

Judges 3:1-31  
Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar

Introduction

1. We began our study of the book of Judges last week with chapters 1 and 2
2. We learned that this book describes the time between the conquest of Canaan and the beginning of the monarchy
3. The book begins on a positive note when the Israelites approach God for instructions on carrying out His commands to finalize the conquest of Canaan, but soon deteriorates into disobedience with Israel failing to drive out the inhabitants of the land, and ultimately falling into a pattern of idolatry and apostasy
4. The book describes repeated cycles of Israel's apostasy and oppression, with God intervening at various times by raising up judges to deliver them from their enemies
5. In today's passage we meet the first of these three judges

A. Israel becomes like the Canaanites and commits apostasy against the Lord (3:1-7)

1. Israel falls prey to the pagan culture around them (1-6):
  - a. This began when the Israelites disobeyed the Lord and refused to drive out the inhabitants of the land (chapters 1 and 2)
  - b. As a result, the Lord refused to drive them out Himself and left the inhabitants there to **"test Israel by the"** (1):
    - 1) Verse 4 says, "they were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses"
    - 2) Another reason for leaving the inhabitants in the land was so that the generations that had not experienced war would **"be taught war"** (2; they were going to need it)
  - c. However, this generation failed that test; they not only **"lived among"** (5) the inhabitants, but began to assimilate with them:
    - 1) To assimilate means to take something in, to begin to resemble or liken oneself to it
    - 2) In this case, the Israelites began to take in and resemble the pagan, Canaanite culture they were surrounded by
    - 3) We know this because they began to intermarry with them (6): **"and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons..."**
    - 4) We also know this because we are told they **"served their Gods"** (6c)
    - 5) God warned them about this when He gave them the Law:
      - a) Exodus 34:15-16: **"But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim 14 -- for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God-- 15 otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice, 16 and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods."**
      - b) Deuteronomy 7:3-4: **"Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your**

**sons. 4 "For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you."**

2. Israel commits apostasy against the Lord (7):
  - a. Apostasy can be defined as either the abandonment or renunciation of one's religious beliefs or an embracing religious beliefs that are contrary and diametrically opposed to one's former beliefs
  - b. In Israel's case, it was the latter—a merging of Canaanite beliefs and practices with their beliefs and practices regarding the Lord
  - c. The word "forsook" (which means to leave or abandon) is used repeatedly in Judges, 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles
  - d. This is referred to as evil: **"The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord..."**
    - 1) They **"forgot the LORD their God..."**—"forgot" is likely used here in the sense of disregarding the Lord by disobeying His commands, rather than an absence of remembrance
    - 2) They **"served the Baals and the Asheroth"**
      - a) Baal was the Canaanite god of agriculture and fertility
      - b) Ashera was the goddess of fertility and Baal's consort or sexual partner and she was generally represented in the form of wooden poles or towers in Canaan
      - c) Baals and Asherth are both plural here because there were many forms of these two gods and they varied among the many different Canaanite people groups
      - d) Canaanite worship was highly sexual, with the men engaging in sex with temple prostitutes as a way of encouraging Baal and Ashera to mimic their own behavior (which would result in agricultural fertility/crop growth)
      - e) Other practices included child sacrifices
      - f) Israel is accused of all of this throughout its history in the OT

B. The Lord chastises the Israelites (3:8)
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1. Israel's apostasy moves the Lord to chastise them (8): **"Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years."**
  - a. This was a DIVINE act of discipline: **"the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of..."** their enemies
  - b. The result was oppression under the hands of a Mesopotamian king:
    - 1) His name was Cushan-rishathaim, which means **"Cushan the Doubly Wicked"**
    - 2) According to v. 8 he was specifically the king of "Aram of the Two Rivers" (the literal Hebrew translations which is rendered Mesopotamia in that verse) which is modern day Syria
    - 3) Nothing else is known about him
  - c. Fun Fact: notice the word play--Israel **"served"** the Baals and Ashtaroth so God made them **"serve"** the Mesopotamians
  - d. This oppression lasted for 8 years
2. So we see that Israel's suffering and oppression was completely and utterly of their own making and a direct result of their disobedience

3. We also see that the Mesopotamians and their king were divine agents of God used to chastise Israel

C. The LORD raises up Othniel and delivers Israel from its oppressors (3:9-11)
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1. Israel cries out to God for help: **“When the sons of Israel cried to the LORD...”**
  - a. The imperfect tense here implies an ongoing crying out rather than a single act (i.e. “when the sons of Israel were crying out to the LORD...”)
  - b. We have no indication in the text when this pleading began; all we know is that Israel was oppressed for 8 years before God raised up a deliverer
2. The LORD raises up Othniel (9):
  - a. His purpose was to deliver Israel from their enemies: **“the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them”** from their oppressors
  - b. According to verse 10 he does just that: **“The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.”**
  - c. Othniel was Caleb’s younger brother and was known for capturing Debir and then marrying Caleb’s daughter, Achsah (Joshua 15:17 and Judges 1:13)
  - d. So, he was a seasoned military commander.
  - e. Even so, the author makes sure that we understand that that his victory over Cushan-rishathaim was all God:
    - 1) He was empowered by the Holy Spirit (10a)
    - 2) It was the Lord who gave the king into his hands (10b)
  - f. Israel experienced 40 years of peace under Othniel (11)
3. A note about the use of the term judge in the book of Judges:
  - a. The Hebrew word for judge, shaphat, is a broad term and is used primarily in three ways in the OT:
    - 1) To act as a ruler
    - 2) To decide cases of Law and resolve disputes
    - 3) To serve as a government official
  - b. The official role of judge first appears when Moses’ father in law suggests that Moses setup leaders to litigate disputes and matters of the Law among the people in Exodus 18, but it then became official by God in Deuteronomy 16: 18
  - c. These judges are mentioned alongside the elders of Israel throughout the book of Joshua
  - d. When we come to the book of Judges, the term is used interchangeably to refer to three primary functions:
    - 1) To save or deliver (i.e. to command a military)—all three of the
    - 2) To judge (i.e. to litigate)
    - 3) To rule (i.e. to govern)
    - 4) Some of the judges appear to fulfill only one of the functions (like Ehud and Shamgar in today’s text who only appear to have been military leaders)
    - 5) Other judges appear to fulfill multiple roles like Othniel who was a military commander and apparently a ruler in Israel

- e. It is absolutely clear, however, that the judges in this book were DIVINE AGENTS, RAISED UP and EMPOWERED by God for the primary purpose of delivering Israel from its enemies.

D. Israel returns to its evil ways and is chastised by God once again (11c-14)

1. After Othniel died (11), Israel returned to its evil ways (12): **“Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD.”**
  - a. This same phrase is repeated three additional times in this book (4:1; 10:6; 13:1)
  - b. Notice the word **“again”**
  - c. In the introduction of the book we are told that Israel refused to listen to the judges, and after each judge died 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 stubborn ways”** (2:16-19)
  - d. With the rare and only exception in 10:16, the author never specifically mentions any repentance by Israel, but instead continually described Israel returning to its wicked ways
  - e. At best, any repentance was fleeting
2. Eglon, king of Moab, joins with the Ammonites and Amalekites and conquers Israel (13-14):
  - a. This was another DIVINE act of chastisement (12-13): **“So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees [i.e. Jericho].”**
  - b. Moab was to the west, Ammon to the NW and Amalekites to the south of Israel
  - c. This time the oppression/chastisement lasted 18 years (14): **“The Israelites served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.”**

E. The LORD raises up Ehud and delivers Israel from its oppressors (15-31)

1. Once again, Israel cries out to the LORD (15): **“But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD...”**—as above, no mention of repentance is made by the author
2. The LORD raises up Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite to deliver Israel (15b)
3. Ehud assassinates Eglon, King of Moab (15c-26)
4. Ehud leads Israel’s army and defeats their enemies (27-30)
5. Eighty years of peace follows (30b)

F. The LORD raises up Shamgar to deliver Israel from the Philistines (31)

1. The text says that Shamgar was raised up after Ehud and saved Israel from the Philistines by killing 600 of them with an ox goad (8 to 10 foot stick with a sharp spear on one end to goad oxen while plowing and a scraper on the other end to clear mud clods from the plowshare)
2. Shamgar is only mentioned here and in Deborah’s poem in Judges 5:6 where she describes a time of distress so bad that people avoided the dangerous highways and took alternative routes when traveling
3. According to Josephus, Shamgar died the same year he became judge (Ant., V, iv, 3)
4. Nothing else is known about Shamgar but it appears his role as a judge was short lived and may have been used to rescue Israel from a small incursion of Philistines, rather than a lengthy period of oppression.

## Conclusion and Take Away

1. There are two major themes that permeate this passage this morning
2. The first is the constant and continual sin of the Israelites, in spite of God's kindness and deliverance
  - a. Unfortunately, this is a distinguishing mark of Israel's history
  - b. According to the author of Hebrews, this book was written as a warning for us (**Read Hebrews 12:5-13**)
3. But, Israel's rebellion is not supposed to be our focus, because the book isn't actually about them; It's about God.
4. The second major theme is the salvation of the LORD
  - a. Take a look back at vs. 9 and 15
    - 1) The word "**deliverer**" is actually the Hebrew word yasha, "savior"
    - 2) When Israel cried out to Him, the LORD raised up a **SAVIOR!**
  - b. And this salvation comes purely on the basis of the LORD'S compassion (2:18): "**When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered 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 oppressed and afflicted them.**"
  - c. Notice that it's the LORD'S pity/compassion that motivates Him to save Israel, and He does it IN SPITE OF the fact that they do not deserve it
  - d. Does any of this sound familiar?

Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:6-10: "**For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life**