

Lesson 5

Israel's Sinfulness; God's Faithfulness

God is faithful to save all who seek Him.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

A cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance plagued Israel during the era of the judges. New generations of Jews born in the land that God gave their forebears began to worship the false gods in Canaan. God responded with corrective punishment intended to turn their hearts back to Him. When they cried out to God, He gave them leaders, called judges, whom He empowered to defeat Israel's oppressors and liberate Israel to serve Him. In this lesson, the judges Othniel and Ehud are reviewed as men whom the Lord raised up to deliver the children of Israel. The purpose of God's corrective actions was to restore a right relationship with His people.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

With eighteen letters and six syllables, the longest name in the Bible is *Mahershalalhashbaz* (Isaiah 8:1, 3). *Cushan-Rishathaim* (Judges 3:8) is second, with 17 letters. This name (pronounced *ku'shan-rish-a-tha'-im*) means "the twice evil Cushite." Most likely, this was Israel's name for him rather than the name the king used for himself. He is the first king named in Judges to oppress Israel as an act of God's judgment for their worship of the false gods of Canaan. God allowed Israel to endure eight years of oppression until they finally cried out to Him, at which time God "raised up" Othniel, the son of Kenaz (Judges 3:9), to deliver them.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. PATTERN OF DEFECTION AND DELIVERANCE *Judges 2:10–23*

- A. The Failure of the People (10–17)
- B. The Rise of the Judges (18–23)

2. THE LORD'S SPIRIT ANOINTS OTHNIEL *Judges 3:7–11*

- A. The Peril of Forgetting God (7–8)
- B. A Prayer God Answered (9–11)

3. EHUD CONQUERS MOAB AND LEADS ISRAEL *Judges 3:12–30*

- A. The Left-Handed Judge (12–15)
- B. Cloak and Dagger Deliverance (16–30)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. PATTERN OF DEFECTION AND DELIVERANCE *Judges 2:10–23*

A. The Failure of the People *Judges 2:10–17*

The Book of Judges begins with the death of Joshua and the people seeking God's guidance moving forward against the Gentile nations remaining in Canaan. Several of the tribes of Israel had failed to drive the Gentiles out of their allotted land (vv. 16-35). Judges 2 looks back, before the death of Joshua, to a visit from the Angel of the Lord (v. 1) who spoke as the Lord, using the first-person pronoun *I* six times. (Some Biblical scholars believe the Angel [Messenger] of the Lord is the pre-incarnate Christ.) The Angel reminded Israel of His covenant with them and asked why they had not torn down all the altars of the false gods in the land. He said the enemy nations would be a snare to the people of God (v. 3). When they heard this, they wept (v. 4), repented, and sacrificed to the Lord. They called the place "*Bochim*" (v. 5), which means "weeping." After this, Joshua dismissed the people to return to their allotted land, where that generation served the Lord while Joshua was alive (v. 7). When Joshua died (v. 8), a new generation arose, "*which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel*" (v. 10).

Verses 11 through 23 summarize the Book of Judges: A new generation, who were handed the land from their parents, "*did evil in the sight of the LORD*" (v. 11). They abandoned the God who brought their parents out of Egyptian bondage and began to serve the false Canaanite gods, Baal and Ashtaroth. In keeping with His covenant of blessings or curses (Deuteronomy 30:19), God chastised the people. God not only withdrew His protective hand, enabling the Gentile nations to oppress Israel, but God "*delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled [plundered] them*" (v. 14). However, when the children of Israel cried out to the Lord in their distress, "*the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them*" (v. 16).

B. The Rise of the Judges *Judges 2:18–23*

Verses 11 through 17 reveal the cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance, but verse 18 notes that the people never seemed to learn how obedience leads to God's blessings. Instead, even after witnessing God's deliverance, as soon as a judge died, "*they played the harlot with other gods*" (v. 17 NKJV). Furthermore, it seems each generation was more corrupt than the previous (v. 19). Their behavior angered God, who said because they refused to listen to and obey His voice, He would not drive out any of the nations who remained in Canaan (vv. 20-21).

This explains why hostile kingdoms remained in Israel as constant threats, even into the reign of David. God said that through these pagan nations, He would "*prove [test] Israel, whether they will keep the way of the LORD ... or not*" (v. 22). These pagan nations did four things: (1) tested Israel's faithfulness to God (3:1); (2) were used to punish Israel when they were unfaithful to God (2:14); (3) kept Israel's armies ready for war (3:2); and (4) kept the land that Israel had not yet settled from becoming an untamed wilderness (Deuteronomy 7:20-24).

2. THE LORD'S SPIRIT ANOINTS OTHNIEL *Judges 3:7–11*

A. The Peril of Forgetting God *Judges 3:7–8*

This account begins by noting Israel's idolatry. Their parents were fading from the scene, and this generation, which had known only Canaan as their home, became comfortable living among the Canaanites. They were intermarrying with the pagan nations and embracing their false gods. Verse 7 states they did evil in the sight of the Lord, forgot God, and served the Baals and Asherahs

in the groves where the Canaanites set up wooden poles or idols. The word *Baal* is a title meaning “lord” or “husband” and is generally associated with the Syrian god Hadad, who was the god of wars and storms. By serving or worshiping this god, Israel was engaged in spiritual adultery.

Israel’s unfaithfulness to God resulted in His righteous anger. God is not petty or short-tempered. Indeed, He *“is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9). Saying the anger of the Lord was *“hot”* (Judges 3:8) does not mean God is easily provoked or that our actions result in wild emotional swings by God. God is always angered by sin, idolatry, and spiritual adultery. Likewise, God always looks favorably upon faithfulness and obedience. God does not emotionally move back and forth based on our actions. He is *immutable*, meaning “unchanging and unable to be changed.” However, human beings sometimes change from faithfulness and God’s blessings to unfaithfulness and God’s anger. To stay in God’s favor, Israel needed to remain faithful to their God. They did not. Therefore, they chose the anger of the Lord, who *“sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim, the king of Mesopotamia”* (v. 8 NKJV). The Hebrew word translated as *“sold”* can mean to sell as merchandise or to sell into servitude. If Israel did not choose to be free to serve God, they were choosing to be servants to the nations whose gods they served.

B. A Prayer God Answered Judges 3:9–11

As chapter 2 explained, when the conditions of Israel became intolerable, they would remember the Lord and cry out to Him. After eight years of servitude to the king of Mesopotamia, they cried out to the Lord, and He heard them. In response to their cries, God *“raised up a deliverer [for] the children of Israel, who delivered them”* (v. 9a). This is the first named judge of Israel—*“Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s young brother”* (v. 9b). Othniel was Caleb’s nephew, so he came from good lineage. He doubtlessly knew of the fame of his uncle Caleb, and God saw potential in Othniel as well.

Othniel, however, did not deliver Israel by his ability or strength. The Spirit of the Lord in him enabled Othniel to become a deliverer (judge) in Israel. After the Holy Spirit empowered him, he led an army to war against Cushan-Rishathaim and prevailed. The Lord chose and anointed Othniel as a deliverer, but deliverance came from the Lord. God does great things through ordinary people whom He anoints. As a result of the God-empowered leadership of Othniel, a generation of Jews (forty years) had rest from their enemies.

3. EHUD CONQUERS MOAB AND LEADS ISRAEL Judges 3:12–30

A. The Left-Handed Judge Judges 3:12–15

During Othniel’s judgeship, Israel enjoyed forty years of peace (a generation), but following his death, they resorted back to their old habits and did *“evil in the sight of the LORD”* (v. 12). Their evil included willfully disobeying their covenant with God and engaging in idolatry. As a result, *“the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel”* (v. 12). God gave Eglon the ability to defeat and dominate Israel. Eglon further strengthened his position by forming a coalition with the Ammonites and Amalekites (v. 13). Together, the coalition defeated Israel and *“possessed the city of palm trees”* (v. 13), which was at or near Jericho.

As a result of God’s judgment on Israel for their evil behavior, they served Moab for eighteen years (v. 14) until they again cried out to the Lord. He heard their cry and raised up another deliverer, a lefthanded man, *“Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite”* (v. 14). In Judges 20:16, other Benjamite warriors are described as *“left-handed.”* In both cases, the Hebrew wording indicates they were bound or limited in using their right hand. Lefthanded people

have traditionally been viewed as defective (the Latin word for *left* means “sinister”). Still, like athletes today—such as boxers, pitchers, and tennis players—they could be highly effective warriors. God anointed Ehud as Israel’s deliverer, and they sent him as an emissary to Eglon under the pretext of taking a present (possibly their required tribute) to the king.

B. Cloak and Dagger Deliverance *Judges 3:16–30*

Ehud crafted a double-edged dagger approximately eighteen inches long and fastened it to his right thigh under his garments. Because a sword (in this case, a long dagger) is usually carried on the opposite side of the dominant hand, Ehud positioned it to easily reach across his body to draw the dagger with his left hand. The advantage was that anyone suspicious would have been looking at his left side for a potential weapon since most people are right-handed. Ehud came to Eglon with a cadre of attendants bearing Israel’s present for the king. After giving their tribute to Eglon, Ehud sent them away. As they left, Ehud stopped and turned back at the “*stone images that were at Gilgal*” (v. 19 NKJV). He told the king he had a secret message for him, and as Ehud likely anticipated, the king told him to be silent until they were alone in the king’s chambers. The king even dismissed his attendants before allowing Ehud to speak. Ehud told the king, “*I have a message from God unto thee*” (v. 20). Eglon rose from his seat to approach Ehud, at which point Ehud reached down to his right thigh with his left hand to draw his dagger and plunge it deep into the belly of the obese king.

Eglon was “*very fat*” (v. 17), so when Ehud drove the dagger into the king, it was enveloped by fat, and Ehud could not pull it out. The wound was so severe that the king’s entrails began to spill out. Ehud then left by way of the porch, locking the chamber door behind him. When Eglon’s servants saw the door was locked, they assumed that the king was taking a bathroom break and were unwilling to disturb him. By the time they used their key to open the doors and discover the dead king, Ehud had escaped (vv. 25-27). At the mountain of Ephraim, he blew a trumpet to summon the armies of Israel, who descended upon the Moabites and killed about ten thousand Moabite warriors. As a result of this great victory, Israel “*had rest for eighty years*” (v. 30).

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

While there are no longer deliverers known as “judges,” God still raises Christian leaders to make a difference among His people, the community, and the world. God may be raising you and me for such a time as this.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

When called by God to go and do His will, trust that He will anoint you to perform the role or responsibility that He gives you. Trust that by God’s grace, you can make a difference.

WORKSHEET

Israels Idolatry in the Time of the Judges

During the Era of the Judges, in the history of ancient Israel, as told in the Book of Judges, the Israelites fell into idolatry (the worship of false gods) again and again, bringing on themselves repeatedly the righteous judgment of God.

At the Conclusion of Joshuas Life, the Israelites had failed to remove all the Canaanites from the land of Canaan, and those who remained, living in the land with Israel, evilly influenced the Israelites to worship false gods.

The Canaanites Were Extremely Corrupted by Sin. A curse placed on Canaan's descendants by Noah (Genesis 9:25) was a prophetic foretelling of how spiritually and morally corrupted the Canaanites would become.

The Israelites Had Been Taught by Moses not to go after *the doings of the land of Canaan* (Leviticus 18:3). The doings Moses had in mind were incest (v. 6), adultery (v. 20), the sacrifice of infants to false gods (v. 21), sexual relations between people of the same sex (v. 22), and sexual relations between humans and animals (v. 23). *For in all of these the nations are defiled which I [the LORD] cast out before you* (v. 24).

Why Were the Israelites in the Time of the Judges so attracted to the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites? Very likely the allure of idolatry was the desire to worship false gods that did not require of their devotees holiness of life, but encouraged and even required their devotees to engage in sexually immoral practices. The long history of the human race confirms that the lust for sinful sexual pleasures has always been one of the most powerful temptations for humans to resist. In fact, it will not be resisted without the saving, sanctifying grace of God in one's life.

In the Time of the Judges, the Israelites participated in Canaanite forms of idolatry (Judges 2:13; 3:7), and they also invented homegrown idolatry of their own (8:27; 17:1-5; 18:18-20, 30-31).

Going the Wrong Way

1. Describe Joshua's influence on the nation of Israel (Judges 2:7).

Who has a similar influence in your family or church, and how?

2. What sobering promise to Israel did the Lord keep (2:14-15)?

What does this say about the Lord's character?

3. Why did the Israelites become more and more corrupt (2:19)?

4. Paul Little said, Collapse in the Christian life is seldom a blowout; it is usually a small leak. Do you agree with his statement? Why or why not?

5. How was Othniel (Judges 3:9-10) like his older relative, Caleb (Numbers 14:24)?

What are you intentionally doing to have a positive influence on a younger person?