

Sermon 3: Judges 3:7-31: The Men God Uses

OUTLINE

Othniel
Ehud
Shamgar

INTRODUCTION

The Whole Story line of the Bible revolves around one simple idea: man is a lost sinner condemned and in need of rescue, subject to enemies greater than himself and worse has God against him; but God is gracious and has promised a man who will war in order to rescue and save sinners undoing all the evil that has resulted from sin. Adam was to obey God and bring us into God's Sabbath rest but failed putting heaven out of reach and bringing hell upon us, so God made a promise in Gen. 3:15 of that Man who would be born of woman, who would overcome our enemies and succeed where the first Adam failed, not only securing eschatological rest but also saving us from hell. That man we know is Jesus Christ, the whole bible points to Him. In the OT it points to Him through, promises, types and shadows; in the NT we see Him coming to fulfill all of these things. Here we are in the book of judges, a book that teaches through repetition a very basic idea: that men are sinful in need of salvation, and that God is gracious and will raise up a savior to save them. Israel who is the son of God recapitulates, repeats the failure of Adam. Through their sin they bring God's judgement and enemies upon themselves and they need God to rescue through raising up someone to save them.

We are now going to start what is called the cycle section. I am warning you now, it is going to get boring quick. We are going to see this pattern of sin and God saving over and over again. We are at the beginning where things are still relatively neat compared to the moral downgrade that we are going to see as the book progresses. What we want to take note of as we begin is Othniel's cycle, as the ideal cycle. If I had to ask you to mention the names of the judges in the book of judges most of you probably would not have thought to name Othniel. Rather people like Samson; Jephthah; Gideon; Deborah would have come to mind, but Othniel is in fact the best of the bunch. In fact his narrative leaves out all sorts of info that we find in the other cycles to leave us with a nice clean paradigm to compare all the other cycles against. Things are going to get progressively worse as we go. I should probably warn you that I am going to pour cold water on all your favourite Sunday school stories because we have to often read the OT looking for moral examples treating the stories of the bible like Aesop's fables rather than recognizing that God is working out His plan of salvation. We will see that judges are some of the darkest days and the characters are described warts and all. There will be moments of faith, but this will be mixed with shocking inconsistencies and sins. Othniel is one of the few who is spared his sins being candidly described making a good idealistic savior and template.

In this first message we are going to look at three of the men that God raised up to save, Othniel; Ehud; and Shamgar. We will be looking at Othniel as the ideal savior; Ehud as a flawed savior; and Shamgar as an unexpected savior.

Othniel

V7, 'And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.' Our cycle begins with sin, sin we have already had summarized in the double introduction to the book. We have seen that they did what was evil in God's sight, the nature of sin; they served other gods instead of the one true God, the actions of their sin; and this resulted from them forgetting God, the cause of their sin. This statement about forgetting God as the cause for sin should stand out for us because we want to know more of why we sin, we want to understand how sin gets ahold of us so that we will not be taken in by it. This word forget is not describing someone who is a victim of brain injury who is forced to forget, no rather it is a willful suppression and intentional disregard. This idea of forget is not denying that certain obvious facts and truths about God were not known. No, what we have here is a casual acquaintance with God and the truth about Him that is treated so coldly that you might as well have been said to have forgotten Him. Like a husband and wife who live with one another and take each other for granted not relishing the gift of marriage, not rejoicing in the unique individual the other one is, not appreciative of the service and sacrifice that has come their way for many years. This is the type of forgetting we can have towards God. The key to overcoming this sort of forgetting, like that cold spouse, is not by learning new facts you never knew but reminding yourself of the wondrous thing it is to be saved; to know God; and all the things that He has done for you. As David puts it, 'Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!' Taste again, sample again, avail yourself of His grace again, and your eyes will be opened, your heart will be gripped, your soul will be drawn from fleeting things to the only One who can satisfy. A fall away from God is preceded by forgetting God, are you forgetful?

We should highlight that the gods they forsook God for were gods related to immediate needs. Baal would provide rain and growth for economic stability and security; Asherah was related to fertility and seduced people with sexual ceremonies and instant gratification. Sins related to security and satisfaction; greed and lust were more attractive to the God who saved them, who commanded them for their holiness, who gave them marriage and family and law and identity and purpose. We can walk by sight and not by faith, we can be seduced to forget God by fixing on the things before us that give us instant gratification but are lies, self-destructive and bring God's justice rather than the God who is true.

The next part of the typical pattern is God's responding justice according to the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, v8, 'Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.' Instead of being the head they will be the tail; instead of victory, they will suffer defeat, instead of inhabiting the land they will be oppressed. God pours out a justice in keeping with the nature of sin. The language of a reversal of the Exodus is present with the language of being 'sold'. The bad guy here is the king of Mesopotamia and the most powerful bad guy in the book of judges. It is not likely that we are given his official name because his name here means, doubly wicked, which is likely a known nick-name. God's anger here unlike His judgement day wrath is mixed with mercy. This is a gracious pain sent to awaken sinners to their plight that they might reach out to God. Sadly we do not do things because they are right but are often bottle necked into doing the right thing. We learn from this that we are dim witted and slow learners and do not do

things because we know that they are right but often learn the hard way through self-inflicted trauma. Sadly, another characteristic of ours is put on display, they put up with this situation for 8 years before they cried out to God. They were slow to learn that they had been punished for sin; they were slow to stop crying out to their other gods and go to YHWH; they were slow to become discontent with their suffering and be desperate enough to seek God. Sadly I have spoken to many who are severely afflicted, they have been damaged in their health, had money stolen from them, their business has become precarious, but they refuse to allow the pain to push them to God and they stubbornly persist to hold to the sin that causes these problems. In God's mercy the Israelites cry out.

V9, 'But when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.' Now I have read some commentators who have spoken here about the Israelite's repentance, that this cry was a cry of repentance. Dale Ralph David says otherwise. After a study of the word for cry here he comes to the conclusion that it indicates a cry for help out of deep distress not a cry of repentance, 'This generalisation is based on a study of the [over] 60 uses of [za'aq] ... in their contexts. Possible exceptions to [this] conclusion ... are few and, upon examination, prove to be apparent rather than real. Whenever [za'aq] appears associated with repentance or confession of sins [Judg. 10:10, 1 Sam. 12:10, Neh. 9:28]) that repentance or confession is explicitly expressed by some additional clause or second verb, a factor which implies that [za'aq] by itself cannot and does not carry any idea of repentance.'¹ Why then does God answer? He answers because of His pity and mercy; He answers that you might see His willingness to save and that His kindness might lead you to repentance. We might get the impression that God is stingy and quick to punish but here we see that He is compassionate towards those who bring God's hand upon themselves because of their sins.

Now we have met Othniel before, in Josh 1:11-15, one of the few positive reports in Judges when taking the land. V10, 'The Spirit of the Lord was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.' When describing this best of all judges note that first he is described as having the Spirit of the Lord; then that he judged; then that he went out to war. The Messiah means anointed one, and this is what Othniel is, an anointed one. He is faithful in ruling Israel; and he is faithful in fighting the Lord's enemies, a balanced ruler unlike others who were only good fighters. Now we who know the whole story of the Bible read this and our minds cannot help but join the dots to Christ. A man from the tribe of Judah, a man whose description in this section at least is flawless, a man who is anointed with God's Spirit, a man who goes out and defeat the greatest of all our enemies. What a glorious picture of Christ. There we are stubbornly pursuing sin and idols; refusing to worship the true God but go in search of things of this life that cannot satisfy. Despite the afflictions of living in a fallen world and many providential prods to cry out to God we are stubborn. We only cry out to God to complain and not repent. But God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. God sends His son to go to battle against satan, to defeat the greatest of our enemies and to rescue us, and to rule us. V11, 'So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.'

1 Dale Ralph Davis, [*Judges: Such a Great Salvation*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 50.

Adam should have obeyed God and entered the promised Sabbath rest but failed; Christ was promised and has come and been obedient and laid down His life to secure God's promised rest in the new creation. Othniel gives us a little picture of this expected rest that we now have guaranteed by the presence of the Spirit in Christ.

But sadly, this godly leader dies. This rest is enjoyed temporarily because it is a type not the final promise. And sadly the next generation turns to sin again. Here we see another one of our flaws. We recognize that God gives us spiritual elders and pastors and teachers to aid us; but it is apparent that the Israelites spirituality and faithfulness to God were dependent upon a man. As soon as the man is removed, their faithfulness stops, what a sad indictment. We must make sure that we follow God for His own sake, that He is the prop that is finally holding us up. We cannot depend upon parents, a spouse, a pastor, they will die. Thank God that Jesus Christ is resurrected and can never die.

Ehud

Israel returned to their vomit and as is typical with those who return to their sins, things get worse. Instead of one oppressor they have three, the Moabites, Ammonites and the Amalekites. Instead of 8 years they experience 18 years of oppression before they cry out. We also see that the city of palms, in other words Jericho, a strategic city taken in the conquest is taken by Eglon, v12-14. Sin is a thief and a destroyer, it promises pleasure but in returning to it we lose the ground gained in holiness. We give it a foothold and it rebuilds strongholds that we need to breakdown afresh. All that effort in breaking habits, renewing the minds, taking emotions captive, preaching to ourselves, we undo it when we go back to old sins and we will have to fight hard to dig them out of their new entrenchments.

V15, 'Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab.' Eglon is a fat man and his name sounds like the word for bull and round. Later on when describing how fat he is the same word to describe the fattened calf is used. There is a lot of humor, irony, sarcasm, parody, and other devices as God gives victory over the enemies of Israel. This use of humor is to show how weak the enemies are and how easily they are overcome; and to highlight the humiliation suffered by those who fall under God's judgement. Ehud is a surprising savior because the tribe of Benjamin we will see in the later chapters of this book are not a bastion of spirituality at this time. His name means 'Where is the splendor' a name given by god-fearing parents who were mourning the state of Israel during that time. The narrative here is quite detailed and we get a good picture of the events. Israel is in a position of paying tribute to Eglon. Ehud is in charge of delivering the tribute. Some have tried to suggest that the mention of his left handedness is an allusion to some sort of deformity and then try and make the point that God uses weak instruments. This is true, but it is likely that Ehud is chosen to protect the tribute for his military prowess not weakness. Now Ehud does not lead the armies of Israel but first conducts an assassination. Many have trouble with this aspect of the text, but let me remind you that Judges is not written to give us moral lessons but to record a dark period of Israel's history and is more descriptive than prescriptive. Why does Ehud first assassinate Eglon before leading Israel in war? Is it an insidious strategy instead of a bold exercise of faith? Is it because of the weakness of the people who would not dare to fight

without such a victory first? We don't know. But Ehud although having some questionable aspects to his actions does seem to be a man of faith.

We see that he delivers the tribute, and then head back. When he gets to the idols he sends his party away and then returns to finish Eglon off. Let me use a little sanctified imagination to try and cast some light on these events, and please this is my speculating but trying to make sense of the text. Eglon had a plan to assassinate the king. He made a dagger with a blade long enough to get through all the fat, and double edged to do double damage. I suspect that he had planned to do the deed when he delivered the tribute being in the presence of the king personally. But then he chickened out. But on the way home when he got to the idols his heart is moved within him, and he is motivated because of his hatred for idolatry and the oppression of Israel to go back and put his plan into action. He bravely goes back solo, tells the king he has a message from God and puts him to death. If this reading is correct then there is a moral lesson we can glean from Ehud. Ehud reminds me of Paul, Acts 17:16-17, 'Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.' His spirit was provoked and he preached the gospel. This is the lesson of Ehud. We may chicken out of sharing the gospel, but let us think a little more deeply about how God is being dishonored and let us see how deep the lies are that are trapping people, let your heart be moved by these truths and let them move you to bold action.

The most important part of the story comes across as anti-climactic after that stealthy and humorous account of Eglon's death, v27-30, 'When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. ²⁸ And he 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. ²⁹ And they killed at that time about 10,000 of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; not a man escaped. ³⁰ So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.' Ehud calls the people to fight and they came. He assures them that God has given the Moabites into their hands. Their victory is underlined by the number defeated, and the fact that they fought strong and able bodied men not weaklings.

If we are looking for echoes of Christ in Ehud, here is one I can see. Christ has gone ahead of us and singlehandedly and humiliate our enemy. Now He calls us to war and will lead us in triumph because the Lord goes with us and has secured the victory for us by Christ. Perhaps the death of Eglon gave faith to the Israelites, well let the victory of Christ over satan, sin and death gives us faith to boldly proclaim the gospel.

Shamgar

V31, 'After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.' What do we make of this one verse savior? Much depends on how you read 'Anath'. Is the place Anath in Galilee or is this the Egyptian goddess Anath? Some have suggested that possibly this Egyptian went to war against the Philistines and overcame the Philistines. He was not an Israelite, nor is he called a judge, only as someone who saved Israel,

though unwittingly. We do not know. All we are told is that God did a Samson like miraculous deliverance and Israel is saved.

These three men were only able to bring about a temporary defeat over Israel's enemies and a temporary rest to Israel. They are God's answer to the sin caused problems we inevitably bring upon ourselves. They are pointers to the provision of God in Christ to save us, to God's goodness to sinners who aren't interested in serving God and who bring their trouble on their own heads. These judges point us to the God who promised a savior who would defeat our enemies and save us from our sin.