

# 10/21/2018 - Judges 1-3

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Date: 22 October 2018

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Thank you. My name is Benji Slayton. I'm planting a church up on the northeast side of town. I've been able to preach to you guys a couple of times. I'm glad to be here again with you tonight. So let me go ahead and pray for us. Our Father, we pray that you would open our eyes and our hearts to see and to know you, to be changed by you. Be with us, we pray in Christ's name. Amen. You'll have to forgive me. I've got a little bit of a cough. So if I cough in your ear, I apologize. It's more painful for me than it is for you, I promise. And if you guys want to turn me down, you're welcome to do that if you can, you know, anticipate when I'm going to cough. So I, one of the things that I love is a new start story, a new beginning story. You know, somebody who beats cancer, somebody who overcomes a failure that they've had in life, a reunited family. I just like those big new beginning stories. And so a number of years ago when Barack Obama was elected, you remember one of the storylines from that election in 2008 was that he was the first African-American president.

And, and that was a significant deal. And so I was the RUF campus minister at the University of Texas then. And so I wanted to go to campus and kind of see how students were responding to this. So for his inauguration, I went and I watched the inauguration on TV, on campus at UT in Austin, the real UT.

And, and with a bunch of students that I didn't know. And there was this palpable sense from students of anticipation and hope. And like, this is a new day. We are starting again. And in fact, if you remember from his speech that day, this is one of the lines. We need to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and get busy remaking America. What he said was saying was, we need a new start.

Lest you think it was just Barack Obama who thought that we just elected a president two years ago, whose Donald Trump's eight years later, Donald Trump's major line was, we're going to make America great again, right? We need a new start. Apparently there's something about elections and new starts that this just works well. There's something about these new starts that are just part of our, of our human psyche. I think each one of you wants to believe that when things are going poorly, if you can just get something new, you can make things work. A new self-discipline, get a new job, get a new attitude, get a new boyfriend, get a new, you know, president, a new political philosophy.

Maybe it's just a new outfit, but that newness will somehow help you overcome the challenges that you feel are there for you. Excuse me. I think sometimes we think that those new starts can, they become these kind of center points that our life rallies around that we think can make the rest of our life work out. So, but is it really true? Can you really begin again? That's actually the question of the entire Old Testament book of Judges. That's the question that it's wrestling with.

[ 3 : 22 ] This book comes out of a unique time in the, in the history of the people of Israel. In fact, North Shore is starting a series just on this book that's going to last, I don't know, month or two maybe. But that's the central question is, can we begin again? How do we, how do we make life work for us? And so what I want to do this morning, this afternoon is I want to look at a couple of the key themes in the book of Judges. And then I want to look at one of my favorite stories in the book and see how it highlights some of that. So I said that this was a unique time for the people of Israel. You'll recall their story. 400 years they were slaves in Egypt. And then Moses comes along and he brings them out of Egypt from the, through the Exodus.

And they go and then they wander around for 40 years in the wilderness. And then God raises up Joshua as the new leader after Moses. And they come across the river Jordan and they go into the promised land, right? And their job under Joshua is to, to clear the promised land of the people who are living there. Take control of the land. And so this book comes after Joshua has died and after they were supposed to have cleared the land of Israel. But before, before Canaan, before the Israelites had established a monarchy. And so it was this wild time in history. There's really, we just read the key verse. There was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. They were supposed to have cleared the land, but they didn't finish it. God's command to them was that they would take the people who live there and displace them. Take them out of the land. Now, you may really hate that idea as a modern American person. But what you need to remember is this was actually God's righteous judgment because the people who lived there were notoriously wicked. The Canaanites practiced child sacrifice. They would burn their children to the god Molech as a way of gaining his favor. The

Philistines, they, they were the ones who really specialized in temple prostitution. They would put their children into the service of these temple prostitutes. In Phoenicia, they were, they would use mediums and sorcery. So the people of Israel were supposed to come in and establish a just and a good and a righteous society. The problem was they only did about half the job. And so the rest of the Old Testament unfolds with Israel having to deal with these people who are living there. Some of the times they're fighting them. Some of the times they're marrying them. Some of the times they're just taking on their religious impulses. And they over and over turn their hearts away from following the one true God and follow the gods of the people who are there. It's, it's actually kind of ironic.

God gives Israel a new start, bringing them into the promised land. And they immediately begin to turn away from him, even though he gave them the new start. There was no king and everybody did what was right in his own eyes. So the book of Judges tells story after story of this kind of sad state of affairs. But thankfully, the author does so in a really kind of literary manner. It's really beautiful as all good storytellers do. He tells how their hearts turn away from God. There's this repeated cycle.

The first thing that happens is they turn towards idolatry. They begin to worship the gods of the peoples. And then God brings up an oppressor, an outside force usually that oppresses them. And then they cry out to God in repentance. And he brings, he brings a deliverer, a judge is what they were called. But they're a deliverer. And that deliverer brings them victory. And then there's peace and security for a certain amount of time. And then they turn back to idolatry, idolatry, oppression, repentance, deliverance, peace, and back to idolatry. It's a cycle. And you see it over and over through the book of Judges. It sounds kind of depressing because it sounds kind of familiar.

[ 7 : 45 ] If you've tried to follow God for any length of time, what you see is that this kind of thing happens in our own lives. And that brings us to the story that I want us to spend a little time looking at.

It comes out of chapter 3. And it's the story of a guy named Ehud. Maybe an unfamiliar story to you. So we're just going to read along. I don't know if this is going to go on the screen or not. But I'm going to read along and kind of make some comments as we go. And hopefully we'll get to see how some of these themes are worked out in this one particular story. So from Judges chapter 3, starting at verse 12, And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. See, we're back to the cycle.

Again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And the Lord strengthened Eglon, the king of Moab, against Israel because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And Eglon gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites and went and defeated Israel.

And they took possession of the city of Palms. City of Palms. Anybody know what that is? That's the city of Jericho. Do you catch the irony here? Do you remember the first city that the people of Israel conquered when they came into the promised land? Jericho. Joshua fought the battle of Jericho. You remember that one from Sunday school? And now the city that has fallen, that has become the site of the oppressor, is Jericho. Verse 14, And the people of Israel served Eglon, the king of Moab, for eighteen years.

Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gerah, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon, the king of Moab. Tribute. Think, you know, a bug's life. You know, they're taking their crops and they're giving the first fruits to Eglon, the king of Moab, and keeping a little bit for themselves, hopefully enough that they could live on. Verse 16, And Ehud, going to bring tribute, made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length. The cubit's just like eighteen inches. And he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes. And he presented the tribute to Eglon, king of Moab. Now, Eglon was a very fat man. And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he went away. He sent away the people who carried the tribute. But he, Ehud himself, turned back near the idols at Gilgal and said, I have a secret message for you, O king. And Eglon commanded, silence. And all his attendants went out from his presence. Okay, can I just stop right here?

[10:47] So, what you see the writer of Judges doing is he's showing us this cycle that's happening. It's happening again to Israel. They're calling out for a deliverer. God's raised up Ehud. He's this interesting guy. He's left-handed. That would have been unique. And he prepares for this by putting the sword on his thigh. Why would he do that? Well, to evade capture. This is, he knows that left-handed warriors. Our guests are pretty rare at this time. And so, they're not going to be expecting somebody to come in with a sword strapped to the thigh on their right leg. And he comes to Eglon. And Eglon is this kind of cartoonish caricature. I don't know if any of you kind of giggled at the way that he's described here. But he really is like, he's a very fat man. And he moves slowly, it seems. And he tells, Ehud comes in and he says, I've got a secret message for you. And so, he kicks everybody out of the room. Who does that? You know, what kind of a leader sits and talks alone with their enemy without any security? You can imagine this story being taught to, or being told to Israelites, the first hearers. This would have been told orally, most likely, to a group kind of like this of people who knew their own history. They knew the oppression that they have felt. They also knew God's favor.

They would have, the writer is bringing them along. He's wanting to create anticipation. And he's wanting to create a sense of expectation and hope. He's wanting them to feel like they're a part of the story in true literary form. They're asking, what would happen? Is Ehud going to be the hero? He wants them to feel that suspense and surprise and joy. And he even wants them to feel a little bit of horror. Go back to verse 20. And so Ehud came to Eglon as Eglon was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, I have a message from God for you. And the action is like all slowing down. It's slow motion. And he arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand and took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. And the hilt went in also after the blade.

And the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly. And the dung came out. Then Ehud went out of the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber and locked and behind him and locked them. And when Ehud had gone out, the servants came. And when they saw that the doors to the roof chamber were locked, they thought, surely Eglon is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber. And they waited till they were embarrassed. But when he did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. And there lay their Lord dead on the floor.

Ehud escaped while they delayed. And he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Sirah. When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down from the hill country. And he was their leader. And Ehud said to them, follow after me, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand. So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites and did not allow anyone to pass over. And they killed at that time about 10,000 of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men. Not a man escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel and the land had rest for 80 years. Whoa. What do we do with a story like that?

You don't hear that read on many Easter mornings. What do we do with that? That's in Holy Scripture. Well, I think the place to start is you have to acknowledge the ugliness of this story.

[ 15 : 15 ] In many ways, it's showing how degraded Israelite society was at this time. Israel is religiously unfaithful. They're oppressed by tyrants. They try to solve their own problems through treachery and assassination. We should go ahead and label it. Ehud's an assassin.

And then it's being told back to us in this kind of ugly and rather comic detail. It's ugly. Really ugly. But yet there's hope embedded in it. And so what we need to do as we look at this story is hold forth both the ugliness and the hope together. What can you see from this?

Well, first thing is you need to see this, that God is at work in the very ugliest chapter of Israel's history. The people of Israel have turned away from God. They've suffered the consequences of their choices, but God has never left them. It's clear that God's hands are all over this story.

Verse 12, the Lord strengthened Eglon's hand. Verse 15, the Lord raised up a deliverer. Verse 28, Ehud declares to everyone, the Lord has given the Moabites into your hand. It seems clear that God is driving the movement of the story forward. God is driving this towards an end of redemption and peace and hope and goodness. God is there. And because of that, I think there's real hope to be gained.

I think especially for those of you who struggle, for those of you who are in a place of deep frustration and struggle, this passage really is for you. Because it tells you that God is not far away from you in the midst of your struggle. God is not standing off to the side, looking down at you with his arms folded, ashamed of who you are and what you've become. But that God is offering you a new start. You see, I think most people, most of the time, when they struggle, the way that they begin to think about their struggles is, I need to get a handle on this. I need to go ahead and fix this problem.

[ 17 : 36 ] I need something new to stand on. And then God is going to be able to really work with me. But that's not, that's not the truth of the scriptures in any way. That's totally backwards. The truth of the scriptures is when you are at your weakest and ugliest point, God is most active in your life.

That's the truth of the gospel. That he meets you in the muck and the mire of your life. That your job is to seek after repentance, is to turn, is to turn your attention towards him.

So there's, there's that hope. There's also a warning, I think, in this passage. The warning is this, and you'll come back to this over and over in the book of Judges, but you should never underestimate the power of self-deception in your own life.

You see, in the Israelites' desire for a new start, they consistently turn towards things other than God. You know, whether it was idolatry, you know, just bare idolatry. Maybe they were worshiping Baal in Ashtoreth. Maybe they had even stooped to the level of child sacrifice. Or maybe they just began to live like the people around them. They looked at what was around them to see if it was something that could help them answer the problems that they had in life. You know, I think so many times, this is what we do. We just look at what's available to us and hope that that can provide the answers.

A new relationship. Even good things, right? A new relationship that we think is going to provide the answers that we need. A new president, as I mentioned earlier. Moving to a new city.

[ 19 : 30 ] Moving, going to a new, having a new Bible reading plan. We use even good things to do this. And the point of the passage is that only God can bring our deepest needs. Only He can bring life.

If you really want to do a deep dive on your own heart, go ahead and ask yourself this question. What is one thing that if I had it, I think it would make all the difference in my life?

What's one thing? You see, I'm planting a church. It's a new church. A lot of people are attracted to a new church because they see it as the possibility of them having a new start spiritually.

But you see the problem embedded in that. If we go forth with this message that we're starting a new church because we're going to answer all the problems that you've had with all of your other churches in life, you see the problem that's already there. See, that's not what we're doing.

What we're doing is what the church has always been called to do, which is point to the one who does have life, to point to the one who can provide a new start, to uphold Christ and invite people into that. Even a new church can be the place of idolatry, of trusting something other than God to meet our deepest needs. And I think that actually is where the ugliness of this passage can be really helpful to us.

[ 21 : 04 ] You know, there are some of you that you haven't gotten over Ehud yet in everything I've been saying because you hate these Old Testament passages. You just despise them. And I think that if that's you, you need to hear that you simply, you can't just simply reject passages like this, no matter how brutal and ugly and foreign they appear to be. Here's why. First thing is, God is providing freedom from an oppressor for his people in this. And frankly, in doing so, there's no indication that God is particularly happy that Ehud is an assassin.

And frankly, it doesn't do very well for us moderns to look back on these Bronze Age cultures with our supposed moral superiority. If Ehud was standing in our society, what might he say about us?

It wouldn't be a whole lot better. So we can't just ignore these things. But even more, if you actually look at this passage, what you realize is the Bible is not upholding Ehud as a hero at all. In fact, the very next passage tells us this. It says, And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died. Ehud was raised up. He was a ruler for them. For a little while, there was peace. And then he died and the people went right back to doing what it was that they were doing. God used Ehud to bring this small dose of justice, but it was fleeting and it was temporary and it was forgettable. Do you know what the Hebrew word for deliverer is that it uses throughout here? It's the same word for Messiah.

Ehud was this little wee Messiah. Temporary one. Imperfect one. Ehud is meant to point away from himself to the true hero. He's meant to point to the true Messiah. He is meant to point to the one who would be a king and whose kingdom would be a kingdom of peace and his rule would have no end.

Obviously, Ehud is to point you to Jesus. Ehud should make you long for something better than Ehud. Ehud should make you angry that humanity continues to put its trust into these rulers and authorities that are not ever going to bring about peace. Ehud should actually make you mad that we continue to follow leaders who cannot bring us the things that we so desperately long for.

[ 24 : 06 ] These little messiahs. And then we ask them to bear the weights and the burdens of our hopes and our dreams and our expectations. Sometimes we put this on our spouse. If my spouse will just be what I want them to be. We put them on our political leaders. We put them on our pastors. We put them on our friendships. We put them on our work. And they can't bear that weight. They can never satisfy you in the way that you long to be satisfied. And a passage like this is saying to you, you need to go back to the one who can. Go back to Jesus. Go back to God. It's a call to return to him.

I think this is why it's so helpful that when Jesus, when he wanted to give his disciples something to hold on to, when he knew that they would be weak, when he knew that they would look to things to satisfy them, what did he give his disciples? He gave them bread and he gave them wine.

And he said, every time you get together, I want you to do this. Every time. Because I want you to remember that you are going to consistently be hungry. You're going to consistently be thirsty.

In fact, every day you are going to long for something that cannot ever be satisfied in this world. The only place that it can be satisfied is in me. That's it. And if the book of Judges teaches us anything, it should make us hungry and thirsty for God to come again in his rule, in his reign to make all things right, it should make us long for heaven. It should make us long for redemption.

Okay, we have to stop there. As we come to the table here in a second, identify those longings in your heart. Those longings that so easily want to find an outlet in this world and bring those longings back to Jesus. Amen. Let me pray. Father, help us to see the sufficiency of Christ to meet all of our needs. We pray in his name. Amen.