

JUDGES SESSION #5

Who is your spiritual ‘hero’ or model? It’s valuable to have someone to look up to & pattern our lives after, but there are dangers in having heroes. One danger is that we may feel we can never be much use to God because we could never be as good as our hero/model.

Judges tells us the stories of some remarkable ‘heroes’ – but Scripture paints a **realistic** picture of these characters to help us realize that if God used people like them, He can use people like *us* too.

We now move into **MAIN NARRATIVE SECTION** of *Judges* – 14 chapters of stories about these unusual biblical characters who usually had two roles:

- 1) **deliverers** – freedom fighters who overcame the enemies of God & of Israel and liberated their people from oppression
 - 2) **civil rulers** – sometimes before becoming deliverers – but more often afterwards – the judges acted as magistrates, settling disputes, dispensing justice, etc.
- they were often called *yasha* ‘(saviors) [same word is used at the root of the names ‘Joshua’ & ‘Jesus’]
 - ...so will see hints of **Christ’s ministry** here at times, in shadow form; two of the things Jesus said He came to do, as found in Luke 4:18, were “to proclaim liberty to the captives” and “to set at liberty those who are oppressed”
 - the Old Testament leaders we will encounter in the Book of Judges were called by God & anointed by God’s Spirit for special service...beginning with...

OTHNIEL

What do we know about Othniel?

- nephew & then son-in-law of Caleb (the mighty prince who won the princess by conquering a giant’s city!)
- his name meant “lion of God” – a very appropriate name because Othniel was associated with the tribe of Judah from whom would come the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” – Jesus!
 - this was the most important tribe & significantly the first one to produce a deliverer
 - we also know from vs. 10 that God’s Spirit was upon him
- so here is a man with a *significant background* (tribe of Judah; & closely related to Caleb, a great man of God) & with *proven ability* (we have already seen his successful conquest of the city of Debir)
 - ...Othniel is an excellent candidate to be one of the heroes of Judges

Let’s pick up his story in chapter 3 beginning with verse 7:

So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs.* ⁸ Therefore the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years.

⁹ When the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia

into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim. ¹¹ So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

- notice the ‘painful pattern’ cycle here
- this first story maximizes the literary structure & historical pattern of Judges by clearly showing how this pattern worked: they **sinned** (they did evil, forgot God, & served other gods); God sold them into **slavery**;
Israel **cried out** to God;
God raised up a **deliverer**;
and then the land had **rest**
- the oppressing king was Cushan-Rishathaim – a name meaning “the Cushite of Double Wickedness” (probably a Jewish nickname)
 - he was the ruler of “Syria of the Two Rivers” – a ref. to an area of Assyria & Babylon
- in other words, this *first* oppressing power comes from the region where *Abraham* originated – with this first oppression, it seems God may be threatening to take them back to where they started!
- this is also the region where Israel & Judah would eventually go into exile
 - so God may also be **warning** them of what *could* happen to them (& later does)
- the oppression by Cushan-Rishathaim lasted 8 years
 - the fact that deliverance comes in the 8th year (a number often associated with ‘new beginnings’) may indicate something of a “second chance”, a new beginning for Israel ...but do they make the best use of this opportunity?
- well, let’s pick up the story with the next judge:

EHUD

Judg 3:12-23

¹² And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord strengthened Eglon king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord. ¹³ Then he gathered to himself the people of Ammon and Amalek, went and defeated Israel, and took possession of the City of Palms. ¹⁴ So the children of Israel served Eglon king of Moab eighteen years.

¹⁵ But when the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for them: Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. By him the children of Israel sent tribute to Eglon king of Moab. ¹⁶ Now Ehud made himself a dagger (it was double-edged and a cubit in length [about 18 inches]) and fastened it under his clothes on his right thigh. ¹⁷ So he brought the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. (Now Eglon was a very fat man.) ¹⁸ And when he had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. ¹⁹ But he himself turned back from the stone images that were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king."

He said, "Keep silence!" And all who attended him went out from him.

²⁰ So Ehud came to him (now he was sitting upstairs in his cool private chamber). Then Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." So he arose from his seat. ²¹ Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the dagger from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. ²² Even the hilt went in after the blade, and the fat closed

over the blade, for he did not draw the dagger out of his belly; and his entrails came out. ²³ Then Ehud went out through the porch and shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

...yes, I know! Quite a gory story, isn't it?

- Othniel, as a prince of Judah, may have been an 'obvious' choice for a judge
- but Ehud was not so likely because he was a man with a **personal limitation**
 - he was left-handed, generally considered a handicap in the ancient world
- even in our day, we see a prejudice built right into two English words:
 - *dexterity*: comes from the Latin for **right**-handed!
 - on the other hand (literally!) *sinister*: comes from the Latin word for **left** hand
- what makes Ehud's case especially striking is that he came from the tribe of Benjamin (whose name means "people of the *right* hand")
- you and I may have our own limitations; we need to *recognize* them but not be paralyzed by them because God can turn *our* liabilities into assets too, just as He did for Ehud

- this time the people of Israel suffer **18 years** of oppression before deliverance comes, 10 years longer than the previous enslavement
 - the people are harder now; as a result, it took longer for them to cry to God
 - sin has a **hardening** effect on us, which is one of the most fearful things about sin – we become less sensitive to its evil, less sensitized to the damage it produces in us, and less willing to go to God for deliverance
- the names of their **enemies** listed here as the oppressors is very significant:
 - **Moab & Ammon** – these people were descendants of Lot's daughters – and as biblical history shows, Moab & Ammon lived out an extension of the terrible morality learned in their home cities of Sodom & Gomorrah
 - the third group mentioned are the **Amalekites** – Israel's fiercest foe from earlier times; but the very first enemy Israel had defeated
 - so it was particularly humiliating now to be under their rule
- King Eglon's HQ were in **Jericho**
- again, this was the first city conquered by Israel under Joshua; but now, after years of disobedience, it is the centre of power for those who enslaved them
- notice 3 important echoes from Israel's history (as pointed out by James Jordan):
 - (1) we could say that the faith of *Abraham* had saved Lot from Sodom; but Israel lacked that **faith** now so they were – in a sense – 'back in Sodom'
 - (2) the prayers of *Moses* had saved Israel from Amalek; but the people lacked those **prayers** now so they are oppressed again by Amalek
 - (3) the convictions of *Joshua* had enabled Israel to destroy Jericho; but now they lacked those **convictions**, so Jericho was now the HQ of their oppressive king

...now, let's get back to Ehud's story

- Ehud was apparently a **recognized leader** in Israel
 - he was therefore chosen to carry their tribute money (their taxes) to King Eglon
 - as Israel's representative Ehud was also given a private audience with the king
- Ehud *did* have a "message from God" for Eglon, as he said; but it wasn't verbal – it was a **two-edged sword** of judgment

- Jesus, the Greater Ehad, is pictured in Revel.19 leading His army to victory with a two-edged sword (the Word of His mouth) to execute judgment on the nations
- the record of Ehad's assassination of king Eglon (who, by the way, in Jewish tradition was the father of Ruth) is one of the more **gross** descriptions in the Bible
- consequently, as S.J. Robinson noted, "These verses may not be our choice for a nice little devotion, but we have to remember that they describe **desperate measures for dark times**. God **can** work in the most unexpected ways. Just think about the cross."¹

- let's pick up the story again at verse 27:

Judg 3:27-30

...when he [Ehad] arrived [at Seirah], that he blew the trumpet in the mountains of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the mountains; and he led them. ²⁸ Then he said to them, "Follow *me*, for the Lord has delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand." So they went down after him, seized the fords of the Jordan leading to Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross over. ²⁹ And at that time they killed about ten thousand men of Moab, all stout men of valor; not a man escaped. ³⁰ So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.

- after executing God's judgment on King Eglon, Ehad escapes from the palace & rallies his troops to completely defeat their enemies
- the Moabites flee but Israel cuts them off at the Jordan River, which becomes another place of judgment
- here 10,000 are killed – a round figure indicating total & complete victory
- 80 yrs of peace follow this victory – indicating that **this** generation at least must have taught their children God's truth!
- notice that the **Lord** raised up the enemy (vs. 12); the **Lord** raised up the deliverer (vs. 15); the **Lord** gave the victory (vs. 28) ...God is indeed a "Phenomenal God"...the Sovereign One at work throughout this whole story

Ehad & Israel's victory brought about a striking role reversal: 'Moab was made subject to **Israel**, and the land had peace for eighty years' (v. 30). On the day that Ehad travelled to Jericho to symbolize his people's subservience to the king of Moab, God turned things upside down! Now the *Moabites* were the ones under subjection.

- let me quote S.J. Robinson again: "This should give us hope for the difficult times we face. God has a way of changing our circumstances at the most unexpected times and in the most unlikely ways. And remember: our final victory is assured! That is why the apostle Paul—after describing a time in which he was 'under great pressure, far beyond [his] ability to endure'—was able to say 'thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession'" (2 Cor. 1:8; 2:14).²

Let's check out one more judge to finish up this session. He is described in one simple verse:

Judg 3:31

After him was **Shamgar** the son of Anath, who killed six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad; and he also delivered Israel.

¹ Robinson, S. J. (2006). *Opening up Judges* (20–21). Leominster: Day One Publications.

² Robinson, S. J. (2006). *Opening up Judges* (21–22). Leominster: Day One Publications.

- here was a *peasant* farmer with *limited resources*
- his family background is a little confusing, or complex
 - his name, Shamgar, is not Hebrew but Canaanite
 - and his father's name, Anath, is that of a Canaanite god
- ...apparently his family had completely capitulated to paganism; but Shamgar himself at some point must have become a believer and turned to God who chose him to be a judge
- he lived in southern Judah (basically Philistine country)
 - and apparently his efforts provided peace for a long time because this area of Israel doesn't show up again until the time of Samson, the last judge in the book
- no doubt he was a great "**surprise**" to the 600 Philistines who died at his hand
 - who would expect a Canaanite *peasant* to defend Israel?
 - and who would expect a farmer to suddenly use his **ox goad** as a weapon?
 - these were typically 8-10 ft. long poles, tipped with sharpened metal; so they could be dangerous though generally not thought of as a military weapon!
- but Shamgar knew how to use it like this and ended up killing a very large number of men with it! (600)
- the Bible contains many **humorous** incidents
 - and since humor often depends on the element of surprise, Shamgar's story may qualify
- at any rate, there is certainly a **lesson/principle** from his story for us:
 - he didn't have much but he **used what was available**
 - it reminds me of the story of a South African farmer whose property was nothing but dry rocky soil; so he eventually gave up trying to farm; he sold it and went looking for diamonds; he had no luck with that and sadly died penniless after a year;
 - some time later, the man to whom he had sold his farm noticed unusual looking rocks in a corner of the field...yes, you guessed it – that 'hopeless' farm turned out to be first Kimberley diamond mine!
- sometimes we assume that what God has given us is not sufficient – it's not good enough for us, and it's not enough to make us useful for God either
- so we waste our time & energy looking for better opportunities or waiting until we have more money or more degrees or whatever... when all along, God has planted some 'diamonds' in our lives that are already valuable & useful

As we look at these first 3 judges, we could ask the question: **what kind of people does God use?**

- well, He certainly uses completely **different** kinds of people
- ... a prince of Israel, a left-handed gut-spilling assassin, and a peasant farmer with a Canaanite name
- God uses people who step out in **faith** and trust Him, using whatever resources He puts in their hand
 - it's also clear that He uses **weak** people who draw their strength from Him
- remember 1 Cor 1:27-29 (reading here from The Message version)

Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? That makes it quite clear that none

of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That’s why we have the saying, “If you’re going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God.”³

- yes, God loves to use ‘weak’ people so that He can demonstrate His own strength for the glory of His great name
- you may think you are not important enough for God to use you – but that’s not true
 - the most important quality for usefulness to God is not *ability*, it’s **availability**
- as the great 19th century evangelist, Dwight Moody, said, “I am only one, but I **am** one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And that which I can do, by the grace of God, I **will** do.” With that simple commitment, God used him to bring revival to England and America ...what does God want to do with YOU?

Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message : The Bible in contemporary language* (1 Co 1:26–31). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress.