



Israel's First Three Judges Judges 3

Introduction

Would you choose freedom rather than slavery? Are you sure? Freedom has its price, its responsibilities, and its restrictions too. To be free, people must make difficult, often uncomfortable, choices. Charles Spurgeon said, "How intimately (the believer's) duties and privileges are bound up with Jesus Christ our Lord" (My Sermon Notes, C.H. Spurgeon). Slavery, on the other hand, may simply be the end of the road of least resistance.

Once freed from our sins by faith in Christ, it is partly up to us to keep free. Jesus' part is to sanctify us in the Holy Spirit so that, strengthened, we are not alone in the battle. Otherwise, we can be enslaved again by some of those same sins from which Christ liberated us.

"It takes courage to win freedom. It takes character to keep it. Freedom does only one thing. It allows us to make choices. If we make the wrong choices, we lose our freedom" (Keeping Free, Frank Pollard).

Israel had won her freedom by following God and obeying His word. The tribes could have kept their freedom in the same way. But they did not. There are priceless lessons here for us.

Outline of Judges Chapter 3

- I. Coexisting with Canaanites - Judges 3:1-6
- II. Cycle Introduced and First Deliverer, Othniel - Judges 3:7-11
- III. Cycle Repeated and Two Deliverers - Judges 3:12-31

I. Coexisting with Canaanites - Judges 3:1-6

A. Purpose In Predicament - Judges 3:1-5

- 1. *The nations which the Lord left, that He might test Israel* - Judges 3:1-3

a. God's mercy

God's mercy is particularly evident when He turns a bad thing to good. God and everything He does is good. It took faith for Joseph to believe that when he said to his brothers who had abandoned and sold him, *You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good* (Genesis 50:20). God turned Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites into a training opportunity!

b. Need for training

The new generation had not been toughened in battle. They were farmers not soldiers. The pagans in their midst could serve a good purpose in training them to handle opposition and to discern good from evil.

How alert are you? How battle ready are you in prayer due to those around you who promote ungodly philosophies and practices? Are you as effective against evil as your forebears?

2. The test - 3:4

The pagan peoples would be a litmus test. Would Israel choose to keep God's commandments given them by Moses, or not? Could they remain pure with immorality around them? Would they worship the one true God with multiple idols and exotic rites in view? Would they live a seemingly restricted, simple, and devout life when bombarded by sensual stimuli?

How well do Christians today pass these tests? Do we resist today's godless culture of sensational stimulation available twenty-four hours a day? Exotic and "fun-filled" experiences beckon. Indulgences and addictions formerly frowned upon are now accepted and excused as "only human". Does God see believers today exercising discernment and self discipline? Dare we expose our leisure habits to His holy examination?

B. Predictable Result of Coexistence - Judges 3:6

1. Mixed marriages

And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons. The inevitable result was the marriage of God's people with the ungodly. This almost always brings heartache to individuals. For cultures it means compromise and a weakening of traditions and values held dear.

For our protection God still advises, *Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers* (2 Corinthians 6:14).

2. Serving other gods

Influenced by their pagan mates, the men and women of Israel were led to turn from God and worship pagan deities. All this was contrary to the express prohibition of Exodus 23:24; 34:16-17 and Deuteronomy 7:3-4.

II. Cycle Introduced and First Deliverer, Othniel**5. Their cry to the Lord – 3:9a****A. The First Cycle - Judges 3:7-9****1. Doing evil – 3:7**

So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and Ashteroth. They took the first step down, out of their God-given position. The evil they committed had two parts.

- They forgot God
- They served the pagan gods

They committed spiritual adultery, which became such a national habit that by Jeremiah's time, four-hundred years later, it carried the whole nation into exile for seventy years.

Of this tragedy Francis Schaeffer wrote, "Two factors are involved. Israel has forgotten what her end will be if she turns from God, but, even more fundamental, she has forgotten her purpose as a nation - she has forgotten her relationship to God. She has forgotten what was recorded in the Pentateuch, that the chief end of man is to love God. She has forgotten her purpose as the people of God" (Death in the City, Francis Schaeffer).

Forgetting God is a dangerous step for it creates a vacuum eager to be filled by lesser forms, or "gods" (see Jeremiah 2:13).

2. The anger of the Lord - 3:8a

God is a jealous God. His jealousy is pure in motive, unlike ours which is selfish in motive. He loves us too much to be unmoved and unresponsive when we sin. The stupidity and waste from our unfaithfulness arouses His anger. In humans, anger produces adrenaline which girds us for action. This is not unlike God for when God is angry He acts.

3. Sold into the hand of the Mesopotamian king – 3:8b

God lifted His hand of protection from Israel and allowed Cushan-Rishathaim, a king from the land which Abraham had left, to dominate them. Mesopotamia today is Iraq.

4. Enslaved for eight years – 3:8c

They were back to square one, from slaves in Egypt to slaves in their own land.

Their misery broke their rebellion and pride so that they cried to the Lord who heard their cry as He had at first when their forefathers were slaves in Egypt (Exodus 2:24). *This poor man cried out and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles* (Psalm 34:6). Will you cry to the Lord if you are miserable and let Him deliver you?

6. A deliverer raised up – 3:9

Othniel, the first deliverer, begins the line of judges.

B. The First Judge, Othniel – Judges 3:10-11

Othniel was related to Caleb, Israel's military and spiritual hero, even before his marriage to Caleb's daughter. He was the son of Caleb's brother Kenaz, and he married Caleb's daughter Achsah after a successful campaign (Judges 1:12-13).

1. Empowered by God's Spirit

The Spirit of the Lord came upon him. The primary qualification for serving the Lord is spiritual power. Othniel received it. In Old Testament times, God's Spirit came upon selected people to give them supernatural wisdom and power for service. Some examples are Joseph (Genesis 41:38), Bezalel (Exodus 31:3), Balaam (Numbers 24:2, a confusing example), Joshua (Numbers 27:18), Gideon (Judges 6:34), Jephthah (Judges 11:29), Samson (Judges 13:24-25), Saul (1 Samuel 11:6), and David (1 Samuel 16:13). There are many more as well.

Individuals who had the Spirit come upon them were not necessarily godly, Balaam and Saul for example. This proves that the purpose was job performance and not relationship with God. When God had something extraordinary He wanted done at a particular time, and a certain person was available to do it, God could empower him or her, much as an employer would give an employee a needed tool. The moving of God's Spirit is an awesome thing and beyond explanation.

The relationship of the Holy Spirit to individuals changed after the cross, at Pentecost. Before the cross, Jesus told His disciples, *He dwells with you*. But he also told them He *will be in you* (John 14:17). This happened at Pentecost and has been the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the believer ever since. He dwells "with" many people, but He dwells "in" all who belong to Jesus Christ (Romans 8:9). Do you have this reality because you believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

2. Judge

And he judged Israel. Othniel was the first of the judges from which the book takes its name. Israel had known two great leaders, Moses and Joshua, who led the entire nation. Now they would have thirteen judges, eleven of whom are in the book of Judges. None of them would judge over the entire nation except the last two, Eli and Samuel (in 1 Samuel).

3. Gave the land rest

Othniel was a military hero who went to war against the king of Mesopotamia and prevailed. Israel was set free. Thanks to the people's repentance and Othniel's strong leadership holding them to it, the land had rest for forty years.

III. Cycle Repeated and Two Deliverers - Judges 3:12-31

A. Second Cycle of Failure and Mercy - Judges 3:12-14

1. Unfaithfulness of the people – 3:12a

Again, the people committed evil in God's sight, although they probably did not think of it as such. People are able to fool themselves and rationalize their behavior. However, it is always best to see things from God's perspective, especially our own motives and behavior. Paul warns us to keep examining ourselves every time we take communion, the Lord's table, because God is examining us and He will act accordingly (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

2. Response from God – 3:12b

So the Lord strengthened Eglon king of Moab against Israel. Eglon, an obscure king of Moab, otherwise unknown, enters the sacred record thanks to the sinning Israelites.

3. Defeat of Israel – 3:13

This pagan king enlisted support from the fearsome Ammonites and Amalekites unnecessarily. He was unaware that he could not lose because God had strengthened him as a rod of punishment for Israel. He took possession of Jericho, *the city of Palms*, an oasis by the Dead Sea which had been Israel's first conquest in the promised land. This was especially humiliating.

4. Enslaved again

Israel's servitude to Eglon of Moab lasted eighteen years.

5. Supplication out of desperation

Someone has noted, "Man's extremity is God's opportunity." The Israelites remained enslaved until they cried to God. As soon as they cried out, He acted, not out of obligation, but from mercy.

6. Deliverer Raised Up

There was a man named Ehud whom God was ready to use.

B. Ehud the Second Judge - Judges 3:15-29

Ehud was a Benjamite, the tribe that produced Saul of the Old Testament, Israel's first king, and Saul of the New Testament, Christianity's great Apostle Paul.

1. A left-handed man – 3:15

What was generally regarded as a handicap became Ehud's greatest weapon. The tribe of Benjamin seemed to produce left-handers. Judges 20:15-16 mentions *seven-hundred select men* (of the tribe of Benjamin) *who were left-handed; every one of them could sling a stone at a hair's breadth and not miss.* What big league pitchers they would have been! Was Peter also a Benjamite? Only a left-hander would cut off the right ear of the temple guardsman (John 18:10). Was left-handedness Paul's thorn in the flesh? Not likely.

Whatever our handicaps may be, God can take them and turn them to advantages. Paul chose to glory in his infirmities because *when I am weak, then am I strong* (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Do you have a handicap, defect, weakness, impediment, or personality difficulty? Will you acknowledge it and offer it up to the Lord Jesus? God loves you just the way you are and He will take that thing which plagues you, cleanse it, and sanctify it for His purposes!

2. A courier – 3:16-25

The people trusted Ehud and chose him to deliver their tax money to the king of Moab. Eglon, the king, was a bit handicapped too. He was very fat. Ehud had noticed this, and before one of his trips to Moab he made himself a dagger eighteen inches long and hid it in his clothes on his right side.

Ehud had a strategy. After presenting the tax money, he sent his helpers home and he turned back alone for a do-or-die encounter with the king. The king may have thought Ehud had more money for him or was asking a favor when Ehud said, *I have a secret message for you, O king*, for he sent all his servants away.

Aware of the significance of his opportunity, Ehud said, as the king approached him, that the message was from God. He then finished him off in quite a gory fashion and did not wait around to retrieve his weapon which was buried in Eglon's flesh.

3. Escape – 3:26-27

On the way home, near Jericho, the stone images which Ehud passed both coming and going (3:19 and 26), could have been the stones which Joshua took out of the Jordan and set up on land, as God commanded (Joshua 4). Can you see Ehud salute them as he passed by?

4. Giving the glory to God - vs.28

Ehud took no credit for any victories, private or public, saying, *Follow me, for the Lord has delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand.*

5. Peace and rest - Judges 3:30

The land had peace and rest for eighty years under Ehud.

C. The Third Judge, Shamgar - Judges 3:31

After him was Shamgar...who killed six hundred men of the Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also delivered Israel. Shamgar is considered the third judge and may have judged the western part of Judah during Ehud's judgeship to the east. The Philistines lived along the coast of the Mediterranean, whereas the Moabites were east of the Jordan (see map). The land's enduring name, Palestine, is derived from the name Philistine. They were a very strong, tenacious people, undefeated until David.

For Shamgar to singlehandedly kill six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad, a non-military weapon, was heroic indeed, if not downright miraculous. An oxgoad is, as it says, for goading or prodding oxen. It is about eight feet long with a pointed end. In this case, the Philistines got the point!

Applications

1. Are you ready, willing and able to stand up for the Lord?
2. Do you make excuses for not being involved, or do you use whatever is at hand to defeat the enemy?
3. Whom will you encourage and invite to follow you in serving our King Jesus?