

Judges 3

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[0 : 0 0] Are you of any use to God? When God looks at you as only God can, knowing you as you really are, does He conclude, I could use him or I could use her? Or does He move swiftly on in search of more promising material? What kind of women and men does God use? If we had to draw up a profile of the kind of person God is able and likely to use, what would that profile look like? We maybe do that in our everyday life as we're identifying a role that needs to be filled, a task that needs to be performed. We say, well, we need a profile for the person who could fit that role. Is that something that God has? Does He have a list that He looks down when He looks at you and says, oh, well, you meet a few of them, but not all of them. You tick some of the boxes, but not others.

Is that the way God works? The book of Judges has a lot to say to us on this matter of who God uses or who God chooses to use. And today we will consider the first three judges we meet in the book, Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. Or as we'll call them or describe them, Othniel, the classic choice, the obvious choice. Ehud, the unexpected choice. And Shamgar, the scandalous choice. We want to think of these men that God uses. And as we do, we will be led, as we must be led, to the man that God uses. But we begin in the passage before us with these men that God used. We begin by thinking of Othniel. We've called him or described him as the classic choice. Or another way, another word we might use is the obvious choice. And in a moment, we'll explain why we're describing him in that manner. But before we do meet Othniel, we need to briefly familiarize ourselves with the background or the context in which Othniel is called by God as it is summarized for us in verses 7 and onwards there in chapter 3 of Judges. We have there a number of verbs describing the people's actions and God's response. And we need to just very fleetingly go through them. We read the Israelites did evil. They did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God. They served the Baals and the Asherah. And what is God's response? Well, we read that the anger of the Lord burned against

Israel. And so what does God do? It is God who sells them into the hands of Cushan, Rishatayim. He hands them over. No doubt the king thought that he was the one who was capturing them. But it is God who hands over his own people to this pagan king. And we read that the Israelites were subject to him for eight years. And then what happens? Well, it's the usual pattern as they suffer under the yoke of their oppressors. So they cry out to God. And God is moved by their misery and by their pain. And he responds to their cry and he raises up a deliverer for them. We have the classic cycle as we've already been introduced to it in the book of Judges and that will repeat itself time and time again. Rebellion, retribution, repentance, and rescue. It's a neat way of describing the cycle. But is it accurate?

[4 : 1 8] Rebellion, certainly. Retribution, certainly. Ultimately, rescue. But repentance? Do we find repentance in what is presented to us in these verses that introduce us to God raising up Othniel?

We're told that the people cry out to God. And so often we read that and perhaps just very fleetingly or unthinkingly say, well, isn't it good? Finally, they see sense. Finally, they repent of their sin and they cry out in confession to God. But is that actually what the people are doing?

A careful study of how the Hebrew word employed here that is translated there in verse 9, but when they cried out, when the people cried out, a careful study of how that word is used, and others have done that work and I make use of it, would suggest that this word in and of itself, all that it tells us is that they were suffering, that they were indeed in a miserable state, that they were indeed in great pain. And of course, we know that, that under the yoke of this cruel oppressor, of course they're in pain, of course they're suffering. And when we're told that they cry out, all that we can definitively conclude is that they were in pain. The word in and of itself does not in any way guarantee for us that this crying out is evidence of heartfelt repentance on the part of the people. Indeed, the circumstances would suggest that perhaps that is not present at all. Now again, we have to be

careful here. We're talking about a whole people. We're talking about many people. And there would have been a variety, no doubt, of spiritual conditions represented in this people, corporately presented to us as the people of God, of Israel. But this language that is used of the people crying out should not be understood as being definitive evidence that what we have here, and what God is responding to, perhaps more interestingly, is heartfelt and genuine repentance. The same word is used in what I would suggest. There are similar circumstances in the book of Exodus and chapter 2 and verse 23. And we maybe could profit from briefly noting what we read there in Exodus chapter 2 and in verse 23.

During that long period, during that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out. And their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. Again, they are in pain, they are oppressed, they cry out. But that crying out in and of itself ought not to be misunderstood as definitive evidence. That what lies behind their crying is genuine repentance. Now, we might say, well, one evidence that might suggest that actually what we have here is genuine repentance is the manner in which God responds. Are we not told after all that as a result of their crying out, God has mercy upon them? God has compassion for them. Does that not allow us to conclude? Well, it must have been repentance because look how God responds in salvation and deliverance for His people.

But not so. We would be wrong to so conclude. The striking reality, and one that we can celebrate and give thanks to God for, the striking reality is that God's sovereign grace and deep compassion do not require a rebellious people to earn His favor by means of heartfelt repentance.

[8 : 36] The misery of the people, the self-inflicted misery of the people, the deserving misery of the people is enough to move God's heart and their favor.

And as we just think about this a little before moving on and meeting Othnia, which is really what we want to do, are we to then conclude that repentance is unnecessary? Well, by no means. That would be a false conclusion.

But what we can conclude is that God not only employs judgment, but kindness to lead His people to repentance. We know that Paul himself declares that very clearly and eloquently in his letter to the Romans.

In Romans chapter 2 and in verse 4, what do we read there? Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?

Might it not be here in the day of Othnia? The people cried out. They were in misery. They were in pain. But heartfelt repentance was absent. But God, in His sovereign grace and deep compassion, shows His kindness towards them, that by that means He might draw them to repentance.

[10 : 00] Well, God raised up Othniel as His chosen deliverer, a man that we're describing as a classic or obvious choice. Why do we so describe him? Well, notice, first of all, what we might talk about as His classic pedigree.

Now, we've already commented on this with the children. He was, we're told, the son of Kenas, Caleb's younger brother. This Caleb, Othniel's uncle, is the Caleb.

Certainly, we have every reason to conclude that. The Caleb, who along with Joshua, were the only spies who urged the people to take the promised land all those decades before.

And were rewarded by being the only two Israelites rescued from Egypt who entered the promised land. Othniel was of good, pious stock.

You would expect God to call a man like Othniel, his classic pedigree. But also, we might talk about his classic track record. You see, we've already been introduced to Othniel in a very positive light in the book of Judges.

[11 : 07] In chapter 1 and in verse 12, we read, in this description of this final stage of God's people taking possession of the land, we read, And Caleb said, I will give my daughter Aksa in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath-sefer.

Othniel, son of Kenas, Caleb's younger brother, took it. So Caleb gave his daughter Aksa to him in marriage. And it's possible, though it's unwise or perhaps not possible really to definitively state this, but it's possible that Othniel's status as a judge in Israel dates to that very victory recorded for us there in the first chapter.

Othniel was deliverer material. He would have comfortably topped any YouGov poll that sought to identify the people's choice for delivering Israel in the midst of their oppression if they'd been asked, Who do you think could deliver Israel?

No doubt many would have said, Well, Othniel. What about Othniel? He's the man. He's the one. And he is the one that God called and raised up for that task.

And indeed, as he performs the task, the deliverance that he affords or that he is instrumental in providing, as we might call it, a classic deliverance. He was a deliverer chosen and equipped by God.

[12 : 37] We read there in verse 10, The Spirit of the Lord came upon him so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. He went to war, not alone, not as a solitary fighter, but together with the armies of Israel.

He gathered them together, and together with Othniel at the head, they won this historic and decisive victory. Othniel, an obvious choice as a deliverer for Israel.

Othniel's the kind of man God uses. Of course he is. He has the pedigree. He has the track record. It's a no-brainer. And we might say, God does use those whom he has blessed with spiritual privileges.

God continues to use those blessed with a godly heritage, those who have shown themselves to be faithful in his service. That may describe you this morning, and if it does, we'll thank God that it does and listen to his call as he would use you in his service.

Othniel, the classic choice, the obvious choice. But we move on to the second judge, the second deliverer, Ehud, who we're describing as the unexpected choice.

[13 : 54] Well, again, 30 seconds of very fleeting context. The Moabites, who are spoken of there in verse 12, as those who had a power over Israel at this time, they were descendants of Lot.

Their territory was east of the Jordan, not in Canaan itself. But what had they done? They had crossed the Jordan, and they had, in an act of excruciating humiliation, had set themselves up in Jericho, the city of Palms, that iconic city that had been the scene of such a great victory for God's people under Joshua.

Well, the Moabites were there ensconced. And taking their power and exerting their influence over the Israelites from Jericho.

And for 18 long and painful years, Eglon and his army oppressed the Israelites. And when finally the people cry out in their distress, what do we read?

God gave them a deliverer. God gave them a deliverer. The unexpected Ehud. Now let's describe a little, or explain a little, why we categorize him as an unexpected deliverer.

[15 : 16] We want to think about his unexpected disability and his unexpected mission of deliverance. We begin with his unexpected disability. What's the very first thing we're told about Ehud?

There in verse 15. The Israelites cried out to the Lord. He gave them a deliverer. Ehud, a left-handed man. A left-handed man. Now it may seem a little harsh to describe this as a disability, but bear with me, especially if you are left-handed.

What is clear, what is evident and clear in the passage is that the author deliberately and repeatedly lays stress on this fact, that Ehud was a left-handed man.

Why is that so? Why is that significant at all? I think we can only understand the significance of Ehud being described as left-handed if we are aware of the manner in which the Bible uses the image of right-handedness in relation to God and men, the language God chooses to use in communicating to us.

We're familiar with the manner in which God expresses himself in this way. It is by God's right hand that the people were delivered from slavery in Egypt.

[16 : 35] We won't look up the passages, but in Exodus chapter 15 and verse 12, that's the language used. It is by his right hand that God swears his loyalty to his people.

We find that in different passages of Scripture. We're familiar with the Psalms that speak of pleasures evermore at God's right hand and how his chosen one is seated at his right hand. And we could go on. But poor Ehud was known and singled out for one thing. He was left-handed. And so we contend for those who were looking on an unexpected choice.

But there's more to this than meets the eye in this matter of him being left-handed. What is literally stated in Hebrew, that phrase that is translated in our Bibles as a left-handed man, what is literally stated is that he was bound or hampered in his right hand.

That is what the text actually says. He was unable to use his right hand. Now that is understood, perhaps reasonably, as a manner, perhaps an idiomatic manner, of describing a left-handed man.

[17 : 55] But what is literally said is that he was bound or hampered in his right hand. The other possibility, of course, is not that he was left-handed as we would understand it, as one of these things, the lottery of genetics, you're right-handed or you're left-handed.

No. But that what actually we are being told is that he had some kind of disability or paralysis in his right hand. And so, yes, he was left-handed, but only because of this limitation that he had in his right hand.

It required him to use his left hand. And, of course, that would have made it much more noteworthy than the simple fact that he was left-handed, as some people are left-handed and some people are right-handed.

Now what I would suggest is that what is being said here is indeed that he had some kind of disability or paralysis of some kind in his right hand that required him to use his left.

And I say that not only because of the language that is employed, though that does point us in that direction, but the very events that then unfold would give reason for us to confirm that this is actually what is going on here.

[19 : 13] Ehud then was disabled or other-abled, and yet this was no impediment, quite the contrary, to his being chosen and used by God.

This man with a disabled right hand, this man with a withered hand, this man afflicted by this condition that weakened him in terms of his physical strength and capacity.

God chooses and uses this man. And I would encourage you to take note and to take heart. Maybe you're different from what is deemed to be normal.

Perhaps you are disabled in some way in mind or body. Has God in providence placed you under limitations of one kind or another? And there are so many multiple limitations that we can be subject to.

So be it. God can use you. God delights in using the unexpected and the surprising, as he did with Ehud, this man with his unexpected disability.

[20 : 18] But then, of course, it flows into his unexpected mission, and it's unexpected from start to finish. The commission that he has given by Israel is the one that provides him the opportunity for slaying Israel's oppressor.

And that commission he has given is an unexpected one. He is to head up the delegation entrusted with the humiliating ritual of delivering tribute to King Eglon, ensconced there in Jericho.

King Eglon, graphically described in a demonstration of refreshing political incorrectness as a very fat man. And Ehud has to go and deliver tribute to this king, this very fat man, fattened, no doubt, by the very tributes cruelly wrung from the Israelites.

Now the question is, why was Ehud deemed to be an appropriate representative of the Israelites to go and deliver this tribute to Eglon and the Moabites?

Might it not have been that his very disability made him singularly appropriate? The Israelites did not want to provoke the Moabites in any way. They did not want to give any hint that there was rebellion afoot.

[21 : 40] And what sane Moabite would have considered Ehud any threat to their well-armed palace guard? So Ehud, the left-handed man, the man with a disabled right hand, what threat could he possibly be to us?

And so Ehud is chosen to perform this humiliating task of handing tribute to Eglon. But Ehud was not all that he appeared to the Moabites or, I suspect, to the Israelites themselves.

Ehud had a plan, a plan that involved an unexpected weapon designed for the very purpose that he has in mind, a sword or dagger short enough to conceal and long enough to kill.

And he makes his way to Jericho and hands over the tribute as the text describes, and then, seemingly, begins his journey home, having dispatched his companions ahead of him.

But we're told, rather intriguingly, that on approaching the idols near Gilgal, he makes an about turn. We read there in verse 19, that the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back.

[22 : 55] Now there's much debate and much difficulty in knowing exactly what is said there in what is translated as the idols near Gilgal. You'll note that in the footnote, in our Bibles, an alternative is given, the stone quarries, the idols, the stone quarries, or simply the stones near Gilgal would be one possible translation.

What exactly were these things that are being described? Well, we don't really know. But one intriguing possibility that I throw out for you to ponder on or consider, and if it is actually the case,

and we've no way of knowing for sure, we can draw out some interesting conclusions, is that these stones near Gilgal may well have been the very stones set up by Joshua to commemorate the miraculous crossing of the Jordan.

If we just turn back to Joshua chapter 4 and verse 19, notice there we are told of stones that were set up at this same location near Gilgal.

In Joshua chapter 4 and verse 19, this is following the crossing of the Jordan, and as Joshua would give thanks to God for this, we read in verse 19, on the tenth day of the first month, the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho, and Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan, and the passage goes on.

And here we read of the stones near Gilgal, and it is at this point that Ehud turns back. Now what's going on? Was it always his plan to leave and then turn back, perhaps?

[24 : 41] Or was it that he had lost some of his courage and was heading home, and then he saw the stones near Gilgal, and he thought, these are the stones that speak of a faithful God and equipping God, and it's about to turn.

No, I have a task to perform, and I must perform it. And he returns to fulfill his mission. He returns to the palace with his unexpected message, a secret message.

He's left alone with the king. Again, why would this enemy, no doubt a subject, but an enemy, be left alone with the king? Well, might it not be because he was so inoffensive?

This is the man with a disabled right hand. What possible danger could he be to the king? No, we can leave him alone with the king. Somebody else, no, but Ehud, we can leave him alone with the king.

No worries, no problem. He's left alone with the king. And he tantalizes Eglon with this talk of a message from God. King, I have a message from God, a secret message for you.

[25 : 46] And Eglon is intrigued. His curiosity is aroused, and he struggles to his feet. This very fat man, he struggles to his feet only to be met by a blade glistening in the mordering sun streaming through the windows of the summer palace.

And the blade enters and is swallowed up by the mammoth midrith of the king. And the killing closes with a crude and macabre twist that we'll note in just a moment.

What does Ehud do having slain Eglon, the king of Moab? Well, he locks the door and begins his escape, but it's surely a hopeless cause. All the guards and all the soldiers, how could he possibly escape?

The corpse of the king will be found and Ehud captured. But no. As we've read, Eglon's servants assume the locked door is due to Eglon relieving himself.

But is it just the locked door that leads them to this conclusion? And here we come back to this macabre twist at the end of the account of his killing. In verse 22, we read, and this is not pretty a language, but this is the description we have, that in killing Eglon, the handle sank in after the blade which came out of his back.

[27 : 09] And again, that phrase, came out of his back, is a subject of much discussion as to its exact meaning. The English Standard Version opts for an alternative translation that I would suggest is more likely to be what is intended.

And the translation they offer is not and it came out of his back, but and the dung came out. This is not pretty, but this is what we're being told.

It would seem his violent death, Eglon's violent death, was accompanied by or more likely provoked an involuntary bodily function. And might it not be that the very odor or stench of Eglon's dung led the servants to the conclusion that they came to that he was relieving himself.

And so, allowed Ehud the precious moments he required to make good his escape. And then we know what followed in terms of the decisive victory of the Moabites that we will not occupy ourselves with this morning.

The whole episode, however you look at it and however you understand some of the twists and turns that maybe it's impossible to take a definitive view on, the whole episode is surprising and unexpected.

[28 : 25] It's violent and crude. It is dark and yet entertaining. You can almost hear Israelite children and grown-ups too giggle with mischievous delight at its telling and retelling from generation to generation.

God used Ehud. God used the left-handed man. He used the man with the withered hand, the weak man. And the principle still holds and is echoed in the words that we read in Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

God using the weak and the foolish as viewed by the world to shame the wise. Ehud, the unexpected choice. But then we come and much more briefly because so little is told to us of the third judge, the third deliverer, Shamgar, who we're describing as the scandalous choice. Now poor Shamgar only merits one verse. Certainly one verse here in chapter 3. He does reappear very fleetingly in Deborah's song in chapter 5.

But here in chapter 3, just one verse is deemed sufficient to present to us as Shamgar. And yet even this one fleeting verse says enough to justify our description of his choice as a deliverer for Israel as a scandalous choice.

[29 : 49] And why do we come to that conclusion? Well, even from these few words we can conclude one or two things that are important. First of all, his name, Shamgar, is not a Hebrew name.

Again, there's debate as to its precedence, but it's certainly not a Hebrew name, possibly Hittite, one of the tribes that populated Canaan. But not only his name, his father's name, this is the little information we're given, Shamgar, son of Anath.

Anath was the name of a Canaanite god. So given this deliverer's own name, given his father's name, it seems reasonable to conclude, though again, we could not do so definitively, but it seems reasonable to conclude that Shamgar may well not have been an Israelite at all.

Israel's deliverer was not one of their own. Now for the Israelites, that was the ultimate scandal, that God would choose a pagan, that God would choose a Canaanite, a Hittite, to be the deliverer of Israel.

A scandalous choice. And what of his weapon? An ox goad. Now I don't know much about deliverers, but I can't imagine many self-respecting deliverers use an ox goad as their weapon of a choice.

[31 : 09] An ox goad was basically a long pole with a sharpened end that was used, as the name suggests, the clues in the name, to goad oxes, to get them to go where you wanted them to go.

And it would seem that at one end it had this sharp point and at the other end the shape of a spade of some kind. I must admit, and maybe this just reflects my own frivolity, but the image that comes to my mind is Jackie Chan with one of these things and swinging it around and doing all kinds of damage with an ox goad.

But of course, even Jackie Chan wouldn't have been able to kill 600 Philistines with an ox goad. Now if he did it in a wonder or whether he did it over several bouts, I don't know.

But here, this, it would seem, a pagan man, this foreigner, this Gentile, chosen as Israel's deliverer, using this unconventional to be as generous as we could be weapon.

It's interesting and intriguing to just wonder for a moment. And here we do need to take a bit of a leap of, if not imagination, but of probability, but to wonder whether the issue here might not have been.

[32 : 19] Notice that Shamgar struck down 600 Philistines. Now at a subsequent time in the history of Israel, many, many decades later, and that's why we need to be very careful, you may recall that we're told that you could not find in Israel a blacksmith.

And why was that? Because the Philistines, who at that time, and this is subsequent to these events, in order to not allow the Israelites to have the weapons they would need to rebel against Philistine rule, actually made it a punishable offense to do that kind of work within Israel.

And so we're told in 1 Samuel chapter 13, we won't look it up now, that the Israelites had to go to Philistia to get their tools sharpened and what have you, because in Israel that was not possible because of the Philistines' laws that they imposed on them.

Now, whether this was already the case is probably unlikely, but if it was, well, perhaps poor Shamgar had no choice in terms of weapons.

This was the only one available to him. Our interest really is not in the details, but the fact that God chooses this man and a choice that we could describe, I think, legitimately as a scandalous choice.

[33 : 38] He uses the outsider, the despised, as his deliverer. So we have these three deliverers presented to us, an obvious choice, a classic choice, Othniel, an unexpected choice, Ehud, and a scandalous choice.

God uses very different and very unexpected men and women. Don't ever imagine that God could never use you. Don't ever say, well, he couldn't use me because, and then you come up with your reason, well, whatever that reason is, God says, no, that's not a reason for me. That doesn't disallow you from being used by me. I will use whom I choose. I'll use those you might deem to be suitable and I'll use those who are deemed altogether unsuitable by the wisdom of the world.

Very different men and yet, though very different, there is some common ground. They were all chosen by God. They were all used by God to deliver Israel. And another common theme is that the deliverance that they secured was a limited deliverance, a limited deliverance.

We know the cycle. They were delivered for a generation or perhaps two generations. But then, once again, oppression visits Israel.

[35 : 01] The deliverance that they provide is limited. And why was that? Why were these men incapable of securing a lasting deliverance? Well, the answer to that question is the other common thread that unites them.

And the common thread that unites them is not really a very surprising one. That they died. That's what we're told. Othniel died. And once again, the deliverance fizzles out.

Ehud died. Once again, no longer available to deliver and to rescue his people. Shamgar died.

We're not told he died, but we can reasonably presume that he did. This is what unites them.

They all died. However great they were, however gifted they were, however used of God they were, the time came when they died and no longer could they serve as deliverers for Israel.

And of course, that is true not only of Othniel and Ehud and Shamgar. We could go on. Deliverer after deliverer, king after king, prophet after prophet, priest after priest, and he died.

[36 : 05] Period. And he died. But the men used by God, mortal and limited in their power to deliver, point to the man, the man who also died, but whose death did not mark the end of delivering, but was the very means of his delivering his people.

The man who died and rose again. The man who, rather than being conquered by death, conquered death on behalf of his people. The man who would and did secure a lasting and complete deliverance for his people.

The man, Christ Jesus. In some ways, we could describe him as the obvious choice, the only one capable of mediating between sinners and a holy God, and yet also the unexpected choice, the carpenter from Nazareth.

And the scandalous choice, the one who died an accursed death on the accursed tree as he became sin for us. Yes, like Othniel, like Ehud, like Shamgar, he died, but only to rise again triumphant from the grave.

Listen to his own words as he speaks to us this morning from heaven in all his ascended glory. I am the living one. I was dead.

[37 : 28] And behold, I am alive forever and ever. Othniel and Ehud and Shamgar, they point us to Jesus. This purpose that they serve is not always recognized, and that is unfortunate.

But you know what's worse, way, way worse, is that when we discover that they are pointing us to Jesus, but we don't follow the finger that they point in the direction of the Messiah.

What about you? Othniel, he's pointing you to Jesus. Will you go? Ehud is pointing you to Jesus.

Will you go? Shamgar is pointing you to Jesus.

Will you go? Go to the one who has secured eternal deliverance for sinners like you and me. Go. Trust. Believe.

And do not tarry. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are a saving, delivering, redeeming God. We thank you for all the means and the people that you employ.

[38 : 36] We thank you that you are capable of using whoever you choose your sovereign will allows you, your prerogative grants you that capacity to fix your eyes on whoever you choose to fix your eyes on to use for the fulfilling of your purposes.

And we thank you that that is a reminder that we receive today. We thank you that we are those who can be used by you. We pray that we would be available to be used by you, that we would be sensitive to your call when you would call us to serve you.

But we thank you also and very especially that as we consider these men with their merits, with their virtues, with their faults, these men who provided limited deliverance, we thank you that these men point to the one who provides eternal and perfect and lasting deliverance.

They point to your son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. And we pray that as we are pointed to him, so we would go to him, that we would go to him, to put our trust in him, that we would go to him, to bow before him, that we would go to him, to serve him as his disciples.
Help us to go in that direction. And these things we pray in his name. Amen.