

Judges 3B

- Last time, we met the first of twelve judges
 - The first judges was Othniel
 - Israel had sinned by doing evil by worshipping idols in the land
 - The Lord responded by putting Israel into captivity at the hands of an enemy from Mesopotamia
 - After eight years, the people cried out for relief
 - And so God raised up Othniel to free Israel
 - He ruled for 40 years and during this time the people returned to obedience more or less
- Othniel's story was short
 - Other Judges will have much longer accounts
 - But in all cases, the details of each situation or judge matter less than the overall pattern of sin and redemption that plays out in each example
 - Samuel kept Othniel's story intentionally brief so we will have opportunity to learn the pattern
 - And that pattern always begins with Israel doing evil, despite possessing the Law and the Lord's blessing
 - Then the Lord will respond with a judgment of some kind
 - Which will lead the people to eventually learn their lesson
 - At which point the Lord will raise up a judge to contend with their sin
 - And for a time, the judge will serve to restore a degree of obedience
- But each turn of this wheel, the pattern is less successful at bringing Israel back into obedience
 - The destructive nature of sin and idolatry erodes the opportunity for future repentance and obedience

- And successive judges become less effective in controlling the people's hearts
 - And the judges themselves become less righteous
 - We noticed that Samuel records nothing negative about Othniel, not because he was perfect
 - But because Samuel is preparing us to see a degradation in the quality of the judges
- The whole book teaches us that the human heart is desperately wicked
 - And Law and human judges simply can't rescue men from that dilemma
 - The Law highlights our sin
 - And even our judges are corrupt
 - So where does Israel find its answer?
 - This book gives us to the same answer every book of scripture gives: Messiah
 - Men need a Law on our hearts
 - And a Judges who forgives
 - And a King who will rule in peace
 - So let's go back into the story of Judges, with a new judge but a familiar pattern

Judg. 3:12 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.

Judg. 3:13 And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees.

Judg. 3:14 The sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

- Once again, the pattern begins with the tell-tale phrase: Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord
 - We aren't told what they did in this second cases, but we don't need to have the detail, because Samuel defined it earlier

- Doing evil in the book of Judges is shorthand for worshipping false gods
- So after forty years of peace, the nation returns to idol worship
 - What caused the turn?
 - We learned that in the earlier verse
 - In v.11 we were told that Othniel dies
 - Apparently, the death of that judge gave opportunity for the people to return to their sinning ways
 - Now this pattern is hardly unique to the Israelites
 - All mankind follows this pattern, including those who have been saved by God's grace
 - Try as we might, we can't obey the Lord and refrain from sin unless we have help
 - We need accountability, we need encouragement
 - And sometimes we need correction
 - Within the body of Christ, we have all these things, or at least we should have these things when the Church is operating properly
 - We all need someone to hold our feet to the fire
 - And if we think we're an island and can stand up to the temptations and the schemes of the enemy, then we are fools
 - James tells us to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another
 - We need that support to stay in the Lord's will
 - But above all else, we need the Spirit of God living in us
 - That's the unique and supreme blessing the Lord has bestowed upon His church, the deposit of His Spirit
 - By the Spirit's presence in our life, we are given both an awareness of what is right and the power to do it
 - By His power we have the potential to live in obedience, if we chose to follow Him over our flesh

- In the days of the judges, the people of Israel did not possess the Spirit of God, not even the Old Testament saints who were righteous by faith
 - Only occasionally did the Lord place His Spirit upon a person in the days prior to the Church
 - But the Lord did provide prophets, judges and later kings
 - And these men (and sometimes women) were God's provision in Israel to promote obedience to His word
 - Those who lived by faith took full advantage of that provision
 - But these judges were temporary and their power insufficient to the task of promoting righteousness among the people
 - So in v.12 we move to Step 2 two of our Judges pattern
 - The Lord empowers three of Israel's enemies to do His bidding in chastising the people of Israel
 - The three enemies are Moabites, Ammonites, and Amalekites
 - The three nations were led by Eglon, king of Moab
 - The Moabites and Ammonites were descendants of Lot
 - And the Amalekites were descendants of Esau
- So the people God long ago declared would be enemies and oppressors of Israel are now beginning to fulfill their purpose
 - They begin their assault by retaking Jericho
 - This is the new Jericho which had been rebuilt near the site of the original city destroyed by Joshua
 - From there they were able to defeat the tribes of Israel throughout the land
 - And they made Israel their slaves for 18 years
 - They were able to defeat Israel because the Lord strengthened these enemies
 - Once again we shake our heads a little at the Israelites stubbornness, don't we?

- The first time around, they were oppressed 8 years before the Lord raised up a man to free them
- The number 8 stands for new beginnings in the Bible
- The Lord was giving Israel a second chance, saying, "Let's try this again."
- And then they received 40 years of peace, 40 being the number of testing
- In effect, the Lord said, "I'm giving you 40 years under Othniel to see if you will serve Me according to My Law."
- But Israel squandered that new beginning, so now the Lord has brought judgement for 18 years
 - This period of judgment lasted more than twice as long as the first
 - But there is also message in this number
 - The number 18 is twice 9, and 9 stands for judgment in scripture
 - So in effect, the Lord was saying, "For failing this second time, I will give you a double judgment."
- While I hesitate to make rules out of examples in scripture, I do believe there is a principle in scripture evident here
 - When we fail to change our ways in response to God's correction, He responds with still stronger measures
 - The Lord is long-suffering, patient, loving and forgiving with His adopted children
 - But we can test that patience by repeated sinning
 - Early missteps may receive mild rebukes and patient correction
 - But if we persist in our sinning, we should expect our loving Father in Heaven to dial up the correction
 - Because if we won't pay attention to the soft word, then we should expect a harsher correction
 - For the Lord will not leave us without the benefit of His correction

- Israel is a perfect example of the Lord's patience united with His persistence
- He wasn't crushing the nation
- He didn't put an end to them
- But neither did He tolerate their disobedience
- And as they failed to heed the lessons He taught to one generation, He increased the pressure on a later generation
 - We can't defy the Lord and expect Him to turn a blind eye forever
 - Be assured He notices and He cares
 - And He responds
 - And if we persist in sin, the consequences of our sin will spill over into the lives of others
- Sure enough, as the correction takes hold, the people of Israel cry out to the Lord, and so Step 3 follows

Judg. 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. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab.

- Now we're introduced to our second Judges in the book of Judges
 - Ehud is a Benjamite
 - It makes good sense that the Lord would raise up a Benjamite to defeat the enemy
 - King Elgon has set up his home in Jericho, which is located in the land of Benjamin
- He is described as a left-handed man, but this term is misleading in English
 - If he were merely left-handed, then it wouldn't be worth mentioning
 - First, we need to understand that the name Benjamin means the son of the right hand, which itself refers to the son of greatest honor

- So the fact that this Benjamite is uses his left hand becomes irony given his tribal identity
 - Secondly, the phrase is an indication that he uses his left hand out of necessity, not preference
 - Perhaps his right hand was injured
 - But whatever the reason, Ehud is limited to fighting with his left hand
 - It's as if he has one hand tied behind his back
 - These details lead us to understand the Lord is raising up a weak hero to lead Israel out of their predicament
 - This won't be the only time we see the Lord choosing to use the weak to shame the wise of Israel
 - And it won't be the last time we see a left-handed Benjamite in the book of Judges
 - But we would be hard pressed to imagine a more unlikely hero than a one-armed, left-handed son of the right hand
- Ehud's limitations also explain the peculiar method he chooses to assault the king
 - Rather than lead an army against the king, Ehud elects to attack like a Jewish ninja
 - First, can you imagine the response Ehud would have received had he proposed to lead such an army?
 - A one-armed man doesn't exactly inspire men to join a rebellion
 - It's likely he had no choice but to act on his own
 - Plus, a secretive one-man operation was more likely to succeed
 - So he begins his attack by forming a plan to visit the king under the pretense of bringing a payment of tribute or taxes
 - Ehud is bringing the tribute on behalf of the Jewish people, perhaps of the tribe of Benjamin
 - Then the rest of the plan unfolds

Judg. 3:16 Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak.

Judg. 3:17 He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.

Judg. 3:18 It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute.

Judg. 3:19 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.

Judg. 3:20 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.

Judg. 3:21 Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly.

Judg. 3:22 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.

Judg. 3:23 Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.

Judg. 3:24 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."

Judg. 3:25 They waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.

- As Ehud prepared to visit the king, he first made a sword about 16" in length
 - This is not the usual length of battle swords, which is why he had to construct it specially for this moment
 - Besides the length, the sword is double-edged
 - A double-edged sword is especially dangerous because it cuts from both sides increasing the lethality of a piercing
 - And of course we remember the term "double-edged sword" to be a reference to the word of God, which Jesus uses to judge all
 - In that way, Ehud is a picture of the ultimate Judge, Jesus Christ, judging all ungodliness in the future
 - Then Ehud hides the dagger under his clothing on the right side of his body under his bad right arm

- Since he fought with his left hand, the sword needed to be on the right side of his body so he could draw it
- This was not have been a customary place for a sword, since men customarily fought with the right hand
- So if searched, it was possible for Ehud's sword to escape detection
 - Then he sets out with a small delegation to deliver the tribute
 - They arrive at the palace and present the tribute to the king
 - Interestingly, Ehud doesn't attack the king while he has the chance
 - The text doesn't say why, but as the events unfold it seems obvious that Ehud got cold feet
 - He couldn't go through with it in the moment
 - Instead, he leaves with the delegation and walks about a kilometer to Gilgal
 - This curious detail is important because it reminds us Ehud is not a strong man
 - He is weak both physically and in fortitude
 - The risk of attacking the king was too much for Ehud
 - This is not a natural warrior
 - This is man like you or men, or perhaps even weaker
 - He's a living testimony that the Lord uses men and women apart from our natural abilities
 - Israel was defeated by three strong enemies because God gave them the strength to accomplish that feat
 - And now He ha empowered a very weak man to singlehandedly defeat that same force
 - That's how we need to understand Ehud's hesitation: it's the weakness of the flesh
 - But of course, the Lord isn't going to take no for an answer
 - And so as Ehud is leaving the city, the Lord directs his path by Gilgal

- At Gilgal, he comes upon the idols that were set up in that place
- This would have been the idols of the Moabites
- These are the very same gods that Israel was worshipping earlier that led the Lord to punish them with Elgon
- It seems Ehud took one look at those idols and all they represented and all the devastation they had brought to Israel
- And this gave him the courage to act
 - That's the love and patience of God showing up to strengthen Ehud
 - That's why the Bible says:

Phil. 4:13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

- So under the conviction and strengthening of the Spirit this judge-to-be tells his traveling party to return home without him
 - And he returns to finish the deed
 - When he arrives at the palace he informs the palace staff he has a secret message for the king
 - They probably relay the message to the king, who responds by telling Ehud to keep the secret to himself while the king dismissed the staff
 - Then Ehud is granted access and finds the king alone in a room on the roof of his palace
 - People often spent time on in a shaded room on the roof of a home to catch the cooler daytime breezes
 - As Ehud approached the king, he says he has a message from God for the king
 - This is not a lie, in the sense that Ehud is delivering a message from God
 - The message was that the king's days were over, and God intended to deliver the message at the point of a sword
 - The king arose from his seat to receive a message from God, at which point Ehud drew the sword and plunged it into the king's body

- Earlier we were told the king was very fat
- This detail now becomes relevant as we're told the sword disappears into the man's body, including the handle
- It even emerges out his backside, and in the process the foul contents of his intestines come out with the sword
 - Why did the Bible record such a detail?
 - Probably for two reasons
 - First, it would have been a delight for Israelites to know that the king of their enemies was despatched in this way
 - His death included ritual uncleanness, which was humiliating
- Secondly, the excrement gave opportunity for Ehud to escape
 - In v.23, Ehud simply walked out as if everything was normal
 - He closed the door to the room and locked it
 - And then he departed the palace
 - The staff came back immediately to attend to the king but found the door locked
 - Normally, they would have been concerned
 - But in this case, they could smell the odor of the feces and made a conclusion
 - They said the king must be relieving himself
 - A king would have had pots available in every room on which to relieve himself
 - Servants would remove the offending pots and bring clean one in place of their place
 - So they wait patiently outside for the king to finish and unlock the door
 - At a point though they became worried by the long delay
 - Eventually, they opened the door and found the king dead
 - By that time Ehud was long gone

Judg. 3:26 Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.

Judg. 3:27 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.

Judg. 3:28 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.

Judg. 3:29 They struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men; and no one escaped.

Judg. 3:30 So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years.

- Ehud's escape took him past the idols in Gilgal a second time
 - This time Ehud must have looked upon the idols with a completely different sense
 - Where before they mocked his cowardice and inspired him to obey the Lord
 - Now they are perfect representatives of the dying, king of Moab
 - Silent, impotent and unclean
 - He arrives in the hill country of Ephraim and calls for the men of Israel to gather
 - He announces he has killed the king
 - And he calls for Israel to remove the Moabites from the land
 - An army assembles and attacks at Jericho, eventually driving the retreating Moabites to the Jordan
 - They seize the crossing places and prevent the Moabites from escaping to Moab
 - Instead, they kill about 10,000 men allowing no one to escape
- And in that way, Moab is subdued and the land is freed for eighty years
 - This victory was won by Ehud's faithfulness but the Lord was also at work through others

- In the final verse of chapter 3, another character enters and exits the story in a single verse

Judg. 3:31 After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

- This guy is a great mystery in scripture
 - His name is not Hebrew
 - He appears to be Hittite, a Canaanite
 - If so, then he was a Gentile who turned to the living God
- How does he relate to Ehud?
 - Well the phrase “after him” at the start of v.31 could mean he followed Ehud after Ehud died
 - If so, he would be the next judge
- But I don’t think that’s the proper interpretation
 - If you glance at chapter 4, you’ll see Ehud’s passing recorded
 - And in the time after Ehud, the pattern repeats again, with Israel descending into evil again
 - It makes little sense for Samuel to mention Shamgar at the end of chapter 3 if he rose to Israel’s defense in the midst of the third apostasy
 - On the hand, the phrase after him could mean after Ehud rose up against the king of Moab, this man took opportunity to join the fight in the west
 - Along the western coastal plains, he rose up against the Philistines to assist Israel’s defense
 - So as Ehud and his men defeated the Moabites, Shamgar was working to defeat the Philistines
 - And like Ehud, Shamgar is an unlikely hero
 - Armed with nothing more than an ox goad, he kills 600 Philistines

- An ox goad was a large pole about 8-10 feet long and sharpened on the business end
- It was used to motivate ox to pull a hoe
- But this man, clearly empowered by the Spirit, manages to kill a slew of warriors
- And in doing so, he ensures Israel is protected on both sides as they battle the occupying forces
- What do we learn from the second judge?
 - Well first, we see the pattern continue
 - Despite the nation's unfaithfulness, the Lord remains faithful
 - Israel can't sin its way out of the covenants the Lord has established
 - And neither can we sin our way out of the promises we have received in Christ
 - But as we disobey the Lord will respond and His response is likely to become more severe the longer we test His patience
 - His response is never intended to crush or destroy
 - It's intended to bring repentance
 - But if we are persistent in our sin, He always has the upper hand in that test of wills
 - Finally, we see the Lord using unlikely and even weak men to bring relief to His people
 - He brought a handicapped warrior
 - And he even threw in Gentile armed with little more than a large stick
 - And together they defeated fierce and entrenched enemies
 - If you're beset by the consequences of your sin, then turn to the Lord in repentance and watch Him to respond in unexpected ways
 - He will bring rescue to those who seek His mercy