

Week 3 - Othniel: Prototypical Deliverer - Judges 3:7-11

Scripture Reading: Judges 2:11-19

Introduction

After taking a look at the parallel introductions of Judges 1:1-3:6, we are going to consider the first of the judges today. And I chose today's Scripture reading to help refresh your memory of the cycle of sin, punishment, rescue, and further sin that the author first reveals in those verses.

Because that is going to be the cyclical pattern for the bulk of the remainder of the book all the way through the end of chapter 16.

Think back to the last time you introduced a friend to a game they weren't familiar with.

You likely explained the gist of the game to them and told them the basic structure of how the game was played along with the game's goal and rules.

But, I doubt you stopped there.

I suspect, in all likelihood, you played a "sample game" to give the neophyte a chance to get a feel for the game.

The judge cycle of Othniel seems to be a lot like that - it's an initial example of the process described in our Scripture reading.

And it's a formally correct example making the Othniel cycle a kind of prototype by which to view the other judges.

The account of Othniel contains all of the elements described and does so clearly, actually rather starkly, as there aren't a lot of interesting details to distract us as readers.

It only takes 5 verses to tell and its purpose seems to be to put some historical meat on the theological bones that we looked at in depth last week without a whole lot of fanfare so as to plainly reveal the message of God's working.

And showing how God intervenes in the lives of his people is the main point of the book of Judges.

This passage is short enough that we can read through it as we begin so let me encourage you to join me in Judges 3 so you can follow along as I read verses 7-11 (you will find it on page 202 of the visitor's Bibles) [**Judges 3:7-11**]:

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. 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. 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. 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. So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

If you are taking notes, I have three main points and those points are like the acts of a play.

The first act is "The **cycle begins**" and we see that in verses 7-8.

This section is the catalyst for all that happens.

The second act is "The **turning point**" and we find that in verse 9.

This is the pivotal point where things change for Israel.

The third, and final, act is "The **cycle resolves**" in verses 10-11.

And it's here that we see how God graciously rectifies the situation.

With that introduction and outline, let's get to our passage.

I. The cycle begins

The author begins with an indictment of Israel - "the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" just as our pattern would anticipate

But the author then elaborates on the evil in Israel with two clarifying comments showing that Israel was unfaithful

A. Israel's infidelity

First, we see that Israel "forgot" God

You and I forget things all the time but we need to understand that this wasn't merely having God slip out of their minds

What the author means here, within the framework of 2:11-13 and the repeated phrase "Israel abandoned the Lord," is that Israel intentionally and actively disregarded God and didn't take him or his commands into account

And then, because they didn't take notice of God or what God required of them, they served the Baals and the Asheroth

Israel disregarded and abandoned the Lord and exchanged worship of the living God to serve idols of wood and stone

They traded God's revealed theology, wholesome morality, and personal relationship for an empty pagan fertility religion conjured up from the depths of depraved human imagination

And what happens next isn't a mere episode of cause and effect with the events following along sequentially as part of a natural process

No, here we see that God is the God of history - that is to say, God makes and orders history

Last week we saw how God is jealous for his people and he will not tolerate their unfaithfulness

God refuses to allow his people to snuggle into sin and get comfortable there

And so we next see God's response in verse 8 [**Judges 3:8a**]

B. God's response

Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia.

The first thing we see is that Israel's infidelity provoked God to anger against them

And God sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia

This is a bad situation for Israel but it's a good bad because, in God's anger, there is hope for Israel

God loves Israel - that's why he chose them after all as we read in Deuteronomy 7:7-9

And, as we read in **Hebrews 12:6** –

The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives

God doesn't abandon Israel in his anger

But neither is God a kindly grandfather type who tolerates misbehavior

Some people have a difficult time with this concept but we need to understand that God sometimes sends calamity and he is not above inflicting misery in order to awaken his people and stir them to righteousness

God's faithful anger when we go astray is a sign of his love

And, while the anger of God and the stinging of his discipline are no picnic, they are a sign of hope for God's people

So God, in his anger, sold Israel into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim and the simple fact is that we don't know for certain just which historical figure he is but we do learn a few things about him from what the author includes

First, what our ESV Bible translates as "Mesopotamia" is Aram Naharaim

Aram is rendered *Syria* in the Greek version of the Old Testament and Naharaim translates to “of the two rivers”
 And that’s where our ESV translation of Mesopotamia comes in because Mesopotamia means “between the rivers”
 Meaning that this king likely came from somewhere east of the Euphrates and between it and the Habur River in northern Mesopotamia making him the oppressor who traveled the greatest distance to punish Israel

But the interesting thing is that his name appears to be a play on words meant to mock him

Rishathaim means “double wickedness” and it seems doubtful that his parents would have named their child Cushan of double wickedness

Perhaps his real name sounded something like Cushan-Rishathaim but the obvious implication is that he was a really bad guy and, in all likelihood, the worst of Israel’s oppressors

And there is a bit of humor in the rhyme presented here between Rishathaim and Naharaim making the whole thing sound like a modern-day political barb - Cushan-double wickedness from Aram-double rivers

That sounds like just the sort of thing an oppressed people might come up with to ease their suffering a bit

Once again showing that God has a sense of humor as he includes such details in his Word

Suffice it to say that Cushan-Rishathaim was the most powerful of the enemies of Israel who travelled the furthest distance underscoring the seriousness with which God viewed their infidelity

God makes the Israelites who chose to serve foreign gods serve a foreign tyrant for eight long years

But then we come to the turning point of the account in verse 9 [**Judges 3:9**]

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.

II. The turning point

Things change when, after 8 years, Israel cries out to the Lord

A. Israel cries out

As we saw previously, this was not a cry of repentance on the part of Israel as some want to assume

It is a cry of pain - a wail

It’s the same Hebrew word we find used in **Job 35:9** which reads:

Because of a multitude of oppressions people cry out; they call for help because of the arm of the mighty

In this case, we read that Israel cried out to the Lord but the word can also mean simply a cry of pain or scream in frustration directed at no one in particular

It’s important that we recognize the kind of cry that this was because it tells us something quite significant about God’s response

B. God’s response

Israel cried out in pain and God raised up a deliverer for them to save them

Israel was more moved by their distress than they were their depravity - their sin didn’t bother them as much as the suffering they were made to endure for their sin - much like the criminal who regrets their capture but not their crime

And yet, God out of his infinite pity for his people - even when they are incorrigibly immersed in sin - God responded with mercy and grace and gave them the deliverer they needed to free them from the punishment he had imposed

This reveals quite clearly that salvation was not because of anything to do with Israel

God’s deliverance is based solely on who God is and what he has planned for his people; it’s not based on who Israel is or what Israel has done or not done - this is an act of God’s grace and mercy

And the name of the deliverer whom God raised up is Othniel - the same Othniel we met in Judges 1:13

We know only a little about Othniel

For instance, we know that he was Caleb's nephew - the son of Caleb's younger brother, Kenaz making him ethnically a foreigner - a Kenizzite proselyte attached to the tribe of Judah as was Caleb [**Numbers 32:12**]

We also know that he was a brave, accomplished military man - after all, he captured the Canaanite stronghold of Debir and won Caleb's daughter for his wife as a result

But we don't know more than those sparse details - and I believe that's intentional

Because, while Othniel is portrayed as a genuinely noble figure and nothing negative is recorded about him at all, the deliverance isn't dependent on Othniel - God is the one who delivers

And I believe the author purposely omits any details that might distract us from that fact

As we go deeper into the book of Judges we will see this change as the accounts will include more and more intriguing details

But Othniel is portrayed as the prototype for the judges - he is the ideal by which all of the major judges are measured

And Othniel fulfills his role as he appears in the account but remains somewhat in the background to allow God to shine forth as the true deliverer of Israel

And we dare not miss the fact that God is behind all of the details

It's God who sold the Israelites into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim and it's God who raised up Othniel to deliver them

And it's God who will determine the proper time to release them from their bondage

III. The cycle resolves

In verses 10-11 we see the resolution of this first cycle

And we see that God is the one who is responsible for its conclusion

A. God gives Othniel success

First, we see that God is the one who gives Othniel success

Look with me at verse 10 [Judges 3:10] –

The Spirit of the LORD was upon [Othniel], 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.

In the book of Judges when the Spirit of the Lord comes upon individuals, it signals the arresting presence and power of God

In most of the cases, we will see God send his Spirit upon people who are unqualified for or disinclined to service to God

But, in the case of Othniel, we see the empowering presence of the Spirit of God transform an Israelite officer into the conqueror of a world-class enemy and into the ruler of Israel

This is a good time to address the title of this book and the fact that Othniel and the others are said to have "judged Israel" making them, in our minds, "judges" even though none of them are actually referred to as such in the text

When we think of a judge, we tend to think of a person clad in a long black robe who renders legal decisions

And, of all the "judges" Deborah is the only one who even comes close to our idea of a judge and her decision-rendering activity has little to do with the events that made her famous

The "judges" actually functioned more as deliverers and God raised them up not so much to render judgments over internal disputes but to save Israel out of her distress from external enemies God had sent to punish them

What we need to understand is that the Hebrew word here means more than to simply render judicial decisions as our English word does

It has the overall meaning of “to rule, to govern, to exercise leadership” and that role then has the dual roles of “judging” which has to do with internal affairs and “delivering” which has to do with external affairs

But what is most important is not what we call the individuals who God uses or even their activities recorded in this record

What is important, and what we need to focus on, is what God is doing during this period of Israel’s history

In response to Israel’s sin, God is faithfully fulfilling his covenant promise to punish them in the hope of restoring them To do so God raises up various foreign powers to dominate Israel and cause them misery

But, when Israel cries out, God is moved to pity for them and he releases them from their oppressors

What we need to recognize is that God is in control and orchestrating all of the events we see in the book of Judges

And God uses nations that are far worse than Israel for his own purposes and then strikes them down when he is done with them using whatever instruments he chooses to defeat them

Just as God had “sold” Israel into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim, he also gave Cushan-Rishathaim into Othniel’s hand

We see how God works in this way quite clearly in Jeremiah 27 where God says **[Jeremiah 27:4-7]**

*‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: This is what you shall say to your masters: “It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, **until the time of his own land comes.** Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.*

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was perhaps the worst of the worst in human history and God used him until his time, until the time of his own land comes, as our text puts it, and then he threw Nebuchadnezzar down

But before that, God threatened to punish any nation or kingdom that refused to serve Nebuchadnezzar **[Jer 27:8]**

The key thing we need to recognize here is that this is all God’s doing

God sent Cushan-Rishathaim to oppress Israel and, after 8 years of oppression, when Israel cried out in pain, God raised up and empowered Othniel who overthrew Cushan-Rishathaim - a most powerful and evil king

This is the most stripped-down account of any of the judge cycles and it’s here that we see God’s hand most clearly in all the details

And with each succeeding account we should prepare for there to be something - sometimes numerous things - to distract from fully appreciating God’s activity

So we will have to be on guard and endeavor to find God in each of the accounts so as to give him his rightful glory

B. God gives Israel rest

And in verse 11 we see God give Israel rest for 40 years

This rest is without a doubt rest from war and conflict - God removed attacks from without, oppression, and affliction and gave Israel peace

God prefers to give his people rest and God’s kindness is designed to lead his people to repentance **[Romans 2:4]** and he seeks to inspire us as much by his goodness as his severity

However, God’s rest is conditional and God’s people must demonstrate ongoing fidelity to God to enjoy continued rest

This account fills in the blanks of the pattern that was described in Judges 2 and serves as the prototype for the remaining series of six major judge cycles

And, sadly, looking down to verse 12 [**Judges 3:12a**] we read the fateful words:

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord

When people abandon God and give their allegiance to anyone or anything else, they absolve God of any obligation to bless them and the rest that the Lord gives must be met by the steadfastness of his people

In fact, when people stray, they put themselves at odds with God and should expect his judgment

The 40 years of rest that Israel enjoyed may be a round number meant to show that the lifespan of a generation had passed by

But, in any event, when Othniel passed away, the first judge cycle is completed, and Israel once again turned from God just as we would expect from the pattern shown in Judges 2 [**Judges 2:19**]

Conclusion

I appreciate the fact that God chose to preserve so few details about Othniel

The sparsity of information allows Othniel to be the prototype or ideal judge by whom to measure all the others

After all, he's only the ideal in comparison to all the rest of the judges who we will become more and more disappointed by as our study continues

And not knowing more about Othniel allows us to avoid the trap of thinking we need to be an Othniel

The point of the account isn't to look at Othniel as a role model whose behavior we should imitate and, thankfully, we don't have enough information to be tempted to do make that our takeaway

Othniel is portrayed as less of a hero type than as being like a well-maintained chisel in the hand of a master sculptor

No one would look at Michelangelo's David and give credit to the tools that Michelangelo used - as important as those tools were to creating the work of art

However, I don't want to dismiss Othniel completely because as stark and sterile as this first judge cycle is recorded, we do see something of the way things can be if one walks in tandem with the Lord and allows God to use them

Because what this passage reveals is how God works in the lives of his people

God's blessing is conditional to be sure and our peace is dependent upon our fidelity to God

Even we, as Christ-followers, cannot expect to live at peace during our sojourn here if we are not being faithful to God because God will not give us peace in our infidelity

But that in no way implies that our peace is due to anything but God's grace toward us

God sends difficulty into the lives of his children and rescues them from that difficulty solely because of who he is according to his eternal, unchangeable character

He punishes because he must be faithful to himself and he rescues because of his compassion toward and love for his people - not because they are worthy or unworthy

And both the punishment and the rescue from punishment are gracious acts designed to benefit God's people

In the account of Othniel, we see how an individual can be used by God to challenge the forces of evil and darkness and, through God's power deliver his people

That gives hope to any generation of God's people who are suffering

Because victories are won, as God revealed through his prophet, Zechariah, [**Zechariah 4:6**]

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit

Next week, we will look at the account of God's left-handed assassin, Ehud found in Judges 3:12-30

And as you read through the passage this week you will find it to contain a great deal more detail than the account of Othniel

And the details are quite interesting - to say the least - but don't let them distract you from noticing God's activity in the account

Let's pray