

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Ehud & the Two-Edged Sword – (Judges Chapter 3) Last week we introduced the book of Judges and explored the introductory section (chapters 1-2) that lays the foundation for the book as a whole. We learned of the four stages identified by Arthur Cundall, apostasy, servitude, supplication, and deliverance and are prepared to assign any given period to one of those four categories.¹ The overarching concern of the book is to demonstrate to God's people who had apostatized by intermarrying with the surrounding Canaanite nations and serving their gods, that the covenant making God is alone able to judge or "save" his people from their sins and from themselves. Today we will look at the first of three such saviors that God used to bring deliverance to his people when they made supplication in repentance to him or when he in his mercy sought to give them a reprieve from the harsh judgment of their rebellion. Although we will identify the first three judges, most of our attention will be directed towards Ehud. The other two judges flank Ehud, and by comparison, the level of detail describing the other two's tenure as judge pales in relation to his.

Before we move into exploring the first of the three judges identified in chapter three, we must deal with the service level appearance of incongruity between three different explanations for the remaining presence of Canaanites in the land. Our assigned reading begins by offering an explanation that is different (but should not be seen as contradictory to) the other two explanations already given. Judges 3:1-2 reads, "*Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before.*" With this explanation we can identify the following three reasons for the Canaanites remaining in the land:

- 1) *Judgement* – Judges 2:3 reveals, "*...I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you.*" As we saw last week, this pronouncement was made as a judgment against the people of God for their unfaithfulness to the covenant.
- 2) *Test* (trial of faith) – Judges 2:20b-22 states, "*Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not.*" It is here clear that the reason the Canaanite inhabitants were allowed to stay in the land was to be a test of faith for the people of God, i.e. God's people would know his will by contrasting his pure precepts with the lifestyle of the land's inhabitants. This was pointed to last week as a demonstration of God's mercy even with the pronouncement of judgment.

¹ Cundall, Arthur E. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Judges and Ruth*. Pg. 70
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- 3) *To Teach Them War* – Judges 3:1-2. Since this passage has already been quoted (above), it will suffice to say that the explicit reason mentioned at the beginning of the assigned reading for this week for God leaving the Canaanite inhabitants in the land had to do with teaching the people of God warfare, an indispensable feature for a nation occupying a land bridge between the continent of Africa (and the great Egyptian empire) and Asia Minor.

How are we to approach the three explanations offered above? Are they contradictory reasons or does each offer a different level of insight into what God is doing among his people? I suggest that the reasons here given can be summarized as follows: it is true that God did not drive out the Canaanite inhabitants of the land because of the sin and rebellion of the people of God. The presence of the Canaanite inhabitants would be a constant reminder to the people of God of their sin and rebellion and of God's just judgment. Even with judgment, however, there is mercy. So, we see that God took what was the just reward of his people and chose to sovereignly use it to further his redemptive purposes on behalf of his people. Another way to interpret the Hebrew word (לִצְדִּים) in 2:3 which is translated as "thorns in your sides" above is simply *to your sides*, suggesting the limits of the land reaching to the inhabitants left in the land and no further. Given the idiomatic context, however, it is more likely that the correct interpretation should be considered as sides that cause provocation. This is supported by the end of the verse that mentions the deities of the remaining tribes as being a snare to the people of God. What might be envisioned by the author is the traps used in the ancient near east to catch birds, in which, "... the victim, flying into a trap, actuates a spring which causes it to be knocked down or pierced."²

So, we can reconcile the three explanations given above by pointing to the mercy of God that uses the judgement of his people to strengthen them in their ultimate covenantal mission. God will use the presence of the surrounding nations to prevent his people from growing soft. He will teach them the art of war so that they can be prepared to defend themselves from surrounding invaders.

Part One: Othniel, the Expected Hero – It is noted in the text that the first to judge or save Israel was the son of Caleb's younger brother. This man was none other than the nephew to the great Caleb who was upheld in the book of Joshua as a contrast to the apathetic spirit of his age. Caleb, though advanced in years, sought to conquer Hebron and overtake the surrounding towns knowing that the descendants of the giants lived there. He remained undeterred by the threat of danger, knowing and trusting in the power of his God to bring deliverance. It should be no surprise, then, that when his generation passed and the majority of Israel, "...forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth..." God would judge them as they deserved. When they cried to him in supplication and repentance, he sent them the son of Caleb's brother to save them from the hand of their oppressor for a period of forty years.

Although the leading character of today's lesson, and of chapter three of Judges, is Ehud, we must look at the two judges that flank him to understand what contrast is being made. In fact, it is quite possible that the author included the brief snippets about Othniel and Shamgar for the sake of highlighting what is most surprising about Ehud. Othniel teaches us that God raised up a savior in response to Israel's repentance, from a likely source: Caleb's household. The text informs us that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him and he judged Israel. This is demonstrated by his military prowess and might, and the Lord delivering the king of Mesopotamia into his hand (Judges 3:10).

² Cundall, Arthur E. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Judges and Ruth*. Pg. 67
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Part Two: Ehud, the Unlikely Judge – Following the period of reprieve that occurred under the leadership of Othniel, the familiar refrain of the book ensues: “*And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...*” The chosen servant of his judgment this time would not be the Canaanite inhabitants, but King Eglon of Moab. King Eglon was known for one reason in the text: his size. Apparently he was a man significantly overweight. He subjected Israel to servitude and occupied the cursed city, the city of Palm Trees or Jericho. It must have been quite provocative for the people of God to witness the city of God’s miraculous destruction, the first fruits of Israel’s conquest reoccupied by an enemy king.

However, this time, God would rescue his people from an unlikely source. It would not be the expected protégé of a great family in Israel, but rather a man from the tribe of Benjamin who did not have use of his right hand. When you read the account of Ehud the description in the English Bible simply reads, “*...the Lord raised up for them a Benjaminite, a left-handed man*” (3:15). However, the actual Hebrew conveys the meaning that he did not have use of his right hand. It is quite possible that his right hand had been deformed or paralyzed in some way.³ Any inability to use the right hand would have been seen as an abnormality among the ancient people of God, making Ehud an unlikely deliverer. The irony does not stop there. Ehud’s tribe of origin was Benjamin, which means, “son of my right hand” in Hebrew. Here we have a savior from the tribe who had the distinction of being Jacob’s son of his right hand (son of power and strength), and he could not use his own right hand. Of all the candidates for Judges in Israel, it was probably Ehud who would have been voted the most unlikely to succeed, but God had other plans.

For the reasons listed above (the fact that Ehud had no use of his right hand), he was undoubtedly viewed as harmless, and was given the undesirable position of being the conveyor of tribute on behalf of the people of Israel. We read here of no supernatural occurrence; no mention is made of the Spirit of the Lord coming upon Ehud. Instead, this unfortunate misfit concocted an ingenious plan: he made a sword with two edges. The fact that he created such a piece is astounding when you compare the weapon with others used by Judges and men of valor throughout Israel during this time. He hid his workmanship on his right thigh under his clothes. After presenting the tribute to the king, he convinced him that he had a special message for him, which caused the king to send away all his attendants. Ehud and Eglon were left alone in the house. Ehud then shared that he had a message from God for the king. The king arose from his chair ready to receive the message from God, and Ehud plunged the sword into his belly and Eglon’s bowels fell out.

After he made good his escape, Ehud came to the hill country of Ephraim and blew a trumpet of war calling all the armies of God’s people to him. His message to them is the only indication we have of his faith. He stated, “*Follow after me, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand*” (3:28). Which hand? Not the gnarled and useless right one. The left hand. Even today in the Middle East, it is considered a disgrace to shake hands or pour water with your left hand. Yet it was this very hand into which God delivered the king of the oppressor. Verse thirty states, “*So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years*” (3:30).

God used this outcast to bring deliverance to his people. The people of God killed nearly 10,000 of the Moabites, and they were subdued.

³ Both Michael Wilcock and Arthur Cundall concur with this meaning of the Hebrew in their commentaries, *The Message of Judges* and *Judges and Ruth*, respectively. Baney, Lesson 9 Winter/Spring 2016

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Part Three: Using What is in Your Hand – The third and final judge mentioned in our text is Shamgar. Only one verse is used to describe the way God used him to deliver his people. We do know from the Song of Deborah, that the situation in Israel at the time of his leadership was very bleak. Judges 5:6 reads, *“In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath... the highways were abandoned and travelers kept to the by-ways...”* Our assigned text informs us that Shamgar, *“...killed 600 of the Philistines (the Canaanite inhabitants) with an ox-goad.*

An ox-goad may sound like an interesting weapon, but remember that most of the Israelites did not possess the traditional weapons of their oppressors during this era. A weapon had to be formed from whatever was available at the time. According to one source an ox goad, “... is a wooden tool, approximately eight feet long, fitted with an iron spike or point at one end, which was used to spur oxen as they pulled a plow or cart. It often had an iron scraper at the non-pointed end to clear clods of earth from the plowshare when it became weighed down.”⁴ It was this device, the common tool of an everyday farmer, that Shamgar used to kill 600 Philistines, and was a judge or savior to Israel.

Conclusion: To conclude our lesson this week we will examine the pastoral application that can be drawn from this chapter as a whole. The first judge (Othniel) reminds us of the process which consistently prevails throughout the book of Judges, but within which God is not obligated to perform as if he were the end result of a mathematically precise formula. There are times that he demonstrates his mercy to his people and saves them even when they do not repent. Ehud reminds us that a savior can come from unexpected places. God uses the weak and foolish things of this world to confound the strong and wise (1 Corinthians 1:27). Shamgar reminds us that we are responsible to use whatever we have in our hand (ox goad) to expand God’s kingdom rule in our lives.

⁴ <http://www.gotquestions.org/oxgoad-Bible.html>