

Overview of Judges

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 December 2015

Preacher: Jonathan Gemmell

[0 : 00] Please do have a seat and grab your Bibles. And please turn to the book of Judges. Let me pray and then we'll have a look at this together. Father God, as we come now to your word, Father, our prayer is that you would speak, that we would hear, that you would be glorified, that we would be changed.

And Father, we would go out from here with you in our sights. And you as our goal as we transition from 2015 into 2016. Father, teach us great things.

From this great book of your great word we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. If you came in, you should have got a little A5 sheet that looks like that. That'll just help you keep track on where we're going. If perhaps you're a youngster, you could have fun. I'm trying to fill in the words as we go through. But I wonder, how would you view, how would you describe your 2015?

How would you describe your 2015? Perhaps it was a year of blessing, where you had success and abundant provision. Perhaps you were given and took opportunity.

[1 : 14] Perhaps 2015 for you was a year of blessing. But perhaps 2015 was a year of struggle, a year of illness, a year of bereavement, a year of stress, where you were asked to do even more with even less than you'd done before.

Perhaps it was a year of newness. Perhaps you became parents for the first time, the second time, the third time. I think we only had third time. I don't think we had a fourth time.

Perhaps she became grandparents again, or for the first time. Perhaps she got married in 2015. Perhaps there was a new job, perhaps a new relationship, perhaps new life, given through faith in the Lord Jesus.

But perhaps 2015 was just another year. Same old, same old, just another diary consigned to the waste paper basket of life. No particular highlights and nothing to write home about.

And so as we leave 2015 behind and go into 2016, what do you think about 2016? Perhaps it's a fresh start, a new hope.

[2 : 31] Perhaps you're hoping for more of the same. Perhaps you're hoping for none of the same that 2015 held. Perhaps it's a year of potential, a chance to change.

A year where you get serious in your Bible reading or your resolutions will last, at least until the second week of January, if not beyond.

I think 2016 is incredibly hope-filled. I think as a church, 2016 has tremendous potential to be a landmark year in the life of our church, to be perhaps the best year so far in the life of Brunsfield Evangelical Church.

And my thinking for that is not because of anything we can do or I can do, but all that God is able and willing to do amongst us.

And so I think at a juncture such as this, as we transition from one period into another, I think the book of Judges has wonderful things to challenge us about, to teach us, things that we can learn even by the bad example of the Israelites in this book.

[3 : 45] It's a dramatic book. We all love Judges at Sunday school. We met people like the Incredible Hulk of the Bible, Samson, who would rip a lion in half with his bare hands.

It's a book of heroes and villains, of cycles and spirals, of violence and scandal, of intrigue and incident. And I hope God might use this book and our time, our short time in it this morning, to launch us in dependence upon him into 2016.

Judges is 21 chapters, 618 verses, just under 20,000 words, three-ish centuries from Joshua to Samuel with 12 judges as the central characters.

And we're going to do it in about 20 minutes max. In all truth, Judges should be a very short book.

God has rescued his people from Egypt, he's given them the law at Sinai, he's forgiven their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, he's been patient through the wilderness, he's been powerful in conquering the land, and now they're settled in.

[4 : 57] And so you'd expect Judges to just be seven words, and they all lived happily ever after. That's what you'd think. They've got there, God promised them many people, a land of their own, and they're there.

We even finished Joshua on a really high note, that Joshua renews the covenant at Shechem, and everyone declares the Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey. Wouldn't that be a great declaration that we would make? As we go into 2016, the Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey. God has delivered on three out of four of his promises. He's given them the land, he's been their God, they've got many descendants, and we're going to see whether this people are going to be a blessing to the whole world. But what we see in Judges is that God's people are still a rabble of sinful, faithless, fickle rebels, who have only gotten this far by God's grace and mercy.

It's all been because God has been so kind, even though they have been so wicked. So I've got four sentences to try and get us into the book of Judges that might be helpful to us.

[6 : 14] Here's the first one. People respond to God's great blessing by gravely sinning against him. People respond to God's great blessing with grave sinning.

Chapter 1, verse 1, there's a leadership crisis. Joshua is dead, and so they come before the Lord and they say, who of us is to go up first to fight against the Canaanites?

Joshua's dead, he's been their leader. He's led them in all their campaigns, he's been at the front of the charge when they've gone up against Jericho and Ai and all these other places.

Now he's dead, who's going to lead us? Judah is chosen, God says, Judah shall go up. And the first 18 verses go really well, it's business as usual.

Israel fights, God is with them, and they win. They start clearing out the Canaanites, the Perizzites, great victories are gained, the land is starting to be conquered, things are going really well.

[7 : 23] The great successors of Joshua seem to be spilling over into judges. But it all comes down to earth with a bang in verse 19.

Chapter 1, verse 19, the Lord was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains because they had chariots fitted with iron.

God had said, your job is to not only be in the promised land, but to conquer the promised land, to get rid of all the Canaanites and the peoples. And in verse 19, we get, but Judah didn't do it all.

They didn't drive the people out of the plains. And in 121, we read, but Benjamin didn't get rid of the Jebusites. And then in 127, Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth, Shan, or Tarnak.

Israel didn't in 128. Ephraim didn't in 129. Zebulun didn't in 130. Asher didn't in 131. Naphtali didn't in 133.

[8 : 38] They had one job. They left Joshua, the Lord we will serve, and his voice we will obey.

What did he tell them to do? He said, you need to get rid of all these people because they'll infect you and they'll lead you away.

And we read that God has greatly blessed them. He's given them this land and what have they done? They've gravely sinned against him by only partially doing what he's called. We did most of it but we didn't do this bit.

We conquered most of them but we left this little pocket. It's partial obedience. Everyone partially does what God has asked. They did just enough.

They conquered just enough land to make it look reasonable but they didn't do it all. Let's face it, we can all be a bit like Israel. We can do just enough, we can partially obey, we can faithfully do the bits that align with our dreams and ambitions but so easily we go, well that's enough.

I've done that religious thing enough this week, now I can do what I want to do. Partial, obedient, cheap, comfortable, convenient, congruent.

[9 : 53] That's what the relationship that Israel has with God will do what you want if it doesn't cost us, if it doesn't make us uncomfortable, if it fits in with our timeline and it is congruent with where we want to go.

And in amongst this partial obedience we get the rose among thorns, the diamond in the rough, Caleb in 120. As Moses had promised, Hebron was given to Caleb who drove from it the three sons of Anak.

Caleb is held up as this person who worshipped God wholeheartedly. And in amongst this partial obedience of all God's people there's one man who is flourishing and successful and forever written in God's word because he wholeheartedly did all that God wanted him to do.

And so I wonder as we transition into 2016 we've got a choice. We can be like the Israelites and partially do what God has called us to do. Or we can strive to be like Caleb who wholeheartedly obeyed and worshipped God in all things.

And there's grave consequences. Chapter 2 The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim and said, I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your ancestors.

[11 : 13] I said, I will never break my covenant with you and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land but you shall break down their altars. Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?

And I have also said I will not drive them out before you. They will become traps for you and their gods will become snares to you. When the angel of the Lord had spoken these things to all the Israelites the people wept aloud and they called the place Bochim.

There they offered sacrifices to the Lord. they didn't realize what they were doing in their partial obedience and it caused great distress great weeping because they only partially obeyed and they were storing up trouble.

And it's just down in chapter 2 verse 11 that we read then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and serve the Baals. They forsook the Lord the God of their ancestors who had brought them out of Egypt.

They followed and worshipped various gods of the people around them. They aroused the Lord's anger. They only did a little bit and it cost them gravely from their disobedience in chapter 1 they never recover in the whole book.

[12 : 32] The Canaanite gods became a snare to that. Canaanite religion must have been very attractive that God had given them his law which was all about holiness and being set apart and living differently from the people around them.

And the Canaanite religion was basically a fertility cult where you could worship Baal and Asherah. He could worship him with licentiousness, sexual immorality and the more you engaged the more prosperity that he promised.

And his people start, God's people start to be snared by the sin. they start to worship these gods and it comes back and it bites them again and again and again to the point that there's great distress.

Chapter 2 verse 15 Whenever Israel went out to fight the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them just as he had sworn to them they were in great distress. When we listen to the lies of the world and go after them it's always great distress.

The world offers prosperity and fun. The world offers greatness and glory and yet in the end it always ends in great distress.

[13 : 47] Great temptation as a church to partially obey to go for what is easy to go for what is fun and in the end if it's not the real true God and obedience to him it always ends in great distress.

God had told them in the law when the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations. And when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them then you must destroy them totally make no treaty with them and show them no mercy do not intermarry with them do not give your daughters to their sons to take their daughters for your sons for they will turn your children away from following me and serve other gods and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

that is what you are to do to them break down their altars smash their sacred stones cut down their asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire for you are a people holy to the Lord your God.

The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people his treasure possession and they fail. Even Joshua gives them a final pep talk.

Be very strong be very careful to obey all that is written in the book of the law of Moses without turning aside to the right or to the left do not associate with these nations that remain among you.

[15 : 13] Do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them but you are to hold fast to the Lord your God as you have until now. The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations.

To this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you wraps a thousand because the Lord your God fights for you just as he promised. So be very careful to love the Lord your God.

He says three things. Be very strong in obedience and they haven't. Be wholehearted in worship and they haven't. Be very careful to love the Lord your God and they haven't.

And so I wonder will we listen to Joshua's words to us as we go into 2016. Be strong in obedience. Be wholehearted in worship.

Be very careful to love the Lord your God. In one chapter in one generation hope and zeal of Joshua has become tokenistic. They've taken God's great blessing of this land.

[16:19] God has been so kind, so gracious, so patient, so protective, so powerful and what have they done? They've gravely sinned against him. They took grace for granted and gratitude was replaced by greed.

And as we go into 2016, as people that have been created by God, redeemed by God, gifted by God, blessed outrageously by God, how are we going to use that blessing? In wholehearted commitment to him and the obedience that follows, or are we going to use it for self-indulgence, self-gratification and self-advancement?

How are we stewarding the loving kindness of God? Mindful of him, grateful to him, useful in his hand.

People respond to great blessing with grave sinning, that's what we learn in Judges. But then we learn that God's people respond to God's punishment with repentance.

If you spend any time in Judges, you know that it's a deeply depressing cycle. It starts with sin, servitude, supplication, salvation. God's people sin, they worship other gods.

[17:36] God puts them under the heel of a foreign ruler to serve him in servitude. In the depths of this oppression, God's people cry out to him in supplication.

And God graciously raises up a judge to bring them salvation. This goes round and round. In the book of Judges, it goes round 12 times.

12 times they're put under the heel of the Midianites and the Philistines. And 12 times God hears their cry as they're in the depth of this oppression and he raises up a judge.

But when God's people realize the discipline of God, they cry out to him, they repent, and they turn to him for salvation. God is testing his people.

He's so committed to them covenantally that he won't just let them walk away. But he's constantly bringing things into their path so that they might turn to him. And as we look out on 2016, we don't know what will happen.

[18:41] But there'll be lots of opportunities to show what is for real and what is for show. Different struggles and difficulties and opportunities come our way.

There'll be countless opportunities to do what this people does and turn to God and seek to worship and follow him, of pressing into him rather than running on our own away from him.

Repentance is always the response, leaning on God when we get it right, trusting God in the midst of difficulty, running to God when we get it wrong. And so you get this cycle and every time God's people respond to God in repentance, they realize that he is the only one that can save them.

He is the one who holds their hope in his hands. God's people respond to God's punishment with repentance.

Let's make sure repentance is the first thing we're doing. When trouble comes our way, reorientating our lives towards God and trusting in his grace. Number three, God gives his people temporary rest through imperfect judges.

[19:58] Throughout the book we've got famous people, famous people that we've learnt in our Sunday school. We've got 12 judges in total, 12 small-s saviors that God uses to rescue his people.

Some are covered in a verse like Shamgar, some get a paragraph like Tolajer, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. Others get all or most of a chapter like Othniel or Ehud, whilst others get several chapters like Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.

And as we see this cycle progress, it is somewhat of a downward spiral. In general, the rest period that the judge brings gets shorter, and the moral fiber of the judge gets more dubious.

The troughs get lower and the peaks don't go as high as you progress through the book. Tremper Longman III, one of the commentators, he's got the best name, if not necessarily the best commentaries.

He says, what a collection of human beings in the book of Judges. Strange heroes they are, a reluctant farmer, a left-handed assassin, a prophetess, an illegitimate bandit, a sex-crazed Nazirite, and others.

[21 : 14] They're unlikely heroes. They're people that God raised up to bring temporary rest to his people. But they did all believe the word of gods at times and in portions of their lives.

All had faith. Though often failing and faltering, they trusted God and God used them to do great things. Some even make it into Hebrews 11.

And what more shall we say? I do not have time to tell you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms and ministered justice and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

God gives his people temporary rest through imperfect judges. They were faltering and failing and still useful to God and what an encouragement to us who know what it is to falter and fail that there's still hope, that God can use us.

But it is very short-lived. When the judge is alive, they win, and when the judge dies, it all unravels again. There's a summary passage in 2.18.

[22 : 42] Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived. For the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them.

But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshipping them.

They refused to give up their evil practices in stubborn ways. Even the best judges were not enough. Even when they heard these mighty men leading them, even when Deborah, the wise prophetess, was leading them, it was not enough to give them lasting rest.

No small s, saviour, was able to save them completely. And it warns us about over-reliance on our leaders, that leaders are best to fallen people.

And therefore, let's never rely on others to do for us what God has called us to do ourselves, to commit to him, to love him, to worship him, to give him our best.

[23 : 50] But when the leader was good, the people were good, but when the leader died, it all unraveled. There was nothing lasting. And this brings us to our last point. God is showing our need of what will ultimately and only be provided in Jesus.

God was showing our need of what will ultimately and only be provided in Jesus. This cycle of sin and servitude and supplication and salvation continues up until chapter 17.

After Samson, no one repents anymore. No one turns to God. There's no more judges. There's no more rest. It is dissolution and decay that escalates on a societal and massive scale.

That a society stops worshipping God. They fail to repent. They're no longer more to his truth. They're no longer engaged in his worship. And rapid decline follows.

Licentiousness. Canaanite gods bring total destruction to the very fabric of Israelite society. The last five chapters move from cowardice to unfaithfulness to widespread immorality to gang rape, murder, civil war and people trafficking.

[25 : 05] The last five chapters utter dissolution of society. If you're ever asked to read Judges 17 to 21 out loud, don't do it. It's really uncomfortable as you see just how low God's people will go when they fail to worship him and serve him.

By the time you get to the end of the book of Judges, you are morally, spiritually and emotionally exhausted. It is a book you experience and as you experience it, it's exhausting.

It robs you of all confidence in humanity's ability to save itself. The sin is so heavy. The cycle is so repetitive.

The learning curve of the people so steep that they're not seeing the error of their ways. You pretty much just despair by the time you get to Judges chapter 21.

And the repeated refrain in those last five chapters, in those days Israel had no king. And everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

[26 : 13] And what they did was horrendous and horrible and grievous and immoral. And so, so far in the story of the Old Testament, Adam messed up.

And God restarted in Noah, but Noah was just the same as Adam and he couldn't save. And then God chose Abraham, but Abraham was a scoundrel as well and nothing Abraham could do could save.

And then God rescued them through Moses and through Moses God gave them the law, but the law just highlighted all the places they were going wrong and couldn't save. And then we get Judges and the Judges couldn't save, not for a long period.

There was no proper rest given through the judge. And then God finally gives them a king, but the king couldn't save. There's a few high points amongst David and Solomon, but in general it's downward.

And no king could save. And then God graciously gives them the prophets who remind them of all this stuff, but none of the prophets could save. And so you end Judges spiritually, emotionally, and morally exhausted.

[27 : 17] You're pretty much in the Old Testament spiritually, morally, and emotionally exhausted because no one seems to be able to save people from sin. And then, after 400 years of silence as God prepares his people, God doesn't speak, he comes.

God doesn't raise up a leader for a while, he raises up a king who will last forever. And we read great words like, but now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify, this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

No longer a king who just lives and dies, but a king who will live forever, who even gives us his Holy Spirit so that we don't fluctuate, we can worship fully.

And so we read in Hebrews, and with this we finish, therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

He's the king forever, the one good God promised. And so four sentences to get our head around judges. That people respond to God's blessing by gravely sinning against him.

[28 : 37] I wonder, will that be us in 2016? When we receive all that God has done for us, how will we use it? How will we steward it? God's people respond to God's discipline with repentance.

Will it be countless opportunities to turn to God and trust him as we go through 2016 and all that lies before us? God gives his people temporary rest through imperfect judges.

Let's not trust our leaders too much. Let's not rely on them too much, but make sure we ourselves are seeking to grow and to love Jesus more tomorrow than we do today, and even more the day after, and pressing into him, and trusting him and receiving from him all that he has for us.

And let's remember that what we ultimately need, what judges ultimately shows us, is that we have an absolute profound and total need of Jesus Christ. Jesus who did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves, and Jesus who did for us what no one else will ever or can ever do for us.

Let me pray. Father God, we thank you so much for your word. We thank you that it undoes us.

[29 : 58] It shows us how sinful we are, how lost we are, how in need we are. And then into that gaping uncoveredness that you've revealed, you pour into the glorious balm of the gospel.

Father, when we see our sin, when we see our need, when we see our hopelessness, thank you that Jesus meets that need, that he is our hope, that he is our king, and he is the one who offers us eternal rest.

And so Lord, may 2016 be a year where we decrease and he increases in us. We pray this for his glory and in his name.

Amen. Amen.