my steps to your statutes. I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands.

Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law. At midnight, I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.

I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts. The earth is filled with your love, Lord. Teach me your decrees.

[4 : 10] Amen. Please have a seat. Now just to kick us off this evening, I wonder if anyone here has ever seen the program Grand Designs on Channel 4. Give me a show of hands. So this is a few years ago.

There's quite a lot of us, by the way, if anyone hadn't noticed that. Alex and I went through, my wife and I went through a stage a few years ago when this was all we watched. When we had to spare half an hour, an hour that we just watched Grand Designs.

And if you haven't seen it before, it's basically a program about, it's normally a couple or a young family who are moving into their dream home. Now, it normally transpires that they've lived in the city for a while and that the family want to retreat to a slower pace of life, to the countryside.

They want to own their little bit of countryside, complete with spectacular modern house. You'll see it there. Normally an eco-friendly house. And the program follows that process from beginning to end.

So it begins. You meet the couple. And you hear their thoughts. The beginning of the show, for our purposes tonight, we'll call them the Browns, okay?

[5 : 17] So there's the Browns in their home. It's very hard to find a surname in a church that someone doesn't have. But nobody's got Brown. So here are the Browns. They're interviewed at the start of the program.

And we hear about their ambitious plans. And we see the sketches for their house. We meet the architect. We hear the timescale. And we have a little chuckle to ourselves as viewers that these plans are unachievable.

Well, over the course of the next 40 minutes or so of the program, these plans, they become a reality. And the Browns are all settled into their new home.

So picture the final scene of the program. The camera focuses in on the Brown family. And what are they doing? They're waving at the camera from their cozy new living room.

And the camera, they're still waving, zooms out. And you see the upstairs of the house. And you see the beautiful garage on the side. And the camera continues to zoom out. And you see the solar panels that are on the roof.

[6 : 19] And you see the exquisite windows. And you see the pristine grass. And you see the hedge that is so beautifully trimmed. And you see the glorious country views.

And you see the golden lab running around in the garden. And it's the perfect ending to the perfect beginning. Credits roll.

Now, you're an avid watcher of Grand Designs. So much so that you actually watch not just Grand Designs, but Grand Designs Revisited.

There is this program called Grand Designs Revisited. And the show that takes you back to visit projects from previous episodes and to see how things are going. So you're watching Grand Designs Revisited.

And lo and behold, tonight's episode is the Browns. So we're going back to meet the Browns five years on. And so the camera crew are really excited. And they follow the presenter up the drive.

[7 : 14] And there he goes. He knocks on the door. But the door is off its hinges. And he pushes it back. And he finds the house in utter disrepair.

The windows are smashed. Those expensive solar panels on the roof are cracked. The pristine garden is now full of weeds. In fact, the beautiful pristine hedge is now so overgrown that you cannot see that beautiful country stride view.

It is total chaos. And the presenter, he clocks Mr. Brown in the corner sitting in his armchair. And he looks over to the kitchen and he sees Mrs. Brown as she's doing her daily duties.

And are they hugging one another? Are they exchanging pleasantries? No, actually they are shouting aggressively at one another. And the presenter, he takes it all in.

And he pans to the camera, turns to the camera and he says, How did it all go so wrong? Well, the book of Judges is a little bit like our imaginary episode of Grand Designs.

[8 : 22] And of the book of Judges, this is how I try to imagine it. If it was a newspaper article, the headline would read how it all went wrong for Israel. And this is a tragic book.

And I think the reason that it's so tragic is that it got off to such a promising start for Israel. If you've got it there, you might just want to turn to chapter 1 of Judges.

We're not going to get into chapter 1, but it's maybe just useful to have it open. Because as we hit chapter 1 of Judges, I think it's going to be useful for us to backtrack just a little bit and very quickly trace God's promise through the Bible story.

So God chose Abraham and God made Abraham a promise of a people and a place.

And Abraham and his family become the people of Israel. And as we trace that story down through the generations, these are just some of the characters we meet. We meet Isaac. And we meet Jacob.

[9 : 24] And we meet Joseph. And the people of Israel eventually find themselves in Egypt. But are they free in Egypt? No, they're slaves in Egypt. And God raises up Moses, who leads Israel out of Egypt.

And under his leadership for 40 years, the people find themselves, having wandered in the desert for a while, on the cusp of the promised land. But it's not Moses who takes them into the land.

It's Joshua who takes them into the land. And as Israel's new leader, Joshua is the one who leads the people into the land that God had promised them. And they defeat their enemies.

And they take the land. And we see at the end of the book of Joshua that Joshua divides up the land for the tribes of Israel to take and live in. So that was a very quick trace of the Bible story.

But here are God's people in the place that God had promised. And whilst not being without its hiccups, I think the big message of the book of Joshua, as we read it, is that God has been faithful in keeping his promises.

[10 : 29] And it's interesting that as you read the book of Joshua, it seems like there are two big battles raging. The physical battles, there are the battles with the Canaanites, the people who are living in the land.

The physical battles. But as you approach the end of the book, and particularly as you read the speeches of Joshua, it strikes you that as well as there being a physical battle, there's another battle going on.

The physical battle may be won, but the spiritual battle, it well and truly rages on in the hearts and in the lives of the people of Israel.

And Joshua leaves the people with a pivotal decision. This is Joshua coming to the end of the book of Joshua.

This is what he says to the people. Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt and serve the Lord.

[11 : 35] But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. Whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living.

But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Joshua urges them. Now that they are in the land, what do they need to do?

They need to choose life. How do they choose life? By choosing God. Do you see what he's doing there? He's reminding the people of God's generosity.

The grace that God has shown them countless times before. In saving them from slavery. Of giving them his law and bringing them to this land.

And so he calls them to turn away from the Canaanite gods. And to be faithful to the covenant and to this God by being faithful to his law. And if they do that, there'll be life and blessing in the land.

[12 : 37] But if they don't, then Israel would experience God's judgment just as the Canaanites did. And they'll be kicked out of the land and into exile.

And the question that as a reader you're left asking at the end of the book of Joshua. Is what will Israel choose? What will Israel choose?

Will they choose obedience? Or will they choose disobedience? Will they drive out the people living in the land with their false gods and their detestable practices?

Or will they compromise and become just like them? I think that's the first big lesson that we're going to learn in the book of Judges. Is that choices matter.

Choices matter. And in particular, I think obedience matters. Doing what God has said. Following his words. Now I wonder this evening how you view obedience.

[13 : 43] It's not a popular concept in our modern day society. We begrudge authority. We instinctively hate it when other people tell us what to do. I think of this every time I'm on a plane.

I don't know if you find this. What is it? The plane lands and stewardess or whoever it is comes on the tannoy and says, Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Edinburgh. Please, we're not quite into our final destination yet.

Our landing spot. Please, can you please keep on your seatbelts? Please, please don't turn on your mobile phones until the captain has switched off that fasten seatbelt sign.

And no sooner has she finished saying that, then what happens? The people get up and they get their luggage. And you can see at the end of the, what's this, the cockpit?

That they're so annoyed. So annoyed. We begrudge authority. Obedience matters. And I think when it comes to our Christian life, I think it's always good when we're talking about obedience to remember two words.

[14 : 51] The first word is grace. That the God of the cosmos, the creator of all, the creator of us, that he would make himself known. And that he would give his people his word.

His perfect word to guide them in good paths and lead them in safe paths. There's this God who had rescued them, not because they deserved it, but because he was compassionate. That he saved them.

He gave them his word. And he said, this is how I want you to live, because I love you. That's grace. I don't obey because I have to. I obey because I get to.

This God is brilliant. Obedience. A famous old hymn by William Cowper. To see the law by Christ fulfilled, to hear his pardoning voice, changes a slave into a child and duty into choice.

Obedience means grace. And the second word is graft. Obedience is a choice to stop myself, my wayward heart that so often wants to go that way.

[15 : 55] I bring myself back to obey God's law and go that way. To say no to self and yes to God. That is graft. As D.A. Carson writes, people do not drift towards holiness.

Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate towards godliness. Prayer, obedience to scripture, faith and delight in the Lord. I think on a side note, that's how Joshua always strikes me at this point in the narrative.

A man who knows grace and a man who knows graft. He's a Psalm 34 kind of guy, isn't he? That he has tasted and he has seen that the Lord is good.

And what does he declare? Is he sitting on the fence with this choice? No. As for me and my household, you may choose to go that way, but we are going this way. We are serving the Lord. But the question still stands, what will Israel choose? And you have to say that as we open the book of Judges, and maybe you want to turn to verse 1 of chapter 1 now.

[17 : 06] And as we read of Joshua's death, they were encouraged to read at verse 1 that the people, what did they do? Do you see it there? They inquired of the Lord.

They spoke to him. They asked him. Now, that is a positive start, we have to say. And that is a solid bookend. But have a look at the end of the book.

Chapter 21 and verse 25. Because by the end of the book, the very last words from the author and the very last taste in the mouth for the reader, we read that phrase that encapsulates everything that went wrong during this time.

That in those days there was no king in Israel. And everyone did what was right in their own eyes. So as we approach chapter 1, here is the family in the house full of potential and hope.

And yet by the end of the book, here we find the family home and the family in absolute chaos. How did it all go so wrong? It's the big question that we'll ask ourselves as we journey through this book.

[18 : 17] As Israel is a slide into idolatry and continue to time and time again choose disobedience. And continue to choose to blatantly disregard God's word and become just like the people of Canaan who they're supposed to be driving out.

And if those are the two bookends of this book, then really the rest of the book is just Israel's journey from there to there. Now, I'm very conscious of stepping on people's land as it were when we step into this book.

But let me just paint for you the big picture divisions which I think are so helpfully illustrated in this handout. So chapters 1 and 2, which start so positively as we've just seen, give us the seed of the problem.

They give us the root problem. And this problem is going to snowball and it's going to dog Israel for the rest of this book. This is the presenting issue of disobedience.

This is where it rears its ugly head, right at the start of the book. And we see it and he will bring it home next week, I'm sure. The tribes, as they try and settle in the land, as they try and take this land, they disobey.

[19 : 32] Beginning with Judah, verse 19, who seem unable to drive out the people. And culminating in Dan, who, verse 34, seemed to be on the back foot straight from the off.

How does God feel about this disobedience? Chapter 2, verse 2. Having restated his goodness and his covenantal love for them, we'll hear the fixation in his voice.

What does God say? Why have you disobeyed me? It's the voice, isn't it, of a disappointed parent. I've found myself doing it recently.

Why have you disobeyed me? Why have you done this? As we progress through the book, the next major chunk is this perpetual cycle.

And we see it play out again and again in chapters 3 to 16. Again, so helpfully illustrated on the handout. But also illustrated for us by the author, verses 11 to 19 of chapter 2.

[20 : 34] Maybe just useful to note these down. You can refer to them and look at them afterwards. And this is almost the template cycle. That we are to recognize.

And the pattern that we'll see unfold in the following chapters. And really it's a five-step cycle. And as steps, I think we can all, we can categorize as beginning with the letter S.

So step one, we get sin. The people sin against God. They rebel against him. They disobey what he said. And step two, slavery.

God judges them and he delivers them into the hands of their enemies. Step three, the people say sorry. They repent. The people cry out to God to save them.

And God in his goodness and by his grace, he hears a people who have absolutely no right to his ear. Step four, saved. God raises up for his people a judge who will act to save them.

[21 : 36] Now a judge in this book isn't someone wearing a gown and a wig. The judges here are deliverers. They're almost mini saviors, if you like, who will act to save God's people from their slavery.

I'll meet 12 of them throughout this book. Some get a lot of air time like Shamgar and Tola. Sorry, don't get a lot of air time. While others get a lot of air time like Gideon and Samson.

There's 12 of them. In fact, Samson, who is the last judge that we meet in the book, he embodies all that is wrong with Israel. He's a man of pride.

He is a man who willfully and blatantly disobeys God. It's interesting when you read that story of Samson. How often the author brings our attention to his eyes.

You can maybe read it when you go home tonight. It's his eyes. That Samson's eyes are his downfall. Because what Samson sees, Samson wants and Samson gets. In fact, I heard it said recently that the best thing that ever happened to Samson was when the Philistines ripped out his eyes.

[22 : 41] But God raises up judges to save his people. And this is step five of the cycle. Silence. Or rest. That is for a while until the disobedience merry-go-round.

It starts all over again. And the thing for us to see about this cycle is it's a downward spiral. Each passing cycle, and there's six of them, things get worse and worse.

And actually the judges that God raises up for Israel become more flawed as we progress through this book. And by chapter 17 we get the closing chapters, which to be honest are really grim.

And they describe for us just how deep this sin problem is in Israel. And we read of a polluted people. A people who have lost all sense of morality.

A people who are even fighting among themselves. Who are supposed to be this light to the nations round about of how good and glorious their God was. And we close with those words that we saw.

[23 : 45] Verse 25 of chapter 21. In those days there was no king in Israel. And everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And the question we're left asking at the end of this book is, how did it all go so wrong?

And I guess that leads us as readers to ask another question. I think this is the second big question that we're invited to ask as readers.

And that's to ask a poignant question. The first question is, how did it all go so wrong? Then the second question has to be, how can it all be made right?

What's the solution to Israel's problem? Well, I think we can quite categorically, even tonight, say what the answer is not.

The answer is not Israel getting its act together. For if this book teaches us anything, it's that we are not to look in-house for a solution to the sin problem.

[24 : 51] Israel are a wayward people and they need a saviour. And I think that's why, if we're going to identify with anybody in this book, then it's got to be the people of Israel.

It's got to be God's wayward people. Because I don't know about you, but I know my own heart. And I know that left to my own devices, I would be wandering all over the place.

But what is it for God and His grace? Like them, we are living in a pluralistic place. And God calls us as His people to radical obedience. And God calls us as His people to make His glory known to the people and the world around us.

But how often do we get that wrong? Like them, we do not have the answer to our sin problem. So is there anywhere then that we can look for any kind of glimmer of hope in this book before we write it off, before we even start it?

Well, praise Him that we can look to God. I think that's the third big lesson that we learn from the book of Judges. Is that God is faithful. God is faithful.

[26 : 03] We'll see it time and time and time again that Israel sin, Israel fall, and they cry out to God to save them. And God hears them and delivers them time and time again.

Not because they deserve it, but praise Him that God is compassionate and He has pity on His wayward people. And because He is true to His promises that He made to Abraham.

God is faithful. That's why we began this evening by singing, Great is thy faithfulness. O God, our Father. It's really interesting in this book that outwith the description of the judges that God will raise up for His people that are described in chapter 2.

That God is actually the only one who is expressly referred to as a judge in this whole book. As if to say that there is only one hero in this book. And He is not a man.

He is divine. God is faithful. That is the first glimmer of hope that we see shining all through the book of Judges. And we find the second spark of hope in the very final verse of the book.

[27 : 10] Which although we've read it just a few moments ago, although filled with regret, actually provides the clue to Israel's hope. And the note that I want to leave us on this evening, and this is where we'll come into land, is that God is faithful.

And how is God faithful? God will provide Israel with a king. What do Israel need? Israel needs a king. Israel needs a leader.

And not just any king and any leader. The hope is not simply in the title of the king. It's not just about putting any person on the throne. The hope for God's people is in the heart of the king.

If the stinging report at the end of the book of Judges is that everyone did what was right in their own eyes, then what Israel need most of all is a king.

And what we need most of all is a king who will do what is right in God's eyes. Israel needs a godly leader who's going to come and bring them back to God, lead them in true repentance and obedience.

[28 : 21] And seek to lead them in being everything that Israel was supposed to be, a shining light to the surrounding nations, displaying the glory of their God. This is what Israel needs.

They need a king. It's the kind of king that we read about in Deuteronomy 17. If you maybe want to check that out later. God outlines the description of this king. And we see it in Deuteronomy 17.

God's king, his heart is not going to be taken up by many horses. His heart is not going to be taken up by chasing many wives. It's not going to be taken up by chasing silver and gold.

No, the heart of God's king, his heart is going to be set on doing God's law, writing it down, reading it, obeying it, and leading the people in doing the same.

So very counter-cultural, isn't it? What do the nations round about Israel look for in a king, they look for strength? What does God tell his people to look for in a king?

[29 : 22] Guy who's good with the swords? No. A guy who is good with God's words. This is the kind of king that Israel needs. And on that level, we can see that Judges is an apologetic for King David.

It is paving the way for him. The very next book, the chronical order, is Ruth written at the time of Judges, which ends with the genealogy of King David. But when we see it in the context of the whole Bible story, and I know there's no way that the author of Judges could have possibly foreseen it, actually Judges points us towards the ultimate David and the true king of Israel, Jesus Christ.

You see, in one sense, that he is the ultimate judge. He is the ultimate deliverer who God will raise up to save his people. And he is the ultimate king, the one who will lead Israel in true obedience to God's words.

And even right at the end of this, this terrible end of the book of Judges, where we read of this quite spineless man who gives up his spouse to death in order to save his own skin. I can't help but think of Jesus who would display the complete opposite mindset, and actually who would hand himself over to wicked men in order to save the skin of his people.

You see, Israel need a king. Israel need a true judge. Israel need an ultimate savior. Judges, it points us to our need for a savior.

[31 : 00] Judges points us to the kind of savior that we need. And ultimately, Judges points us to Jesus. And as we close our time together this evening, I guess that's my prayer as we journey through this book over the next few months, that as we see Jesus Christ, that we would long for him more, that we would savor him more, that we would be inspired to live for him more, and ultimately, that we would love him more.

So just as we close, why don't we stand once again, and let's read those, well, let's close, rather, with these words from Psalm 119. So this is just following on from where we left off earlier.

And as we think, we've thought tonight about obedience, as we've thought tonight about God's words, why don't we close with these great words from Psalm 119. Let's stand together.

Psalm 119, verses 65 to 72. Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart.

Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn your decrees.

[32 : 18] The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold. Do good to your servant, according to your word, Lord.

Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands. Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word.

You are good. And what you do is good. Teach me your decrees. Amen.