

## “The Lord Raised Up a Deliverer”

*The ninety-third in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”*

**Texts: Judges 3:7-11; Luke 2:1-14**

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**W**ithin one generation of the death of Joshua, the nation of Israel is already well-down the road toward full-blown apostasy. That first generation of Israelites born in the land of Canaan did not know YHWH or the great things he had done for Israel. They had not been instructed (catechized) in the great truths of the covenant and therefore were left defenseless against the whiles of their pagan neighbors. And as the Canaanites, who had once been booted from the land, began to return, the people of Israel became more and more like the Canaanites—worshipping Canaanite gods—Baal and Ashtoreth and engaging in all kinds of pagan practices. It was not long before the people of Israel began to do what was right in their own eyes—which meant they no longer regarded the law of God as their teacher of sin and rule of gratitude. And so as a direct consequence of Israel’s unbelief and disobedience, God will bring down the covenant curses upon his disobedient people. When he does, the people of Israel will cry out to him for deliverance.

We return to our series on the Book of Judges, which is part of a larger series “I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My People.” We have been working our way through the unfolding drama of redemption—especially focusing upon the history of the covenants. As we have seen in our study of the opening section of Judges (1:1-3:6), this book describes Israel’s history from the time the death of Joshua (and Israel’s failure to drive out the remaining Canaanites from land and off the frontier), until the time of the monarchy (Saul and David). This period of Israel’s increasing unbelief and disobedience stands in sharp contrast to Israel’s high-water mark in redemptive history, when the people entered Canaan under Joshua and lived well under the blessings of the covenant God had made with them at Mount Sinai. As Israel’s sin increases, the need for a Messiah becomes that much clearer.

The era of the judges is especially important to us in terms of practical application. Having settled in the promised land, the people of Israel were surrounded by various pagan peoples and were continuously tempted to intermarry with pagans and adopt their religious practices in direct and willful violation of the law of God. We too live at a time when we are surrounded by pagans and false religion. Many of our young people feel the same pull away from Christ and his church. Thus Israel’s struggle to remain faithful to the covenant along with the nation facing the consequences for their disobedience to the law of God, becomes a graphic object lesson to us when we seek to do what is right in our own eyes. God’s ways are always best, even when we can’t see that to be true.

And then there are the Levites. Through Joshua, God arranged for the members of the priestly tribe to be scattered throughout the nation, dwelling in the midst of the people. It was the responsibility of the Levites to make the appropriate sacrifices for sin and to instruct the people of Israel about the meaning of the law of God—specifically the blessing/curse principle which underlies the Sinaitic covenant. As we will see as we make our way further into the Book of Judges, the Levites failed miserably to catechize the people. In fact, the Levites are the ones largely responsible for Israel’s deplorable spiritual condition. The modern counterparts to the Levites are those churches and their leaders who are more interested in not offending anyone and tickling ears, than they are with preaching the difficult words of law and gospel. Since the cross is a scandalous message—a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to a Greek—the cross is not preached if people want peace with pagans and if they are reluctant to criticize false religion. The result of not preaching the two words of Scripture (law and gospel) is the creation of

churches who become just like Israel during the time of the judges—partly pagan, partly Christian.

And then there are the judges themselves—men whom God raises up to rescue Israel from some military or political crisis, but who can do nothing about the nation’s spiritual condition. Remember that Israel’s judges are not jurists presiding over a court. They are more like tribal leaders (or deliverers) whom God raises up at critical moments in Israel’s history to prevent God’s enemies from completely overwhelming God’s covenant people. While these men (and Deborah) are God’s chosen instruments to deliver the nation from temporal danger, it is clear that they are nothing more than a kind of divinely sent stop-gap measure to preserve the nation from disaster when things are the most bleak. The modern equivalent of these judges are those who seek to rescue America through political activism and the election of particular candidates with a particular political ideology. Some folk see this as the remedy to the ills of both the nation and the cause of Christ. While such people may indeed be right about temporal danger and social and economic ills facing our nation (and they may even rally the nation against an imminent threat from within or without), political activism can do nothing to deal with what lies as the root of all humans problems, the guilt and power of sin. Only the grace of God as revealed in the person and work of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit can subdue the human heart, creating faith and repentance.

This is why the Book of Judges speaks so powerfully to us in our current situation. In this book we find human sin on display in all its shame and futility—which, I think, is why so many preachers avoid preaching through Judges. In this book we also see God allowing his people to reap the consequences of their sinful rebellion, and yet, because he has pity upon Israel, God repeatedly sends them judges to deliver them. And these judges, in turn, remind us that there are no real human solutions to the deepest human problem. God must send to Israel a redeemer (someone who is both God and man) to deliver us, not from our temporal enemies and woes, but from our greatest enemy, sin and its consequences. That is why, interestingly enough, our text will speak of God sending a deliverer (a judge) to his people at a critical moment in their history—the very thing we have celebrated throughout the Christmas season just completed. But unlike Jesus, the first judge, Othniel, is himself a sinner and even though God’s Spirit rests upon him, Othniel can only help Israel find momentary relief and rest.

**II. As we turn to our text (Judges 3:7-11), we enter into a new section of the Book of Judges, a section in which we see God graciously and repeatedly respond to Israel’s unbelief and disobedience in which the Israelites have become just like their pagan neighbors (this is what we’ve been calling the “Canaanization” of Israel).**

The opening section of Judges (1:1-3:6) describes Israel’s rapid decline and the state of the nation as a whole, before God begins a series of what we might call “interventions” in which God acts to interrupt the downward cycle of the nation before Israel ceases to exist. There are a couple of things to keep in mind as we move into this new section of Judges. First, we must keep in mind that Israel is in covenant relationship with YHWH, therefore Israel was subject to all of the blessings of the covenant (if the people as a nation were obedient), and curses, (if the people were disobedient). This means that someone could live in Israel at a time when the nation as a whole was blessed and yet remain personally an unbeliever (in terms of the covenant of grace—the Abrahamic covenant) and thereby suffer eternal loss at death. It also means someone could be a true believer in YHWH’s promised redeemer and yet suffer under the national curse when the nation as a whole turned its back upon YHWH.

Given Israel’s behavior within thirty years of the death of Joshua—many Israelites were worshiping Baal and Ashtoreth, intermarrying with pagans, engaging in all kinds of pagan practices, all in direction violation of God’s law—YHWH was perfectly just in bringing judgment upon Israel in the form of a

whole series of various hardships. When Israel entered Canaan, God caused the Canaanites to fear Israel's army. Now, the Canaanites no longer fear Israel, nor their armies. When God promised material prosperity, this included bountiful crops, lots of kids, and peace with Israel's neighbors (cessation of war). Now Israel will suffer loss of abundance and many of Israel's sons will die in conflicts with Israel's enemies whom YHWH is no longer keeping at bay. Since Israel rejected YHWH's covenant promise that he would provide for his people, YHWH will give the Israelites over to the Baals and Ashtoreth (the fertility goddess) who were nothing more than the figment of the sinful human imagination. If the Israelites bowed down before Baal, let Baal bless them. If the Israelites erect Asherah poles and worship in pagan shrines, then let Ashtoreth fill the wombs of Israelite women with children. The irony here is that in bowing down in worship Baal and Ashtoreth, the Israelites actually enslaved themselves to the cruelest master of all—the sinful human imagination.

But since God has a purpose for Israel—to provide the world with a Savior and produce God's word written (the Scriptures)—YHWH is not going to just cast Israel off. For the sake of his greater redemptive purposes and for those numbered among the elect in Israel who do indeed trust in the promises of the covenant of grace (that God will send a redeemer to save his people from their sins), God now has pity upon Israel and sends them a series of Judges (Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and then Samson). This next section of Judges runs from Judges 3:7-through to the end of chapter 16 (v. 31). The stories of these various judges and the unbelief and disobedience of Israel throughout this new section takes place against the backdrop of the condition of Israel described in general terms in the opening chapters. In Judges 1:1-3:6 we learn why the people of Israel are doing the things which provoke God's anger.<sup>1</sup>

It is also not accidental that throughout this section the author depicts seven of these “deliverers” (seven being the number of fullness) to make the point that the entire nation of Israel had fallen into this deplorable spiritual condition and had come under the covenant curses. More importantly, throughout this section of Judges, a basic pattern will emerge. The cycle begins when Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord. YHWH, in turn, gives Israel over to one or more of their enemies. When things become unbearable for Israel, the people of Israel cry out to the Lord, who then raises up a deliver (judge) for them. YHWH then gives Israel's current oppressor into the hand of the particular judge, and then the land has a time rest from war and conflict.<sup>2</sup> We will see this pattern repeated throughout this entire section (which by the way, may be topical and not strictly chronological). This pattern reveals to us that while YHWH brings down the covenant curses upon his people because of their disobedience (chastising them), YHWH will still accomplish his purposes.

These purposes include preserving Israel as a nation because of his elect in the midst of the nation. YHWH will also allow the wrath of Israel's pagan neighbors to serve as his vehicle of judgment upon disobedient Israel. And yet when YHWH raises up a “deliverer,” that particular pagan nation/leader will be defeated and punished because of their own failure to acknowledge YHWH as creator-redeemer and the true title holder to the land of promise. In God's sovereign purposes, the wrath of the nations against Israel is the means by which God allows the disobedient Israelites to feel the weight of their sins, and yet at the same time be the means by which God exposes the true depths of the godlessness of paganism. YHWH is indeed working all things together for good.

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<sup>1</sup> Block, Judges, Ruth, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Block, Judges, Ruth, 146-147.

So, it is with all of that in mind that we turn to the rather short account of the first of Israel's judges, Othniel, a very bare-bones (almost skeletal) five verse section from verses 7-11. Recall that Othniel has already appeared earlier in the book of Judges in verses 11-13, of chapter 1. The author of Judges assumes that the reader recalls the specifics given earlier. *"And Caleb said, 'He who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give him Achsah my daughter for a wife.' And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it. And he gave him Achsah his daughter for a wife."* As we saw when we covered this passage several weeks ago, Caleb wanted to ensure that his daughter ended up with a man of great character and strength, who came from one of Israel's most renowned families. Through his willingness to take up Caleb's challenge, Othniel demonstrated that he was such a man.

We know from the brief introduction given to him earlier that he belonged to that first generation of Israelites born in Canaan. Othniel was one of the few Israelites who was still willing to wage war upon those Canaanites who remained in the land. We don't know when exactly this episode with Othniel occurred, but since Othniel knew Caleb (one of Israel's scouts, and a man who had been with Joshua from the beginning) we can assume that this event occurs within just over a generation from Joshua's death. This is why the statement made in verse 7 is so striking. *"And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth."* The spiritual condition of that first generation born in Canaan is not very good. While Othniel is a notable exception, the indication is that many of the Israelites were doing evil in the sight of the Lord.

This statement does not mean that the Israelites had merely grown lax in their religious observances (i.e., the people were sleeping in and not going to the altar for the sacrifices on the Sabbath). It means that the Israelites were actively embracing the religious practices of their Canaanite neighbors. The Israelites were not just sleeping in—they were getting up early and going to the high places of the Canaanites. They were actively seeking pagan gods and bowing before them. As we see here, and in other places, such as Galatia, the path from faith and obedience, to full blown unbelief and apostasy is a short one. And it doesn't take long to fall away from the faith, once someone resolves to do it. Thus when we read in Judges 3:7 that the people of Israel forgot YHWH, it means that they forgot YHWH because they were too busy worshipping Baal and Ashtoreth.

The way this horrible set of circumstances likely came about is important for us to understand—because the pattern we see in Israel can occur in our own day and age. Asheroths (the sanctuaries where Ashtoreth was worshiped) were wooden (because when revival comes to Israel later on, we read that the Asherah poles were cut down). These so-called high places may have been cut from wood, or may even have been a specified grove of trees, thought to be a sign of Ashtoreth's bounty. Many scholars believe that as the Israelites went to the various altars set up by the Levites to make their sacrifices, worshipers of Baal (Canaanites who were back in the land) joined in with them, claiming that they had added YHWH to their own pantheon of "gods." They had come to worship Israel's God in addition to their own, so the Israelites welcomed them at Israel's altars.

Now, if it could be reasoned that the Canaanites and the Israelites all worshiped the same God (maybe in different ways), why couldn't the Israelites make sacrifices to YHWH at one of the groves of trees where Ashtoreth was worshiped. Under these circumstances, it wouldn't take long for an Israelite to go to a pagan "high place" to worship YHWH. From there, it was a short step to then offer a begrudging sacrifice to Baal—just to cover all your bases. Soon, the Israelites found themselves enjoying the godless things that went on at the pagan high-places and the Israelites started joining in with the Canaanites. It wasn't long before the worship of YHWH, actually got in the way of the Israelite's enjoyment of pagan religion. That is what the author means when he says the Israelites forgot YHWH and worshiped Baal.

The theological point is that within thirty-fifty years of the distribution of the promised land to the twelve tribes, Israel was thoroughly Canaanized. This should be a warning to us all about being careless in our life or in our doctrine—it doesn't take long. This should also be a reminder of the importance (indeed the necessity) of catechizing our kids in the Christian faith. Mark my words, if you do not instruct your family in the truths of the Christian faith and the doctrines revealed in God's word—they will have no defense against the pagans around them. If you do not catechize your family, the pagans will. And let's be honest here—there is much in the paganism of American pop culture which is attractive to our children.

As a result of Israel's behavior, YHWH will bring down the covenant curses upon Israel. In verse 8, we are told how this came to pass. *“Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.”* As a demonstration of his righteous anger (and as part of the covenant curse), YHWH allowed Cushan-rishathaim, who was king of Aram Naharaim, to conquer Israel (in the sense of subjugating them). Aram–Naharaim may be another name for the Arameans (Syrians) who lived to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee in what would now be Syria and northern Iraq. This was probably the most powerful kingdom in the region at that time and these people were able to oppress the Israelites for eight years.<sup>3</sup> The king's name is disputed. Some argue that it is a play on words, “the king of double wickedness,” mocking this particular king. In any case, these people came from the east and attacked Israel, because YHWH removed his blessing from Israel, and Israel's enemies no longer feared Israel. YHWH simply stopped serving as Israel's shield and defender and Israel was easily defeated.

After eight years of subjugation to this foreign (and pagan rule) we read in verse 9, that *“but when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.”* Not many details are given about what this subjugation entailed, but at some point the people of Israel had had enough and began to cry out to their forgotten covenant Lord, YHWH. YHWH's response to his suffering people was to raise up a deliverer for them. The deliverer whom he raises up, is someone we've already met—Othniel, who married Caleb's daughter and who had defeated the Canaanites who still remained in the land near the place where Caleb had settled. Notice what is said here—YHWH raised up a deliverer. YHWH did this because of the cries of his people. We need to notice that this is not a sign of Israel's repentance (in the sense of the acknowledgment of their sin and a willingness to turn away from sin to YHWH).<sup>4</sup> This is a cry for help! Lord, save us from this cruel subjugation! In effect, the Israelites are saying, we want to go back to the good old days of prosperity and we want to continue to enjoy intermarrying pagans and doing the things they do! And we need you to save us from Cushan the double-evil so that we can do that!

Othniel has shown himself to be a brave man, but it is not until YHWH calls him for the purpose of serving as Israel's deliverer that Othniel rises to prominence as a national figure. This becomes clear in the first part of verse 10, *“the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, and he judged Israel.”* The Spirit is the means by which God equips Othniel for his divinely appointed task, which is to deliver Israel from the king of double-wickedness, whose armies come from the east between the two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. So God sent his Spirit upon Othniel, about whom we read in verse 10, *“He went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.”*

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<sup>3</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 152-153.

<sup>4</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 153.

Again, in this very bare-bones account, no details are given. We are simply told in very general terms the outcome when God raised up Othniel to deliver his people—God delivered his people by enabling Othniel to defeat these oppressors from the east. The consequence is spelled out—also briefly—in verse 11. “*So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.*” We never do learn much about Othniel, nor the details of his leadership and Israel’s victories over Cushan the “double evil.” But we do see that God will raise up a deliverer for his people when necessary and while there is no mention of Israel’s repentance or any such thing connected to Israel’s overall spiritual condition, God did give his people forty years of peace from their enemies—no small thing. This will be enough time for another generation to pass and when we return to the account of the next judge (Ehud) we will see that Israel’s downward spiral into unbelief and apostasy has only continued.

### **III. What can we take with us from this passage by way of application?**

When Israel forgets YHWH and does what is evil in his sight, God sends an army from the east to oppress the people of Israel and to make life so miserable for them that they cry out to the Lord. In this we see that God will use pagans to discipline his people. And while life under eight years of cruel oppression must have been difficult, this too may have been an act of God’s grace and a blessing in disguise. Ironically, Cushan-rishathaim’s oppression of Israel may have inhibited Israel’s worship of Baal. If Israel’s worship of Baal and Asheroth had gone on unabated, who knows what would have happened? The entire nation may have gone over the cliff, so to speak. But God is not done with Israel. He has a purpose for this nation and its people. This purpose will be accomplished, despite Israel’s sin.

And so God allows a pagan army from the east to subjugate his people, thereby preventing Israel from destroying itself. Was it horrible? No doubt. But God used this to prevent something even worse from happening. This is why we should file this account away in our own minds, because seemingly horrible things will happen in our lives and we may never know what divine purpose lies behind it. God may indeed be using a what seems to be bad thing to protect us from something much, much, worse. Never forget that God has promised to work all things together for good. He will accomplish his purpose in our lives. We see a clear example of this in this passage.

And then there is Othniel, a man of God, a brave and a strong leader, and given God’s Spirit to lead his people to victory, thereby reminding Cushan the “double-evil,” not to mess with Israel, who still can count on YHWH as their shield and defender—not because Israel deserves YHWH’s favor, but because God is faithful. All we know about Othniel is that after he defeated the king from the east, Israel had forty years of peace, and then Othniel died. This reminds us that the series of Judges we will meet in this book may be used of God to rescue his people from temporal danger, but no human savior can deal with the root of all our troubles—the guilt of sin and its wages (death).

Thus it is not accidental that we read in Luke 2:11 of Israel’s promised deliverer and rescuer, whose birth we have just celebrated. “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*” God can easily take care of the Cushans of this world. He raised up judges like Othniel because he has pity on his people and will accomplish his purpose. Because we are his people and he has promised to save us from sin and death (something much worse than an earthly oppressor), God sent to us his son, Jesus Christ, who will indeed save us from our sins. For the Lord has raised up a deliverer for us and his name is Jesus! And he can do what no earthly judge or deliverer can—saves us from our sins.