

Using the Unlikely

Cycles of Sin . . . Stories of Grace – Part II

Judges 3

Introduction

I believe that many, if not most Christians live in a state of semi-discouragement because they do not fit what they consider to be the concept of the kind of Christian that God can and will use.

The reasons for this problem are as diverse as the body of Christ. Some are consumed with guilt over past sin; some are debilitated by failure, which is interrupted only briefly at times, by success; others feel inadequate because they lack a formal education; still others seem overwhelmed by physical limitations; some suffer with the scars of their family history or personal background; others have difficulty accepting themselves as less than perfect. These Christians think, “Surely God cannot or will not use me as He would really like.”

This problem can be boiled down to the following statement:

Many Christians are paralyzed by the belief that since they do not measure up to the model, they do not fit the mold of usable Christians.

Ask a Christian lady, “What kind of woman does God use?”

She will respond with a hazy, but very idealistic answer that the woman God can use will have the virtue and industry of the Proverbs 31 woman; the submissiveness of Sarah; the grace of Queen Esther; the hospitality of Lydia; the teachability of Mary; the faith of Ruth; the body of Miss America.

Who would like to apply?

Ask a Christian man, “What kind of man does God use?”

His answer will be someone who takes charge like Elijah; builds cities like Nehemiah; debates with kings like Daniel; speaks with the wisdom of Solomon; endures the hardships of prison like Paul; has a lake front cottage like the disciples and spends a lot of time fishing.

When the average woman is asked this question, her answer will be a woman who drips with perfection. When the average man is asked the same question, his answer will be a man whose resumé is filled with accomplishments.

A lack of perfection and accomplishment are the things that debilitate many, if not most believers from ever even trying; from ever making themselves available to God. Christians think, “Since I don’t fit the model, I must not fit God’s mold.”

This thinking, however, is not being guided by scripture. When we turn to God’s word, we discover a wonderful truth – God does not have a mold. God does not have a heavenly cookie cutter with which He cuts out paper doll Christians that sound alike and dress alike and fit a perfect and accomplished mold. It is the world that produces conformity – it is the world that tells you what to wear, if you want to be with the “in” crowd, and so on. God wants to produce individuality in the body of Christ.

No other book spells this out more clearly than the book of Judges. In this Old Testament book that we are studying, we find twelve men and one woman that God used to impact a nation. All of them are different from each other; all of them are ordinary, if not unlikely candidates for God's service. Yet, all of them, He called judges.

The first thing we need to clear up is a misconception of these judges. They had no courtroom, wore no robes, and received no salary. In fact, these people were probably more like Matt Dillon and John Wayne than a dignified Supreme Court Judge. They resembled western sheriffs, who, with forceful personalities led the people and enforced justice.

Their story is actually a lesson on human nature. By the time we finish our study of the book of Judges, we will have the cycle of sin embedded in our minds. The people follow God under the leadership of a judge; the judge dies; the people fall into sin and servitude; the people despair and then, repent. God brings along a judge and the people follow God; the judge dies; the people fall into sin and servitude; the people despair and then, repent. This cycle is repeated over and over.

This kind of scene is very normal in every day life. What happens when the external controls are taken off the lives of people? How do they act?

What happens, for example, when a city has a blackout? We read about the crimes for days in the newspapers.

Watch a class of second graders when the teacher leaves the room for a moment. Erasers fly; bubblegum appears out of nowhere.

How many moms have had wild things happen as soon as you have gotten on the phone? What is it about getting on the phone? It is as if the kid thinks, "She won't yell at me because there is someone on the other end. What kind of chaos can I create?"

My kids do not do this, by the way, I have just overheard other parents talking!

Let us pick up the story today, in Judges chapter 3. Joshua dies and the Israelite people fall into sin and idolatry.

Othniel – Winner Over “Double Trouble” Cushan

Let us read Judges 3:7-10a and take a look at the first judge.

The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and the Asheroth.

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.

When the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. . . .

Now each judge seemed to have one primary enemy. For Othniel, it was the king of Mesopotamia. Cushan had enslaved the Israelites for eight years. The people paid tribute to this king. This is similar to mafia protection money. In other words, "If you pay me money, I'll let you live."

Note Judges 3:10b.

. . . When he went out to war, the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

This king of Mesopotamia is an interesting figure. His name is Cushan. The last part of his name, "rishathaim," is a nickname meaning, "doubly evil"; "doubly wicked"; "double trouble".

Cushan has taken on this name to intimidate those who would come against him. This is similar to the name Ivan the terrible. It is like the names of professional wrestlers. Who would ever want to get into the ring with a guy named "bone-crusher" Smith?

In the same way, who would want to face "doubly evil" Cushan; "double trouble" Cushan?

Othniel did face Cushan, and by God's power and grace, won.

Now earlier, I spoke about God using the unlikely. By now, you are probably assured that Othniel is exactly the kind of man God would use. He:

- had a godly family heritage, being the younger brother of Caleb;
- had all the right connections;

- had experience in war;
- had faith and was already proven.

God can and will use people like this! If this describes you, do not be intimidated by someone's criticism that you have all the right connections. I myself, in fact, represent the eighth generation of preachers in my family. By God's grace, we want to capitalize on that heritage; to stand on the shoulders of our predecessors for the benefit of God's glory.

If you do not have this heritage or experience, then take a look at the next judge – he certainly does not fit this mold!

Othniel dies and the people sin.

Ehud – The Left Handed Warrior

Now look at Judges 3:12. God will raise up a second judge.

Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord.

Skip to Judges 3:15.

But when the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man.

Let us notice right away, two things about Ehud.

1. Ehud was a Benjamite; that is, he was from the tribe of Benjamin.

The tribe of Benjamin was the smallest, least significant tribe in terms of numeric size and connections in all of Israel. It was the most unlikely tribe for a national hero to come from. In fact, when Joseph blessed his brothers in Egypt before dying, Benjamin was the last to be blessed and he only got one sentence worth, while the others received three or four. So recognize that Ehud comes from a tribe that did not have the right connections!

2. Secondly, Ehud was left-handed.

At first glance, this surprised me. Is being left-handed so odd! I am left-handed. Are you left-handed?

It is tough to be left-handed, is it not? Notebooks, file cabinets, appliances, and many other things are designed for right-handed people.

A man who is awkward is called a word in French that literally means left-handed. If something is evil or wicked, it is called sinister, which is Latin for the left hand. There was a time in American history that being left-handed signified a bad omen and so, the child was forced to write with his right hand.

I have good news for all the “lefties”. Recent studies of the brain have produced the understanding of the brain's two hemispheres. Those who are left-handed are dominated by their right hemisphere. This goes to prove that left-handed people are the only ones in their right mind!

How many think I should stick with teaching this passage? All the right-handed people are raising their hands!

In verse 15, the Hebrew text for “a left-handed man” does not actually say left-handed. It is “aster yadyomenu,” which is literally translated, “a man hindered; impeded; defective in his right hand”.

Ehud was left-handed because he could not use his right hand. Perhaps he had been born handicapped, or maybe an accident had crushed his hand or his hand had been broken and improperly set, or perhaps he had some neurological disorder that caused his arm to draw up and his hand to curl under.

Israel needs a man to take on the pagan king Eglon; a mighty warrior to represent the sons of Israel; Israel needs a savior. In Judges 3:15, we read,

. . . the Lord raised up a deliverer . . .

In Hebrew, “deliverer” is “yeshua” or “savior”.

Who does God choose??!! A handicapped man from the smallest tribe in Israel!

The next verses reveal Ehud's courage. He single-handedly infiltrates the enemy palace, kills the king, and escapes with no one noticing. Let us read what happens in Judges 3:16-30.

Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak.

A cubit, by the way, is the measure from your hand to your elbow. Continue to Judges 3:17.

He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.

Ehud is presenting the protection money to Eglon, the king of Moab. The Bible picks on “lefties” and

now, “heavies”! This is actually inserted to explain what will occur later. Note Judges 3:18.

It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute.

Ehud is now alone with the king. Look at Judges 3:19. This verse is inserted, by the way, to remind the reader that Ehud is about to rid the land of an idolater, not just a gangster who is forcing Israel to pay protection money. Ehud is acting as God’s instrument of judgment.

But he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” And he said, “Keep silence.” And all who attended him left him.

Ehud really did have a message from God for the king. Continue to Judges 3:20-23. Now the camera slips into slow motion.

Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, “I have a message from God for you.” And he arose from his seat.

Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly.

The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out.

Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them.

This chamber, by the way, was also the bathroom of the king, which was typical of that day. Look at Judges 3:24-25a.

When he had gone out, his servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, “He is only relieving himself in the cool room.”

They waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. . . .

The servants waited until they became literally, embarrassed! They were probably muttering under their breath, “What is taking him so long. Should we

check on him? If he is in there reading a magazine, he will chop our heads off for interrupting him. . . . We’d better check.”

The servants go in and discover the king. Continue to Judges 3:25b-27. Ehud is not finished yet.

. . . Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.

Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.

It came about when he had arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was in front of them.

Note that Ehud is in front! Continue to Judges 3:28-30.

He said to them, “Pursue them, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands”. So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan opposite Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross.

They struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men; and no one escaped.

So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years.

Ehud was a crippled man, used by God to become a crusader! He had no family connections; no physical appeal; no great experience to draw on, but God selected him.

Shamgar – The Hero From Among Peasants

Look at Judges 3:31. We will read of Shamgar, the third judge who judges as faithfully as all the others, yet is only given one verse.

After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

There is only one verse on Shamgar, but there are three clues that tell us volumes. Let us look at these.

1. Clue number one is that Shamgar was not an Israelite name – it was a Canaanite name.

This informs us that Shamgar did not grow up with the kind of background and heritage that we would expect of a national religious leader.

2. Clue number two is that his father's name, Anath, was the Canaanite god of sexual immorality and war.

Shamgar's father was named in honor of an immoral and violent Canaanite god. It seems likely that his father and family were part and parcel of the Canaanite idolatry.

3. Clue number three is that Shamgar was probably poor.

We can assume Shamgar's financial picture by talking a look at his weapon – an oxgoad. This was a long wooden stick that was tipped with metal at one end and a blade on the other for cleaning the plow. It was the tool peasants used to keep their oxen plowing together in the fields.

Shamgar was a Canaanite and a peasant, yet a man who followed God and risked his life by fighting the Philistines.

Conclusion

Let me summarize three thoughts that we have implied, but have not explicitly stated.

1. First, when God chooses His servants, He is not interested in externals; He does not care if they make fashion statements.

It does not seem as if He cares whether a person is wearing the garb of a peasant or the garb of the first judge Othniel, who had a godly man for a brother. If God does not care, should the church?!

2. Secondly, when God chooses His servants, it does not seem as if He is interested in their experience.

God will thrust these men and one woman into the spotlight as leaders; as judges, when they have never walked in those shoes before. In fact, there is not even a job description. He does not seem to be concerned about their resumés. Yet, God puts these people in a position in which His Spirit and His power lead through them. If God is not concerned with experience, should the church be?

3. Thirdly, God is not concerned with the physical attractiveness or the strength of His servants.

He chooses the paralyzed bodies of people like Joni Eareckson Tada and Scott Mitchell to impact His church. He chooses a blind girl by the name of Fannie Crosby to give the church many of its hymns. God chooses the ordinary, unlikely lump of clay. God chooses you and He chooses me to be His servants.

These three judges had one thing in common – they were willing to give all they were for God to use in whatever way He chose.

Turn to one other passage of scripture – Isaiah 40:28-31. If we capture the message of this passage, we will never again say, “Since I’m not the model; since I’m too weak; since I don’t have the experience, God can’t use me.”

*Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator
of the ends of the earth does not become
weary or tired. His understanding is
inscrutable.*

*He gives strength to the weary, and to
him who lacks might He increases power.*

*Though youths grow weary and tired,
and vigorous young men stumble badly,*

*Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain
new strength; they will mount up with wings
like eagles, they will run and not grow tired,
they will walk and not become weary.*

There is an interesting phrase in verse 31 – in fact, underline the words “gain new strength”. This phrase is one Hebrew word that can be translated, “to exchange; to replace”. So Isaiah 40:31a could read, “Yet those who wait for the Lord will exchange their strength for His . . .”.

Each of these three judges; these three men made this exchange. We need to do this too. We need to come to the Lord and say, “Lord, I need to exchange:

- my pitiful weakness for Your strength;
- my inability for Your sovereign ability;
- my failure for Your accomplishment;
- my lack of discernment for Your wisdom;
- my smallness for Your greatness.”

We need to make this exchange that God has allowed us to make, every day.

Hudson Taylor, a great missionary whose biography I have read and re-read, impacted the land of China. He founded, during his missionary ministry, the China Inland Mission, through which six hundred young men and women went to China as missionaries. Near the end of his life, he wrote these words that showed his understanding of the exchanged life,

God is sufficient for God's work. God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do His great works by large committees. He trains someone to be quiet enough and small enough, and then He uses them.

Do you want to be a judge? Do you want to overcome the enemies in your life – the Eglons and the things in your life that are “double trouble” to you?

The real question is, “Are you weak enough; are you small enough to allow God the privilege and sovereign right to exchange your weakness and your smallness for His strength?”

God delights to use Othniels and Ehuds and Shamgars. He uses the ordinary, the unlikely, the people who are willing to stumble up to His throne of grace and say, “Lord, warts and all; problems and all; disabilities in some areas – physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, certainly spiritually – here I am to be used by You. I want to exchange everything of myself for everything of You – use me for Your glory.

We find in Judges 3 that God says, “Ah, you’re just the person I was looking for.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/9/1992 by Stephen Davey.

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