

How good is Judges? No. Joshua and Judges, Dad went on long service leave, right when we hit two of the hardest books in the entire Bible.

So that's our task this morning is to dive into this Book of Judges. You might be aware, you're hopefully aware, that we are in the middle of our two-year project called Christ in Scripture.

We are, Lord willing, going to spend a week in every one of the 66 books of the Bible and see how that book uniquely points us to the person of Jesus and to his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

We're in a series called the Former Prophets, which is the part of the story of Israel after the Torah, after Moses, but before the exile. So last week we looked at Joshua and today Christ in Judges.

To recap the story of what happened last week, Israel, under the leadership of Joshua, finally entered and conquered and settled in the promised land.

After Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, verse 6 of chapter 2, after Joshua had dismissed the Israelites, they went to take possession of the land, each to their own inheritance.

The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel.

Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110, and they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath-Harris in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gash. And Israel lived in the promised land happily ever after.

The promise to Abraham had finally been fulfilled. Abraham's family had a name, a nation blessing, and they had finally got their own land. Israel have arrived in the land of promise, and finally they can do whatever they want.

They've landed in the promise. So what happens next in the story of Israel? What happens to human beings when we are able to do whatever we want?

Well, look at the very next verse. This is what Graham read for us. After that whole generation, meaning the ones who had entered the promised land and conquered it, conquered it.

After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who neither, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

If you've been reading Judges as part of the reading plan, you will know that Israel do not live happily ever after in the promised land.

Graham has read for us the rest of this passage, Judges 2 verses 10 to 19, which really sets the pattern of the entirety of the Book of Judges. In that one passage, we see the cycle of sin.

This cycle repeats itself 12 times throughout the course of the Book of Judges. It starts with sin. Sin leads to oppression, oppression to repentance, repentance to deliverance, deliverance to peace, and then in peace, Israel sin again.

So let me read through the first of the judge narratives, and we'll see the cycle of sin. Judges 3 verse 7, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and the Asherahs.

That is sin. Verse 8, the anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Kushan Rishathim, king of Aram Nahareim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. That is oppression.

Verse 9, but when they cried out to the Lord, that is repentance. Verse 9b, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them.

The spirit of the Lord came on him so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan Rishatham, king of Aram, into the hands of Othniel who overpowered him. That's deliverance.

And then finally, verse 11 is peace. So the land had peace for 40 years until Othniel son of Kenaz died. And then again, Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

This is the cycle of sin in the Book of Judges. Twelve times, this same cycle plays out. Sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, peace, and then back to sin again.

It plays out again and again and again and again. How do we break the cycle of sin? How did Israel get out of that cycle?

How do we get out of that cycle? If that picture is in any way relatable in our life, this sense of doing what we don't want to do and then crying out to God and he helps us get out of it, then we do what we don't want to do.

If that is relatable to us, how do we break the cycle of sin?

I think Judges tells us three things we need. A community around us, a saviour among us and a king above us. To break the cycle of sin, we need a community around us, a saviour among us and a king above us.

Firstly, a community around us. In the Book of Judges, Israel are stuck in this cycle of sin. Sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, peace, and then sin again.

And one of the main problems that Israel have, the reason why they're stuck in this cycle of sin, is they did not drive out the nations of the promised land when they entered it.

This is because the context that human beings live in profoundly shapes us. The community that is around us matters in the way that we live. To break the cycle of sin, we need a community around us.

Chapter 1, verse 28. When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor, but never drove them out completely. Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them.

Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol. So these Canaanites lived among them, but Zebulun did subject them to forced labor. Nor did Asher drive out...

The pattern continues. In this passage, it lists almost all 12 tribes of Israel and the fact that they did not drive out the nations who were before them.

Now, do you remember last week, that fact almost felt like a good thing because we were wrestling with the sense in which God commands Israel to wipe out the nations.

And I made the point that the Book of Joshua is a genre within biblical narrative that is characterised by certain vocabulary which totalises, almost over exaggerates.

So last week, it was almost a breath of fresh air to hear that they did not in fact wipe out everything that breeds. Here in Judges, it's a problem. And the problem is that Israel become like the surrounding nations.

The community around us affects us. And that's why God commanded them to eliminate the people from the land in the first place. I mean, yes, it was because they were a wicked people deserving of the justice of God through the agency of Israel.

But also God knows that the community that is around us shapes the way that we live. And Israel would just become like all the nations. When Israel were in fact called to be a light to the nations, to be like a model home, you know, a model home?

They build some display home in the middle of nowhere and they say, this is what all the homes are going to be like. That's what Israel was supposed to be, showing the world what it is to live in relationship with Yahweh.

They were meant to be different from all the nations. Instead, Israel became just like every other nation.

And I think Judges tells us that part of the reason why they were stuck in the cycle of sin is that they had allowed the wrong community to be around them. They were surrounded by pagan nations. They married their daughters.

They worshiped their gods. They followed their practices. And they became stuck in the cycle of sin.

I wonder if the same thing happens today. I wonder if we 21st century Hornsbyites are influenced by the community that surrounds us. It's obvious that we are.

Human beings are social creatures. That's the way God made us. We are formed by our culture.

Have you heard it said that you are the average of your five closest friends? We are shaped. Is that a good thing?

Think about your five closest friends and whether that is a good thing for the type of person that you are. We're meant to be in the world and not of the world. But it seems like that line is blurry.

We are shaped by the community that we live in. What we're talking about is the power of culture. One of the things that culture does is it normalises a certain set of expectations and behaviours and questions.

It makes them normal so that when we look around, we don't feel like we're that different because we're a part of the same culture.

But one of the things that culture does which I think is even more important than normalising a set of behaviours is the type of questions that we don't even think to ask because of the culture that we have been formed in.

For instance, right now, we would rightly abhor the idea of slavery, of owning a human being and subjecting them to slavery. We would abhor that idea and it's still a fact in the world. So we fight to abolish slavery.

There were times in the history of our world where that was not even a question that people really asked. It's just the way that things were. The economy was built on the back of slavery.

And culture forms us to not even ask the question. Which brings us to the present day, what are the questions that we don't ask because they have been made so normal by the world that we live in.

A couple of years ago, I did an essay on contraception at Bible College. I was getting married and so I personally was thinking through the ethics of contraception and I was doing a class on ethics at college.

And so I thought this would be kind of an interesting thing to study. And what I discovered in conversation with other young married guys around me, is that we don't talk about it or think about it at all.

We don't really ethically process the rightness or the wrongness of using different types of artificial contraception. Now, this is a weird topic to talk about in church. But it's a fascinating study.

My point is that our culture has formed us to the point where we, in my anecdotal experience, don't even question whether or not to use it. The question is which one.

But when you look at the span of 2,000 years of church history, the church has unanimously rejected artificial contraception. We don't even question it today. This is the formative power of culture.

What about owning a smartphone? It's like, well, if you can afford it, of course you're going to get a smartphone, not a dumb phone. That's not even a question that we ask.

What about having a TV as the centrepiece of our lounge room? For all of human history, that was not a fact. But we just do these things without questioning them.

Culture forms us. And so it matters the community that is around us. The Church of God is called to be a countercultural community.

Jesus said we are, and we're meant to be, the salt of the earth and the light of the world, people who live by a different set of norms and expectations.

Paul says in Romans 12, Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. We love that verse, the idea that we could be shaped by the world, but we're called to be shaped by scripture, by God.

What I think we miss is Paul is talking in the plural number. He's not talking to one person being conformed, one person being transformed. He's talking to a community.

And so the community that we form, the culture that we allow to be normal, forms us deeply. So what if the Sermon on the Mount was our cultural norm? What if that was almost the constitution of our church?

The way that we relate to each other? That would be a radical counterculture from the world out there. The company we keep, the community that we live in, matters.

To break the cycle of sin, we need a good community around us.

Secondly, we need a Saviour among us. In the Book of Judges, Israel are stuck in this cycle of sin. Sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, peace, and then sin again.

Now, it's good to have a helpful community around you, to point you to God and not to form you in the other direction. But that's not enough.

Because Israel discovered the problem behind the cycle of sin was not only in the community around them, it was right in here. It was in their hearts.

The Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn says, “the line between good and evil runs not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart.”

There is a problem in here that leads to the cycle of sin. To break that cycle, we need a saviour among us. The Book of Judges gets its name from the type of leaders that Israel had at this time.

Previously, in Israel's story, their leadership had mostly been patriarchal, meaning a man, the father had ruled the nation. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, even Moses and Joshua are patriarchal type of leaders.

They lead for the duration of their life, and then they pass on the mantle of leadership to their successor who passes it on. This is a patriarchal mode of leadership.

But by the time you get to the Book of Judges, that mode of leadership falls apart. Moses handed the mantle of leadership very well to Joshua, but Joshua doesn't hand it on very well. Judges 1 verse 1.

After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, who of us is to go up first to fight against the Canaanites? There's no leader. Who's first?

Which tribe? Which person? Who's our new leader as soon as Joshua died?

So the patriarchal mode of leadership breaks, and then you get this kind of everyone does what is right in their own eyes, democratisation of leadership. And so the leadership of Israel in this time are called judges.

And when you hear judges, don't think of, you know, courtroom, gavel, kind of weak judge. The word really kind of means a regional, military, political leader, and especially a leader who arises when Israel need them.

They rule for as long as they live, and then they die, and then Israel gets worse again. The key point is that they step into leadership as the need arises. They're not kind of a patriarchal leader.

And so the Book of Judges has 12 of these judges, six big ones and then six little ones, and I'll read them for you. These are the six big ones. Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.

And then the six minor judges, Shamgar, Tola, Jer, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. Verse 18 of Chapter 2. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for Israel, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies, as long as the judge lived.

But when the judge died, Israel were back in the cycle of sin again. But not only the cycle of sin, the downward spiral of sin. As you read the Book of Judges, you go through the 12 judges, Israel get worse each time.

And not only Israel, the judges themselves get worse. They go from pretty good with kind of Gideon and Deborah, to okay, to bad, to worse. Samson is not a good guy, but he was one of the judges that God raised up.

The problem is, the judges were only situational saviours. They were leaders, saviours who arose when they needed to arise. They were fixing, saving Israel out of a particular situation.

What Israel needed, what we need, is a transformational saviour. One who not only deals with the symptoms of our problem, but gets to the very heart of it. And that is what we have in our Lord Jesus, a transformational saviour.

I remember I was driving to college once, a couple of years ago, and I was in kind of bumper to bumper traffic in Killara.

And the light went green, and I took off, and then the car starts shaking and bumping and making all these weird sounds, and the engine light starts flashing at me. So I go hazard lights and pull over in the middle of like back streets of Killara.

And I don't know anything about cars. So I called that, and dad graciously comes and checks it out. And in fairness to him, he knows more about cars than I do, but not a lot about cars.

And so there we are in the middle of Killara back streets with the bonnet up thinking, yeah, it's not good. The engine is just shaking and making all these weird sounds. Neither of us know what to do about it.

So who do you call? NRMA Roadside Assistance. The problem is, I was not a member of NRMA Roadside Assistance, so they extorted me with the amount of money I had to pay to sign up on the spot and to get them to come out immediately.

It ended up taking five hours for them to come because they forgot my request and then the guy was backed up. Anyway, that's a story for another sermon. Finally, my saviour arrives.

The NRMA guy comes and he plugs in the thing and turns on the car and he's standing there looking at the engine and he says, oh, it's a whatever, flux capacitor for all I care. I don't know. There's a problem with the car.

I'm like, great. My situational saviour, he knows what the problem is. So do you have like a, you got a stack of flux capacitors in your car that you can fix it?

He's like, oh, no, you got to tow this back to the mechanic. I can't fix this. So then I'm waiting another couple of hours for the tow truck to come.

Most awkward conversation of my life with the driver in the cab of the tow truck. Another story for another day. Finally, we get to the mechanic and he is not my situational saviour.

He is my transformational saviour. He replaces all of the flux capacitors, and the car worked really well from that point on.

I share that story because judges is really dark and we need to laugh a little bit, but also because I'm tempted to treat Jesus like that, and I wonder if you are too, as a situational saviour.

We're pretty happy going our own course in life, but when something goes wrong, we'll call NRMA roadside assistance and get Jesus to come help us out of this spot, out of this tricky situation.

And then as soon as it's fixed, well, thank you Jesus, I'm off. Jesus is not in the business of roadside assistance. He's in the business of heart transformation.

The good news of the gospel is not that he, Jesus fixes the symptoms of our problem. The good news is that he's a heart surgeon who cuts to the depth of our problem and he gives us a new heart. That's the good news.

He transforms us. I'm finding that that is better news as I get older, because I'm finding that I'm a worse person than I thought I was as I get older.

When you're a single guy and you're 21, unmarried, working, whatever, you're like, yeah, obviously I'm a sinner, like I'm not a perfect person. And then you get married and you realise, oh, I'm way more selfish than I thought I was.

And then you have kids and you realise, I'm way more selfish than I thought I was.

I keep on realising that I need a saviour more and more and more and that is a very good thing, because we have a saviour who not only fixes our situation, but he transforms our heart to break the cycle of sin. We need a saviour among us.

And thirdly, we need a king above us. In Judges, Israel are stuck in the cycle of sin, sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, peace, and then sin again. It's good to have a community around you that points you in the right direction.

It's also good, praise God, that we have a transformational saviour, one who renews us from the inside out. But transformation is not the end of the story. That's not where the Gospels end.

We are invited to live in a new kingdom, under a new king, to break the cycle of sin. We need a king above us. Perhaps the most famous line in the Book of Judges is 21 verse 25.

In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. This line is repeated four times at the end of the book in 17 verse 6, 18 verse 1, 19 verse 1, and 21 verse 25.

In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. I wonder, this is a fascinating question, what musical motif do you hear when you read that passage?

That's a real, maybe it's because I'm musical that I appreciate that thought, but what's the emotion, the tone? What's the background music? What's the motif when you read that line?

What's playing in the background? The reason I think this is an important question is that the Bible, or Judges and then the Bible more generally, does not explicitly give us the interpretation of that passage. Is that good or bad?

What are we supposed to think? This is what Tim Mackey from Bible Project calls the art of reticence, meaning that the Bible doesn't always give us its conclusion on a certain matter.

What it does instead is that God the Spirit desires and indeed does form us into people who could interpret and who could come to the right feeling about what a passage is doing. So think in the case of polygamy.

There is polygamy, meaning marriage to multiple people, all throughout the Old Testament. And it never explicitly says, polygamy is wrong, don't do it.

Instead, what you do as a spirit-filled reader of Scripture is you look at all the times that polygamy happens, marriage to multiple people, and you realise it never ends well in the Bible.

There's no story in the Old Testament where a person married to multiple people worked out to be a good thing because of their multiple marriages. This is the art of reticence. The Bible is teaching us, forming us to be faithful interpreters.

So when it comes to this passage, judges doesn't tell us whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. It asks us to conclude. So what music do you hear?

What's the motif? I think if the world reads that passage, the music that they hear is da da da da, da da da, Indiana Jones. Because that is very much a shake off the oppressor and be true to your authentic self idea.

The world would celebrate the heroism of that passage. But is that what the Bible is trying to communicate to us? What I hear, I wonder what you hear is.

The Lord of the Rings, the theme of the ring. Dark, if you don't know Lord of the Rings, then you've got to go read those books and watch the movie. It's dark, it's foreboding, it's somber, that's the feeling behind this passage.

Note that this passage comes four times at the end of Judges. And remember, Judges is a downward spiral. Well, which means by the time this passage lands, we are at the bottom of the spiral.

It is not a good thing. In fact, the first time that this line appears, it's in the context of a woman who was raped to death and then dismembered and her parts were shipped throughout all of ancient Israel.

And then it says that it's not, it's dark music, it's foreboding. Having a king, having no king above us is not a good thing. The conclusion of Judges is that that is not a good thing.

It's not good for human beings to lack a king above them. And that's sort of what Judges does. You know, Judges is between Joshua and Ruth.

In Joshua, you have kind of patriarchal leaders. And then in Judges, you see the breakdown of leadership. And then in Ruth, which Virginia is going to preach on next week, you see the familial origins of King David.

And then in 1 Samuel, the next book, which Jack is going to preach on in two weeks, you see the historical origins of kingship.

So this book Judges in the middle, what it does in the story of the whole Bible, is it tells us what human beings are like when they live without a king. And it is not good. The music is dark and foreboding.

Judges teaches us that we need a king above us, not King Charles III. We need a higher king. We need a transcendent cause to give our lives for.

We need a Lord to teach us how to live. We need a kingdom to be a part of. We need something bigger to give our lives to.

We need a king above us to break the cycle of sin. Now again, that idea, I think, is very unpopular today because the mantra of our day is you do you.

As long as you're not breaking the law and as long as your exercise of freedom doesn't encroach on the freedom of another person, you do you. Everyone does what they want. There's no big overarching God to tell us what to do.

But human beings cannot flourish in that world. Louis Marcoss has this incredible quote. He says in kind of diagnosing our current cultural moment, he says, our compass is broken and the stars obliterated.

He means two things. Firstly, as a society, our sense of moral norms, our standards are broken. There's no overarching truth to build your life on.

Our compass is broken and the big story that we find ourselves living in is obliterated. That's what he means by the stars.

Human beings have always looked at the stars and kind of seen or believed that there is some overarching picture that we are a part of. But in our day, our compass is broken and the stars obliterated. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

And how's that working out for us? You know, the stats, I'm sure, this Gen Z and Gen Alpha, the one coming up, are the most anxious generation in recorded history. More digitally connected but lonely than ever before.

More materially wealthy, prosperous, but lacking purpose and meaning. I've seen it firsthand in youth ministry. The idea that we all get to do what we want, everyone does what is right in their own eyes, it doesn't work for the next generation.

We need a Lord, we need a King, and that is who Jesus is. Paul says in Romans 10 verse 9, If you declare with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, he will be saved. This is the heart of Christianity.

Jesus is Lord. We talked about it in the Let Me Tell You About Jesus series. To be a Christian is to come under the Lordship of Jesus.

To say that he is King. He gets to tell me how to live my life. This is the King that we need to give us a compass and a transcendent story to be a part of.

Dallas Willard, I need to mention him because I mentioned the Sermon on the Mount. He was once asked, why are you a Christian? It was in a lecture, he's a philosophy professor.

He was. Why are you a Christian? Why do you follow Jesus?

And his answer was, who else did you have in mind? Isn't that good? What he's saying is, who's teaching you how to live?

Where are you getting your meaning in life from? Tell me about them. Are they good?

Does it lead to a life of flourishing? Does it make sense of the questions of the world? Who did you have in mind?

Who's your Lord? Who's your King? Your Queen?

But as for me, says Willard, as for me, says me, as for us, as a church, we will serve the Lord. That was the lesson from Joshua last week. Who else did you have in mind?

There's no King better than King Jesus. He gives us forgiveness and eternal life and a kingdom to come with a place for every single one of us in his body. Who else did you have in mind?

Is there somebody better than Jesus? Tell me, because I've not found anyone better than Jesus. He is the King that we need, and he's the King that we have.

To break the cycle of sin, we need three things, a community around us, a saviour among us, and a king above us. And that is precisely what we get in the Gospel of Jesus. He is our friend, our saviour and our king.

He welcomes us into the communion of love that is the triune God himself, Father, Son and Spirit. He welcomes us into his body, the church, where we have a community, a culture that points us in the direction of his love.

He is our friend, he is also our saviour. He doesn't do situational roadside assistance. He does heart surgery, the kinds that we need.

And he is our king. He's our Lord. He's the one that we give our life to because he invites us into a bigger kingdom.

That's how you break the cycle of sin. A community around us, a saviour among us, and a king above us. And that is Christ in Judges.

Our friend, our saviour, and our king.