

You Really Need a King:

Ehud: The Unexpected Hero (Judges 3:7-31)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 11, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ Last week I warned you that we're going to get into every passage in the book of Judges, and into every story, and we won't skip over any of the details, no matter how unsavory. And as you can see, I wasn't kidding. **Today we jumped right into one of the messier stories where there's some morally questionable behavior (a covert political assassination) and potty humor.** Yes, there's a crude, comical aspect of this story involving bodily excrement and a very portly king who had a reputation of taking a long time in the bathroom. I honestly don't think I'm reading into it. I think all of that is intentional.

- ❖ I know it makes some people cringe. They feel this kind of humor is beneath God, beneath Holy Scripture. We don't know what to do with this. It's a bit embarrassing. But actually I think it's encouraging.
 - **I think the rawness of these stories is a great apologetic.** There's clearly no effort to sanitize or clean up the narrative to make it more palatable for readers. Events are recorded as is. Now think about it. That's not what you'd expect if the Bible was this heavily-redacted book put together by ancient rabbis who were trying to promote a particular vision of God to fit preconceived ideas.
 - Ancient Israelites had a very high view of God. They revered Yahweh as transcendent, holy, and hallowed. **So for them to include such messy, crude, unsavory details within Yahweh's Holy Word, demonstrates that the OT authors were committed to recording events as they happened versus just giving us a cleaned up, sanitized version of things.** Like I said, this is a great apologetic for defending the reliability of these ancient narratives.

- ❖ Another encouraging thing is to know that it's not beneath the Holy God of Israel to enter into the messiness and crudeness of our lives. He actually uses us for his holy purposes even in spite of how unholy or unworthy we feel. **One lesson to learn from this morning's passage is that God sometimes chooses to use the most unexpected people to accomplish his purposes in the most unexpected ways.**
 - Many of us fear that we don't fit the mold of the kind of person the Lord might use for mighty service. Maybe because of past choices, past mistakes, past failures; maybe because of our upbringing, our lack of formal education, our physical, mental, or emotional handicaps and limitations – **we've determined that we don't fit the mold.** We're not the kind of person God would use in a significant way.
 - But that's why I'm encouraged by the three judges in our passage. **In fact, if you consider all the judges, there's no discernible pattern. There's no mold.** There are twelve judges in total – eleven men and one woman (Deborah). And the first three – Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar – are all atypical to one degree or another. As we consider each of them, I hope to show you how God delights to use the unexpected in unexpected ways.

Othniel the Prototype

- ❖ Let's begin with Othniel. I'd describe him as the prototypical judge. **If there's a model judge, Othniel would be it.** But even if he's presented as a paradigm for future judges, none of the rest ever fit the mold. But I'm still comfortable calling him **the prototypical judge.**

- ❖ Now one of the first things you'll notice about this section on Othniel is that there's not much said about Othniel himself. **What comes across most clearly are the stages of this cyclical pattern that keep reoccurring throughout the book.** We talked about it last week.
 - It starts with the people rebelling and turning to serve other gods. That kindles God's anger, and he raises up a foreign nation to oppress Israel. In time, the people begin to groan and their cry reaches up to God. And out of pity and sheer mercy, he raises up a deliverer who helps drive out the oppressing nation. But once the deliverer is laid to rest, the depravity in human hearts is laid bare, rebellion resumes, idolatry is renewed, and the downward cycle restarts.
 - In vv7-12 we can see the entire cycle played out. In the rest of the stories, all the stages are not as clearly defined (or even mentioned) like you find here. Which tells me, that this first account is trying to set the table for all the forthcoming ones. That's why I call Othniel and his story the prototype.

- ❖ So look with me in 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.*" **Now when it says they forgot the LORD, we can't take that in a literal sense.** It's not as if the concept of God or knowledge of the LORD was erased from their memory banks.
 - It's more like when the Psalmist pleads for God to "*remember not the sins of my youth*" (Ps. 25:7, 79:8; Isa. 43:25, 64:9). He doesn't expect God to literally forget all the sins he committed. He's simply asking God not to act on the knowledge of all the sins and mistakes he made as a young man.

- ❖ **So in the same way, when Scripture says the people of Israel forgot the LORD, it just means they weren't acting on what they know about the LORD.** What they knew in their heads was not being translated into their hearts or their behavior.
 - That's our biggest problem. We know a lot about God but we don't act on it. Many of us could be rightly described as functional atheists. We're not *literal* atheists because we still believe in a personal God. **But we're functional atheists in that we can easily live our lives as if there were no God.** Our belief in God doesn't translate into our behavior. Our convictions neither captivate our hearts nor control our actions. That's how even believers, like most of us here, can be guilty of forgetting the LORD.

- ❖ Now look back at v8, and we see that this abandonment of the LORD kindled his anger and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim. That's not his real name. It was a derogatory nickname the Israelites made up for him. It means "dark-doubly wicked". This was likely a very powerful, very wicked king. And they were under his thumb for eight years.

- ❖ Then it says in v9 that “*the people of Israel cried out to the LORD*”. **Don’t mistake that as a cry of repentance. Most commentators say it’s just the cry of someone in a bind, someone in deep distress.** They describe it more like a yelp, a sharp cry of pain.
 - The LORD hears it and responds with pity. V9 says he “*raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them*”. So notice how the LORD is not acting in response to their repentance. **This rescue is out of sheer mercy knowing full well that they haven’t repented – that they haven’t changed. God knows they’re going to fall right back into the cycle.**

- ❖ I don’t think v9 shocks us enough. **The fact that we can read v9 and just move on to v10 without a second thought, shows how much we take God for granted.** We assume v9 is just what God does. That’s his thing. We fail. He forgives. We sin. He saves. What’s surprising about v9? But that’s the problem. **God being merciful no longer surprises us.**
 - When I moved to Vancouver I was blown away by the North Shore mountains. Where ever you are in the city, if you look north, you’ll see a range of mountains in the background. It’s this amazing picturesque view. Theresa’s classroom, where she taught, had this awesome panoramic view.
 - She said sometimes on a clear, sunny day, she’d stop in the middle of her lesson and tell the kids to look out the window. But most would just shrug. They grew up with this view. It was so familiar they took it for granted. But for the few who did stop to stare and bask in the wonder, they were blessed by having a newcomer to town remind them of the glory right before their eyes.

- ❖ **That’s why I think it’s so important for longtime Christians to spend more time with non-Christian seekers and new believers – intentionally talking with them about God and the gospel.** Because they can bless us as much as we hope to bless them. Whenever I talk with newcomers to the faith, they always remind me of the glory right before my eyes. If you’re feeling spiritually dry or apathetic, I think one of the best ways to renew your faith is to get out of your comfort zone and engage seekers and new Christians.

- ❖ Now let’s go back to v10. Notice how even though Othniel is the chosen deliverer, all the focus is placed on the LORD as the principal Deliverer. It’s his Spirit who empowers Othniel. It’s the LORD who gave Cushan-rishathaim over to Othniel.
 - In fact, I think the lack of details about Othniel is intentional in this first story in order to drive home the point that, in all the subsequent stories of deliverance, **Yahweh is always the principal actor in this drama of redemption. He’s always the principal Deliverer.**

- ❖ But from what little we do know about Othniel, it’s a good impression. We’re introduced to him initially in chapter 1:13 as Caleb’s nephew. We’re told he was courageous and successful at conquering a fortified city at Caleb’s request and won his daughter’s hand in marriage.

- ❖ The only other fact we know about Othniel is that he (like Caleb) is a Kennizite meaning he's not an Israelite by blood. He's a Gentile who converted (a Jewish proselyte). Later in life, he consciously converted and committed himself to the covenant community we know as Israel.
 - Why does this little fact matter? **It matters because it goes to show how much God loves to surprise his covenant people by accomplishing his deliverance through the hands of a Gentile, an outsider, a foreigner.** If any of you doubt if you can be used by God in significant ways because you didn't grow up with a strong Christian upbringing, because you came to Christ at a much later age in life – you have nothing to fear. You're in no way disqualified, and you don't have to feel like you need to play catch up. Othniel and his abbreviated story is proof enough that God delights to use the outsider to accomplish his purposes.

Ehud the Left-handed

- ❖ Now let's look at the primary character in this section of Judges, Ehud the left-handed. If we pick back up in v12, we're introduced to Eglon the king of Moab, the next nation used by the LORD to chastise his people. It says Eglon conquered and took possession of the city of palms, which is a veiled reference to Jericho (Deut. 34:3).
 - So the first city the Israelites took, that kickstarted the entire conquest of the land, had now been lost into the hands of invaders. It was definitely a symbolic blow. And for eighteen years they slavishly served under Eglon and the Moabites.
- ❖ Then we read in v15 that the people cried out to the LORD. They yelled. "*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.*"
 - I think this description of Ehud is significant. His left-handedness is definitely being highlighted. **That's because ancient cultures were much more biased in favor of right-handedness over left.** Did you know that the word *sinister* comes from the Latin for "left"? Not too subtle. Or did you know that the word *dexterity*, which means highly skilled, comes from the Latin for "right hand"?
 - There was a clear bias in ancient times. And just think of all the biblical references to the right hand. They're all positive. God swears by his right hand (Isa. 62:8-9), has pleasures at his right hand (Ps. 16:11), his right hand is considered a seat of honor (Ps. 110:1).
- ❖ In fact, v15 literally translated says Ehud was "*hindered in the right hand*". Now that could mean he had something wrong with his right hand. It was deformed or disabled in some way. Or it just means he was left-handed. But just think about how poorly the ancients looked down on you if you're left-handed. They describe you by what you're not. You're not right-handed like normal people. You're hindered in some way. And yet an abnormal, hindered man is exactly the kind of man God delights to use.

- ❖ As the story unfolds we see that Ehud travelled with a convoy to pay a tribute to Elgon, who in v16 is described as a very fat man. He probably got fat off all the tribute he's been exacting from the Israelites for the last eighteen years. It goes on to say that at some point Ehud asked for a private audience with the king, teasing that he has a secret message for him. The king dismisses his attendants, feeling unthreatened by a man who has already been patted down for any weapons. But of course the guards only checked Ehud's left thigh because that's where every swordsman keeps his weapon. They're working, of course, off the assumption that any normal person would favor his right hand.
- ❖ So when Ehud approaches to deliver his message, instead he delivers a blow of his hidden dagger into Eglon's fat belly. He thrusts so hard that it says his dagger was swallowed up by belly fat and penetrated through to the other side. The ESV says "*the dung came out*" (NIV 2011 says "*and his bowels discharged*"). Like I said, the story doesn't omit any sordid details.
 - What follows is a bit of potty humor. Ehud locks the door from the inside and escapes by climbing down the walls of the palace. Meanwhile Eglon's attendants can smell the dung and assume that their master must be on the pot. He seems to be taking an extraordinarily long time but it doesn't seem to surprise his attendants. They're use to it. But it reaches a point where enough is enough. It's getting embarrassing. They find a way to unlock the door and discover their king dead on the floor.
 - By now Ehud has had plenty of time to escape. He rallies the people of Israel, and they march out against the Moabites and strike down 10,000 of them. They liberate the land, and it remains at rest for eighty years.
- ❖ So what can we draw from this? Think about it. **What people might consider to be a weakness or limitation (like left-handedness), God considers the perfect means by which he accomplishes his purposes on earth.** He loves to shame the wise and strong, by choosing and using what is foolish, what is weak, what is low and despised in the world (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27-28). That's what we see him doing here with Ehud.
 - And I believe he's doing the same with us. **Some of us deal with a lot of self-doubt, thinking we're not good enough or skilled enough to serve God.** To do anything truly significant for the kingdom. Maybe you – or someone you care about, someone you're trying to disciple – has a physical limitation or maybe it's something mental or emotional. A speech impediment. A learning disability. A diagnosis of autism or dementia. A disability that prevents you from taking care of yourself.
 - So maybe you (or that person you care about) are not generally considered to be someone who can contribute much to the church or the work of the gospel. **But Ehud is yet another example of how God loves to use the most unexpected in the most unexpected ways.**
- ❖ Before we move on, I want to draw your attention to an emerging pattern that we can start to see between the first and second judge. **Notice that with every subsequent story, the judge is more and more unexpected and is forced to act more and more on his own.**

- ❖ **Othniel** is the least surprising of all the judges, and he leads the entire nation to fight for freedom. **Ehud**, as we've argued, is unexpected and he initially acts on his own to kill Eglon before rallying all the people to victory. **Deborah** is definitely unexpected as a female judge, and she ends up delivering Israel with only two of the twelve tribes. **Gideon** is another unexpected judge because of his extreme cowardice and lack of faith, and he has to deliver Israel from the Midianites with only 300 men. And then when we get to **Samson**, we're surprised that such a morally reprehensible man could be a judge, and he has to deliver the nation single-handedly without any assistance from anyone else.

- ❖ **And all of them point us to the most unexpected, the most abnormal, the most left-handed Deliverer of all.** The Bible says when he showed up on the scene, "*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*" (Isa. 53:2-3)
 - And he had to deliver his people alone. All alone. God's people didn't help him or contribute at all to the deliverance. Quite the opposite. His own people did not receive him but instead handed him over to be tortured and crucified on a cross. All alone.

- ❖ **Christ alone accomplished what each and every one of these judges could not do.** They couldn't change the hearts of the people. They couldn't free them from sin's enslaving power. As soon as the judge died and was put in the ground, sin and idolatry would immediately spring up and their hearts would be led astray. They'd fall right back into the cycle. **Only in Christ – only through the True and Better Judge – do we experience true freedom.**

- ❖ **Let me talk to those of you who are still seeking God.** You're not a Christian. I wonder if you're here this morning because you know something is not right with your life. **You feel trapped in an endless cycle, chasing after this or that (this relationship, that job, etc.) but nothing ever seems to satisfy.** You're constantly disappointed and finding yourself back at square one. I hope you come to recognize that you're in the same cycle of sin and idolatry as we find here in Judges.
 - **Jesus is the only One who can deliverer you from this.** Turn to him. Trust him. Cry out to him – not just in a yelp of pain – but in a groan of genuine repentance, an earnest desire to turn your life around by giving it to him.

- ❖ **And for my fellow believers, I urge you to appropriate this freedom that Christ has won for us.** Many of us find ourselves stuck in a cycle of sin. In an unhealthy pattern of sinfulness, making idols out of good things in life. **You feel stuck, like you can't change. But that's a lie. If you're truly in Christ, you've already been freed.** Sin's hold on you is broken. There is no idol that holds any power over you. If you feel that way, it's because you're living a lie. You're not living in light of the gospel.
 - Ask God to empower you by his Spirit to break that unhealthy pattern, to drop that bad habit, to walk away from that temptation. By his grace, you already can because those whom the Son sets free are free indeed (Jn. 8:36).

Shamgar the Unknown

- ❖ Let's conclude by briefly looking at v31 and who I'm calling Shamgar the Unknown. I give him that title because there's not that much I can tell you about him. He's only got one verse. *"After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel."*
 - The invading nation this time are the Philistines. They'll come up again in Samson's story. And commentators say, based on his name, Shamgar is likely not an Israelite by blood. Just like Othniel. And there's a good chance he's a poor laborer who works the fields for a rich landowner.

- ❖ The oxgoad mentioned there was a farmer's tool. It was about 8-feet long with a sharp prick on one end to help drive the cattle across the field as you're plowing it, and there was usually a spade on the other end, which you'd use to clean off the plow before turning around and heading back the other direction. So it was a farmhand's tool, but Shamgar fashioned it as a weapon and killed 600 Philistines with it. And in so doing, he was able to save Israel.

- ❖ As I was preparing this week, I was thinking how to apply this verse. What can we learn from Shamgar? What can we draw from this one random verse about this one obscure, unknown judge? And then it made me ask myself: **When I consider the grand scheme of God's redemptive plan and purposes, would I be okay being a Shamgar in God's story?**
 - I know when my flesh gets the better of me, I want to be Ehud or better yet Deborah, Gideon, or Samson. I want to be legendary. I want stories written about the mighty deeds I performed in service to God and his people.

- ❖ I think all Christians want to be used by God. We want to serve him and make a difference in his kingdom. That's a good ambition, and by God's grace you will. **But would you be okay if your mighty deeds for the LORD barely fill a verse?** If they go relatively unknown and you're a relative unknown in God's kingdom.
 - I think Shamgar and his oxgoad could've easily been skipped. The author of Judges could've skipped v31 and headed straight into Deborah's story. But I think v31 is here to remind us that, in God's story, there are a thousand Shamgars for every one Ehud or Deborah. So I'm not surprised if you and I are Shamgars.

- ❖ **There is a good chance that none of us here will ever be well known for our mighty deeds and contribution to God's redemptive plan and purposes.** There's a good chance no one will write a book about us and what we did for God, much less even a verse.
 - But you can be sure of this: **We barely know a thing about Shamgar and what he did for the LORD, but I guarantee you God knows it all.** The Bible says God has his own book that he's already written for each of us. All of our mighty deeds done for the glory of our mighty God are recorded inside. He knows and he won't forget.
 - As we go forth this week, to faithfully serve the LORD in our homes, in our campuses and workplaces, don't bother yourself wondering if anyone will notice. God has. God sees you, and he delights to use you in his plans.