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Judges 17-21

Judges Series

Sermon 5

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Open your Bibles to the book of Judges. We’re going to wrap up the last five chapters of the book of Judges and it is dark. There is no other way to say. This is one of the darkest portions of Scripture, if not the darkest, that spans these five chapters. So, don’t fret, don’t worry, I’m not going to exposit five chapters from the book of Judges. I’m going to hit the lowlights but ultimately I want us to see the main point of what God is doing in these chapters, what He is drawing our attention to—the good news is that no matter where we are in the Bible that it is always going to bring us back to Jesus.

If you remember, the book opens and we get this warning from the Lord to the nation of Israel that, as they’ve gone into the Promised Land their responsibility was to drive out all the inhabitants, tear down their idols, stop the false worship, and not to partake in that. They were to drive them out and make war against them. God promised that, “If you don’t, and you get comfortable with them, and you go after their gods, I’m going to allow them to rise up and oppress you.” So, we see this cycle begin. That would happen. The Israelites would go after other gods. The Scripture uses the word that they would ‘whore’ after other gods, because that is how Yahweh, the One True God, sees it when His covenant people worship false gods. He sees it as adultery. So, the people would sin and God would raise up an oppressor. He would allow one of those nations to have power over Israel and they would oppress them in every way. The people would eventually cry out but they would not cry out in repentance. They would cry out because of their discomfort, because life isn’t going to the way it’s supposed to go, and they would always fall back and go, “Oh, yeah, that’s right, Yahweh is our God of get-me-out-of-trouble. So, they would cry out to Him. Then, God in His grace, God in His pity, God in His mercy would raise up a deliverer, or a judge, or a savior who would deliver them from the oppressor and then the Scripture says that the people would have rest for a certain portion of time, usually the life of that judge, but as soon as that judge would die the cycle would repeat. The cycle would repeat because they were never really grieved over their sin; they were never really grieved over their adultery against Yahweh. They just didn’t want the bad stuff, right? They wanted to be comfortable, they wanted to be prosperous, they wanted life to go the way they wanted it to go.

Remember how we talked about it being this downward spiral centering around their unbelief, their apostasy, as they weren’t just in a cycle spinning round and round, but they were getting further and further away from the truth, further and further away from the Lord, and deeper and deeper into sin and depravity. That brings us to chapter 17. So, over and over again we’ve heard in this book that, again, the people of Israel “did what was right in their own eyes” and they sinned against Yahweh. That changes here—that phrasing changes.

Look at chapter 17:6—this becomes the new phrase for the rest of the book and it really bookends this last section.

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

He says it about four times. There was no king in Israel and they did what was right in their own eyes. For the rest of the book there are no heroes, there is no deliverer, there is no judge that comes on the scene. There is no one even as noble as Samson, which is not a compliment, right? There is no one. You get these pump fakes where a guy comes on the scene and you’re like maybe this is going to be the deliverer, maybe this is going to be the guy that gets them out of trouble at some point in the story, but he becomes so perverted and twisted that there’s no hero. There’s no deliverance. There’s no law. There’s no one upholding the standard of God. There’s no one bringing people back to Yahweh.

So, we have this story with Micah and his mom. If you’ve read ahead you see that it’s crazy. He’s apparently stolen all this silver from his mom and it’s gone missing and he’s like, “Oh, remember that silver that you’re missing?” and she’s like, “Yeah, I remember the silver,” and he’s like, “It was me.” He brings it back and she’s like, “Okay, I want to dedicate this to Yahweh. I want to dedicate this to the One True Living God,”—the personal name of God, Yahweh. So, do you know what she does? She uses it to make idols and she dedicates the idols to Yahweh. Then, you find out that Micah’s whole house is called the house of Micah and that it’s filled with false gods. He even makes an ephod out of silver and puts it up with the rest of the idols. It’s this picture that what is going on is that the narrator is giving us these super dark, confusing stories, to say that this is what was going on—that this typifies what was happening in Israel. It’s this perverted mingling of paganism and false religion with the worship of Yahweh, so that they are not even convicted. There’s no conviction. There’s no shame or hiding it. They’re just boldly mingling the thinking, and the philosophies, and the values of this fallen, broken world with the Lord, as if there’s no contradiction. So much so that this kid who is from the tribe of Levi is passing by and Micah is like, “Hey, man, do you want to be my personal priest?” You think, maybe this is him, maybe he’s about to set it all right. Nope. The guy is like, “Oh, yeah. There’s some money in it for me? Yeah, I’ll be your personal priest in your house of idols.” This kid is a Levite and is supposed to be one who goes before the Lord on our behalf to make sacrifice, to make atonement for our sin.

In the next chapter, the tribe of Dan is on the loose and they are looking for land to steal from whoever they can steal it from. Then, they come by and they steal all the household idols and they steal this priest because he’s loyal to whoever is paying the most for loyalty, so he goes with them. It’s this confusing, twisted story and then it ends and you’re left going, “What is happening here? What was the point of that? Why is that in the Bible?” It’s just people being unfaithful to the Lord, people committing adultery on Jesus. Why is this in the Bible? It says again in the beginning of chapter 19,

In those days, when there was no king in Israel…

…and it tells us the next story. He reminds us that there was no king. There was no king, so he ties what is happening in their lives is because of the fact that there was no king. This is the darkest story of them all and it is told to us in such a way so that we would draw the comparison and say that Israel is like the new Sodom and what is happening in the nation of Israel, the covenant people of God, the people who received the Law and the Prophets, the people who were given the tabernacle and the sacrificial system, the same people who God led out of slavery through the Red Sea and led them by a pillar of cloud in the day and fire by night, fed them with magic bread from Heaven—these same people are now as wicked, as depraved as Sodom.

I’m going to read just this one section and I won’t make many comments but just to highlight the depravity. Judges 19:22,

As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house,…

What has happened here is that this Levite, this man from the tribe of Levi, is married to how many women but this isn’t his primary wife. He has a wife that he treats as a concubine and she has left him. She’s been unfaithful to him and he goes after her. It says that he speaks kindly to her so if you’re reading it for the first time you get this pump fake that maybe this is our dude. Maybe this is our guy and he’s going to do what’s right. But he goes and he wins his wife back and he’s traveling back home and it’s getting late, so they’re going to spend the night somewhere and they get to Gibeah. They’re in the open square and this old man sees them when he’s coming home from work and he’s like, “Y’all can’t stay out here. Please come stay with me.” He’s showing them hospitality and he brings them into his home and we pick up there.

As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door. And they said to the old man, the master of the house, “Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him.” 23 And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not do this vile thing. 24 Behold,…

This is hard to read. It’s hard to read. I did some searches because I was going to be driving to Georgia and it was going to be a busy week and I was trying to fit in as much sermon prep as I could wherever I could fit it in. I thought, “I’m going to cheat. I’m going to be in the car so I’m going to listen to somebody preaching on these chapters,” but I didn’t find very much. There are not many people who are like, “And for our Christmas service this evening, open up to Judges.” You’re not going to find it. This is dark. It’s confusing. And before I read the next lines I think that’s exactly what God wants us to feel right now. He wants us to feel confused. He wants us to feel offended. He wants us to feel angry, and sad, and to feel just a little bit of the weight of sin.

“Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out now. Violate them and do with them what seems good to you, but against this man do not do this outrageous thing.” 25 But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and made her go out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. 26 And as morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

27 And her master rose up in the morning, and when he opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, behold, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. 28 He said to her, “Get up, let us be going.” But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey, and the man rose up and went away to his home. 29 And when he entered his house, he took a knife, and taking hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. 30 And all who saw it said, “Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day; consider it, take counsel, and speak.”

Again, I believe the Lord wants us to feel confusion, anger, and sadness when we read Judges, especially the last five chapters. In them we are confronted with humanity devoid of the Word of God, devoid of the Law of God. We have to grapple with what we are apart from the justice of God, apart from the intervention of God’s grace. We need to see ourselves apart from the rule and reign of God because that’s His point. He’s saying there is no king. There is no king and this is what happens.

The story goes on and the only time in the whole book of Judges that the clans unite, that the tribes are united, is when they go to war against Benjamin for what happens in this story. They wage war so viciously on their brother, Benjamin that the whole tribe is almost completely wiped out. The rest of the book is them doing whatever they can to keep them from going into extinction. It’s crazy. Then it ends and it ends with this statement in Judges 21:25,

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

So, I think there’s this street-level context that’s happening that’s pretty clear, right? God is preparing the Israelites for a monarchy. That was always His plan. You go back to Genesis and God had talked to Abraham about it. Go back to Deuteronomy and He had made provision in the Law for it. God had always planned to give them a king, but not just any king. He couldn’t be a king like the world. He had to be a righteous king, a king after God’s own heart. Then, we see that they get a false start with Saul, and then David rules, and then Solomon after David, and then you have this brief time where things are pretty good and it’s kind of the golden age of Israel, if you could call it that. Then, it just falls off the cliff again and spirals down. But we’re not going to look at the street view. We’re not going to look at the immediate context for Israel. Because there’s something else; there’s this cosmic, universal, Gospel context that I want us to see this in. Because the same thing that God was preparing Israel for—to have an earthly king—He is giving us these chapters in Judges to show us that the whole world needs a king. And not just any king, and not Saul, or David, or Solomon—but Jesus, the King of kings.

The reality is that we could look at this time period in Judges and think how wicked, how awful, but the reality is that they were wicked and awful because they became like the nations around them. They were just like the rest of the world. This is us. This is humanity. This is humanity apart from the sustaining grace of God.

Romans 1:18,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Who is the “they”? Who are all the people doing that? Who is the “they”? Us, humanity, the world, mankind, earthlings… It’s us. From the beginning, we rebelled against God, we suppressed the truth about who God is, in our own unrighteousness and in our desire to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, namely, us—me. I want to worship me. I want to do what’s right in my own eyes.

So, God begins to show Israel—and through Israel, us—that they needed a king to instruct them in the Word of God, in the Law of God, and this is where we are not like the world. We have Jesus. Our King has come. Go in your minds to Christmas. It’s a happy thought. Think of the songs that we sing and think of the verses that we sing at that time of year. What are we celebrating? The coming of our great King, the Promised Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ, the King has come. He’s entered the world and He’s brought with Him His kingdom, a kingdom of peace and a kingdom of righteousness. These aren’t just words—we live in a broken, fallen world where sin reigns, and even in our own minds, on our own, to try to think of who God is, we are so perverted and we are so twisted that we just mingle what the world believes with what we’ve heard about Jesus, what we’ve heard about God, what we think we understand as truth we get wrong. The best minds, the best philosophers cannot understand the goodness, and the holiness, and the righteousness of God. We were in desperate need for a king to come and open the Word of God.

In Deuteronomy, we learn that—that’s what God told the king to do. One of the responsibilities of Israel’s earthly king was that when he came he was to make his own copy of the Law of God. It had to have a stamp of approval by the priesthood. They had to see that he copied it completely and perfectly and he was to take that his copy of God’s Law and he was going to read it day and night. He wasn’t going to turn from it but he was going to obey it, and live it out, and as an example and the leader of the people he was to show them the Word of God when he read it and in the way that he would rule them. The kings of Israel never attained to it. But we have Jesus.

Jesus himself said this in Matthew 5:17-20,

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

It’s intense. In Matthew 5-7, I encourage you to read it, it’s Jesus coming as King and He is giving His law as he preaches that sermon. Here, He’s saying that all of it, all of the Law, is fulfilled in Jesus. How? In one way because He kept it. Although he was tempted in every way as we are tempted He was without sin. He never broke the Law of God. He fulfilled it perfectly. Another way He fulfilled it is that all of it was pointing to Him, all of it—every shadow, every type, every picture—all of it finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus. He fulfills all of it. He’s what all of the Law was pointing to. And He fulfills it because in His keeping the Law, in His living a righteous life, always obeying in thought, in word, in deed, He earned a righteousness, an obedience, that He could then share with us. That’s our only hope.

They needed a king to show them how to be faithful to Yahweh. They keep saying, “There was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” They were unfaithful. They were an adulterous people.

I don’t know that sting. I know that some of the people in this room do, whether because of the home you grew up in or in your own life you’ve felt the sting and the pain of adultery, but in some sense I can’t comprehend that. I try to go there in my mind and think what that level of betrayal would feel like. I’m not trying to pour into wounds but I think that the Lord wants us to feel the weight of that. He’s saying that when you mingle, when you pervert, the purity that’s supposed to be our worship of Yahweh, our undivided loyalty to Jesus—when we, as covenant people, mingle that with giving our allegiance to the things of this world, He says that it’s like adultery. But then, I step back and realize that apart from the sustaining grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit in my life, I am absolutely capable of that in my own marriage. And apart from the sustaining grace of God and the power and the work of the Holy Spirit in me, I am absolutely capable of being unfaithful to Yahweh, unfaithful to Jesus, of spiraling away from Him in a cycle of giving into temptation, and sinning, and going after the things of this world instead of pursuing God, and ignoring my calling to be an ambassador for Christ no matter where I am, and instead living for my own glory and pleasure, and I could spiral out of control into unbelief, and despair, and depravity. I’m capable of that.

God allowed the Israelites to do just that, to show them that they needed a king to lead them in faithfulness. And listen to me—that is exactly what you and I have in Jesus. That’s the only reason we don’t spiral away from Him. Remember, a few weeks ago we said that the reality for the believer is that we do live in cycles. You will sin, and you will fall, and you will mess up, but it’s in those moments, as a child of God, that unlike Israel we have to cry out, not primarily that, “God, I want the pain to stop,” and not primarily, “I want the bad stuff to stop. I don’t want the negative repercussions of my sin so please help,” but that we would just cry out in repentance. Just like David in Psalm 51 that we would say, “God, have mercy on me. I’m a sinner. What I feel the most are these broken bones and this soul that is dry because I no longer have the fellowship with my God that I was made for,” and that we would cry out for nothing other than restoration with our God. That’s repentance. We will just continue this cycle. If it ever gets to, “I just want the pain to stop. I want a good life. I don’t want this weight of conviction. I don’t want to deal with shame. I don’t want people looking at me a certain way. I want things to all be good and comfortable again,” that’s not repentance. But when we fall under the weight of real conviction and say, “I’ve sinned against God,” and we beat our chest and we say, “I just want to have Jesus again,” then we will remember that this was never about my faithfulness. It’s His faithfulness. God, in His grace raised up our Deliverer. He raised Him right up out of the grave. And if we died with Him—if you died with Jesus, you died to your sin, you died to its guilt, you died to its shame—then you’ve been raised up with Jesus and now you are spiraling ever closer and closer to Christlikeness because of His faithfulness, not yours. The purest gifts of God in your life will be when that conviction sets in. That’s sonship. That’s how you know you’re a daughter of the Most High. Because He won’t let you live in that, He won’t let you spiral out of control, He will bring you to repentance, and He will remind you of the goodness of the Gospel—that Jesus, your King, was faithful. He was faithful so He sits at the right hand of the Father. He sits on a throne that no one can remove Him from. And you belong to Him, in fact, you are seated with Him there already.

2 Timothy 2:8-13. Listen to this,

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. 11 The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

12 if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, he also will deny us;

13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.

That’s good. That’s good. There’s a scary part in there, right? Did you see it? You were feeling all good about yourself and then there was the scary part. What’s going on? The scary part is that He’s saying that those who commit apostasy, those who deny Christ, He denies them. There is a reality that there are those who don’t have saving faith. There are those who go out from among us but they were never one of us. There are those who have a faith that starts out well but doesn’t endure to the end because it hasn’t been authored and perfected by Jesus. It’s a manmade faith, a faith that’s mingled with the beliefs and the ideas of this world, that sees Jesus how it wants to see Jesus. They made a Jesus in their own image and that Jesus can’t save them. Those who deny the real Jesus are denied by Him. But for us, even when we’re faithless, even when we’re in the cycle of doubt, even when you fall, He remains faithful. He can’t deny himself. What does that mean, that He can’t deny himself? He identified with you in your sin, and your shame, and your humanity so that you could now identify with Him in His resurrection, in His righteousness, in His throne room in Heaven, and you cannot be separated from Him. You can’t be. He won’t deny himself.

They needed a king to lead them in pure worship of God. That’s why we exist—to know, to love, and to worship God. Solomon would build them a Temple where they would worship God, but Jesus gives us direct access into the true Holy of Holies, into the very presence of God, where we can come under the worship of God. Listen to this from Hebrews 2:11-12,

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, 12 saying,

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;

in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

It’s a beautiful picture. Do you see it? This is Jesus saying, “I identified with you and now you identify with me, and because of that I’m not ashamed to call you my brothers and sisters.” In fact, the picture is Jesus leading us to worship of God the Father in His throne room.

That’s where this story ends. Because Jesus is our King, you and I, right now, in the here and now, and forever have access to worship God in spirit and in truth to be the people He’s created us to be.

Revelation 7:9,

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice,…

Do you see it? This is all kingship. Our King is on His throne as a lamb, as our Sacrificial Lamb, the same one who laid down His life. He is the King of kings whom we are worshipping. With palm branches in their hands they are crying out with a loud voice.

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Church, we have Jesus. He’s the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He’s not only provided a righteousness that we can have as a gift but He’s given us that example to follow in this life; that we would care about justice, that we would care about the widow, and the orphan, and the oppressed, and that we would live out the Gospel, that we would take the goodness of the Gospel to anybody and everybody. He teaches us His Word. He not only teaches us the Law but He writes it on our hearts and our minds. We have Jesus. We have the King of kings and Lord of lords who is so much greater than any deliverer this world has ever known. So, I would say to you, please don’t reject Him. Please don’t settle for the idea of Jesus that you’ve created in your own mind that’s okay with you and your sin, that’s okay with you having one foot in the world and one foot in the Church, that’s okay with you doing what you want to do—as long as you worship, as long as you say a certain prayer at a certain age, or get baptized, or walk an aisle. That’s not Jesus. That Gospel doesn’t save. That Jesus didn’t rise up from the dead. The Jesus that rose up from the dead said this. He said, “Take up your cross and follow me. So, deny yourself, die to yourself, and follow me.” Surrender completely to the One True God and He will give you salvation for free and radically change you. Your heart and your mind will cry out for righteousness. You’ll want to obey out of love.

I think that for us, as a church, as we’ve been encouraged tonight seeing Kilby and Greg and knowing what they’re giving their lives to, that we would be faithful—that we would be faithful with the Gospel here and now, not just in the way that we say it to ourselves—we need to do that, preach the Gospel to yourself, and not just the way that we say it to each other here—this is really important and we need to do this every week, and not just the way that we encourage each other in small group—we need to do that. Be part of a small group where you are using the gifts that God has given to you to pour into the lives of other people. But we need to do it in such a way that we’re engaging the lost and dying world around us with the hope of the Gospel.

Pray with me.

Lord God, we love you and thank you for the truth of the Gospel. Thank you for your Word. God, I thank you for your salvation. I thank you that we can worship God because of you and through you. I pray now that you would free us to sing truth to you and about you. I pray that you would bring people to repentance and faith. God, I pray that if there is somebody here who doesn’t know you that they would have the boldness to come ask for help to understand the Gospel. And I pray, Lord, that you would use us this week. I pray that many of us would have conversations this week with people who don’t know you and that you would use us to explain the hope that can be had in Christ. We love you, Lord, and we need you. Amen.