

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “No Direction Home: Spinning Wheels”

**Dr. Jay Howell**

March 6, 2022

Today we’re starting a new series called “No Direction Home.” Something we try to do once a year is offer an overview of sorts of an entire book of the Bible, especially one that isn’t as well known. We don’t want to give a series of lectures, but instead a sermon series, following selected passages throughout that book, so that hopefully by the end not only conveys the Word of God for today, shaping us, leading us, comforting us, convicting us, but also a decent enough idea of what that particular book is about so it doesn’t feel quite as intimidating when you circle back to it. That’s part of our hope in this series, which is in part an overview of the Old Testament book of Judges.

One note as a word of warning about this book, which we brought up last week as well. Judges is, I would say, easily the most violent book in the Bible, at least in terms of graphic descriptions of violence. And some of the passages we will explore in this series will include violent descriptions. We’re not painting pictures or anything, but I only offer that in case any parents may want to know a little more before younger kids hear it, in which case, please reach out.

But in sum, the Book of Judges, I think, offers a word of caution to us, one that’s often frightening, lest we be too quick to follow what we want too quickly, and it holds up a mirror to our own fickleness, reminding us all too clearly how much in need of a Savior we are.

In its second chapter, Judges offers something of its own summary, which is where we’ll start. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they followed other gods from the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them; so they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroath. Then the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He handed them over to plunderers, and they plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand against their enemies. Wherever they went, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had spoken and just as the Lord had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.*

*Then the Lord raised up judges who saved them from the hands of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they committed infidelity with other gods and bowed down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the Lord; they did not do the same as their fathers. And when the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who tormented and oppressed them. But it came about, when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their obstinate ways. So the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He said, “Because this nation has violated My covenant which I commanded*

*their fathers, and has not listened to My voice, I in turn will no longer drive out from them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk in it as their fathers did, or not.” So the Lord allowed those nations to remain, not driving them out quickly; and He did not hand them over to Joshua.*

*Judges 2:11-23*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“Once upon a time you dressed so fine; threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn’t you? People call say ‘beware doll, you’re bound to fall’ You thought they were all kidding you.” If you’ve already recognized those words, then you may have already recognized where the title of this entire series comes from. If you made a list of best rock songs of all time, somewhere in the consensus top ten is probably this one: Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone,” and those were the opening words. It’s a song in which the singer is addressing a woman he knows who used to roll in high society, but then had a fall, and wound up scrounging a hard life together on the streets. And the singer seems to take some satisfaction in it, culminating in the chorus which you may know already, “How does it feel? How does it feel? To be on your own? With no direction home? Like a complete unknown. Like a rolling stone.”

When you think about it, it’s not a very kind song. We just got done with this series on being a good neighbor. Perhaps Bob, one could consider showing some compassion to this poor woman who had fallen on hard times, but that’s not what the song’s about. What it’s about is how aimless her life had become once the false foundation of wealth and status had been taken away, “No direction home.”

Presumably, she’s not exactly traveling the world like this. It seems she’s staying more or less in one place, or at least in the same city, and that’s kind of the point. She’s lost, like a rolling stone, while staying in the same place.

If there were a subtitle to the Book of Judges, in addition to “No Direction Home,” then saying something “Lost in the Same Place” or “Spinning Wheels” might be a good place to start, because that about captures the gist of the book. And honestly this book might be one that some of us may have some familiarity with, but for many, this might be a book you’ve never really looked at in depth.

You might recognize some of the names that will show up: names like Gideon and Samson. Maybe from a Sunday School class when you were a kid. Bible heroes, that sort of thing. And like you do when you’re teaching the Bible to younger people, it’s simpler to focus just on what were some heroic acts.

But the Book of Judges, I would offer, is not a book about heroes. It is actually heartbreaking; it is violent; it is tragic; it is frustrating. Heroic things happen, don’t get me wrong; but at its root, it’s a story of what happens when a people loses sight of what matters most and starts seeking after what they want. And the really convicting part of it is: it can hold up a mirror to us. Here’s what happens.

The people of Israel had come out of the wilderness, freed from slavery in Egypt and led for forty years by a man named Moses. Moses, however, wouldn’t be the one to bring them into the so-called Promised Land, the land assured by covenant by God to his people. That would fall to Moses’ successor, a man named Joshua, who you heard mentioned in the passage we read. Joshua leads the people into the land, where they are led by God to take the land, and for the sake of not diluting or corrupting the people’s allegiance to the Lord, they are commanded to drive out the peoples who were there.

But they don't do it. Instead, Israel makes agreements with them, and they start settling down. To that, as we read a moment ago, an angel of the Lord says to them, "See what you have done!" and tells them that as a result they will not have an easy go of it in the land. The peoples they should have driven out would become their adversaries, and their gods a snare. So now instead of inheriting the land and holding it, Israel's presence there was a mixed bag, interspersed with tribes and towns and cities belonging to other peoples and following other gods.

At one point during this stretch, their leader, the one who had brought them into the Promised Land, Joshua died. During his lifetime Israel at least had an anchor, one that pointed them to worship God. But that time had past, and as years passed on, an entire generation grew up who "did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel" (v. 10). And who knows where they would turn then.

Has something like that ever happened to you? Losing an anchor, so to speak. Could have been a parent or a spouse, a teacher or a friend, even a pastor for that matter. I remember within one side of my family when my grandmother died it felt like that. My grandmother, as some of you already know, was a Methodist minister, and within the family she was something of the spiritual bedrock of the whole family. And so when she passed, it felt as if we didn't quite know where to turn.

It's at this point that the Book of Judges breaks a big rule of good storytelling: it gives us a summary of the whole book before even telling us any of the stories. Or, maybe not necessarily a summary, but outlines a cycle that repeats again and again throughout the Book, and one that deepens Israel's painful journey. This is what starts in v. 11.

The cycle begins with the people of Israel doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord, abandoning God and seeking after the gods of the people who now shared the land with them. And so God gives them up to the peoples who oppose them, who plunder them, and it's at this point you might be able to hear the echoes of Bob Dylan in the background, "How does it feel? How does it feel? To be on your own?"

It's out of that distress that the people cry out, and God raises up figures known as "judges," hence the name of the book. Now we hear the word "judge" and a certain image comes to mind. Black robe. Courtroom. "Objection, your honor." That sort of thing. Not quite what this is talking about, though it does conjure up some amusing mental images of militant legal judges leading Israel into battle in a robe, gavel in hand. No, instead, when you hear "judge," think a kind of temporary military leader.

But they're called "judges" for a reason. The ancient notion of judgment or justice is a whole other topic, but a broad way to think about it is, a judge is someone who renders judgment or justice, setting right that which was not right. A judge comes to set things right, so in this case, things are not as they should be in Israel, and God raises a judge to set things right.

And in just two verses, the book tells us pretty much what the rest of the book would be like. Vv. 18-19: "Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways." And repeat, and repeat, and repeat.

And that's Judges in a nutshell. We'll look at individual judges along the way, because each story reveals a little more about how far Israel has to fall, but lest we be tempted to think of these stories as just Bible heroics, the big picture is Israel spiraling further and further away.

And you hear that summary and you think, well surely they would catch on after a time or two, right? They fall away from God. Things go pretty badly for them. God raises up someone who restores them and calls them back to the Lord, then things go well again, right up until they start fall away from the Lord again. At some point, you start to learn, you would think.

But let us not underestimate the aimlessness and even the desperation of the heart that is untethered to the Lord.

Years ago I had to be certified as a lifeguard for a summer job, so a few crash sessions in the pool, CPR, all that stuff. But one thing I remember learning was how to approach someone who was struggling in the water. Not unconscious, but struggling, and therefore a bit panicked and desperate. When you swim up to them, if you come right up to them, face to face, what is that struggling person liable to do? Well, they flail about, clinging desperately to you, even pushing you under the water in order to push themselves above the water, to the point that you have to disengage and then approach from the other side, where they don't have arms, in order to help them.

And I wonder if that instinct doesn't carry over into just about everything. Think about it. When you're struggling, when you're panicked, when you're desperate, when you're on your own, when you've lost your anchor, so to speak, we'll cling to just about anything. That's what Israel does over and over. Sure they could be more faithful, but the point of the story is not to hold up Israel and say, "Look how bad they are." It's hearing their story and realizing, yeah that's not that far off, following God one moment, but abandoning him the next, and clinging desperately to whatever else was around.

Friends, what have you latched onto out of desperation? When you've felt on your own, untethered, what are the things that you cling to that even deep down you know aren't what will keep you afloat, not what will save you?

Whatever those things may be, and we all have them, may God raise up a judge, that we might be delivered from them, but may we not simply run right back to what we so often cling to.

And may we look ahead with hope, because the Book of Judges points ahead to a different direction too, the same direction we're heading in this season as we go toward Easter. Not only is there a longing here for one who would set things right, as each judge would do, but for one who would do so once and for all.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.