

# The LORD Saved His People Through Othniel

*Scripture Readings: JUDGES 3:7-II (text); Romans 13:1-4*

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**D**ear congregation of Christ: In the introduction to the Book of Judges, the author lays out for us the repeating cycle of sin, oppression, crying out in distress, God sending a judge, restoration, and then back to sin again in the life of Israel. Starting with the story of the first judge, Othniel, we see this cycle in a real historical cycle.

Othniel's story is a short five verses. No other judge story is shorter, except for Shamgar's at the end of Chapter 3. Othniel is colorless, undramatic, and without suspense. As the story of the first judge after the introduction, it is as if the author merely filled in the blanks of the cycle of Israel's story under the judges. At last, there are specific names, places and years. Othniel's story then is another introduction to whet the reader's appetite, because the book is a series of stories of Israel's "colorful" eleven judges.

There may be two reasons for this simplicity. The author writes Othniel's story as a paradigm, an example judge story to introduce the other eleven judges. Except for Shamgar's one-verse story, the rest of the judge stories are full of Hollywood-style drama, twists, intrigue and gore, in addition to plenty of interesting characters and geography.

The other reason might be that the author wanted the reader to see the work of the LORD in this story. In just five verses, YHWH, the covenant name of God, is mentioned seven times. He, not Othniel, is the main actor. Othniel is merely an instrument of the LORD in delivering his people from the oppressors. The LORD raised him up to save his people. He was filled with the Spirit of the LORD. And the LORD gave Israel's oppressor into his hand.

So our theme today is "The LORD Saved His People Through Othniel," under three headings: first, "The LORD Raised Up a Deliverer"; second, "The Spirit of the LORD was Upon Him"; and third, "The LORD Gave the King into His Hand."

## "The LORD Raised Up a Deliverer"

Last Sunday, we looked at the second introduction to the Book of Judges. This introduction was a glimpse of what's coming up in the whole book: the downward spiral of Israel into unbelief and disobedience. We were introduced to this spiral in the period between the death of Joshua and the institution of kings.

In our text, we have the first example of this cycle, but now God writes down specific names, places and events. The story begins with a familiar refrain, "*And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD*" (verse 7). And what evil did Israel do? Israel did many evil things before God, but on top of the list is idolatry, "*They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.*" Way back in the covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai just barely three months after God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, they were commanded, "*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image... You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God*" (Exo 20:3-4). Even while they were still in

Egypt, Israel did not “*cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on... the idols of Egypt.*” So God wanted to poured out his wrath upon them, right there in Egypt, but because of his mercy, he did not. Instead, he led them out of Egyptian slavery (Ezk 20:8-10).

When Israel conquered Canaan, the Promised Land, the Canaanites who lived among them and outside of Canaan had their pagan religion, worshiping Baal and Asherah. Baal was the creator god, the god of war and storm, while Asherah is his consort or wife who was the goddess of love and fertility. The writer used the plural forms, Baals and Asheroth, because these idols were carved and set up all over the land. Asherah was represented by wooden poles or trees carved with images of a woman together with lions, serpents or trees. So Baal and Asherah were usually erected side by side, as in Judges 6:28, when Gideon broke down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it. And throughout Israel's history, kings and individuals continued to make Asherah poles to worship them.

So in the time of the judges, “*the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel*” because of their idolatry. And God's anger finally turned into punitive action against his people, “*he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia.*” The ESV, NASB, and KJV says that Cushan is “*king of Mesopotamia,*” but the Hebrew literally says “*king of Aram-naharaim*” (NIV). There is word-play here. The name of the king who oppressed Israel means “Cushan the double-wicked.” And the name of his nation means “Aram of double rivers.” Most Old Testament scholars locate this nation in northern Mesopotamia, which is roughly present-day Syria and northern Iraq. So the king who oppressed Israel is Cushan the double-wicked king of Aram of double-rivers. God is not averse towards his people's witty humor.

This oppression is also ironic. The writer condemns Israel's idolatry with the use of the word “served.” Because the people were so willing to “serve” the Baals and the Asheroth, God sent a double-wicked king whom they will “serve” for eight years. The verb “serve” is also often translated as “worship.” So the people got what they wanted: in worshiping idols, God gave them a wicked king whom they will be forced to worship.

So the cycle continues when the people “*cried out to the LORD.*” Was this a cry of repentance, as we do in our Confession of Sin? Repentance is admitting sin against God, turning away from it, and then turning towards obedience to God. Repentance is a change of heart and mind from evil to holiness wrought only by the Holy Spirit. But we can see from one cycle to the next that this is not true repentance of their sins, but merely sorrow over their oppressed condition. For example, during the time of the judge named Jephthah, the people cried out to God because of their slavery under the Ammonites. But God mocked them, “*Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.*” God had become impatient towards their cries for help and superficial repentance (Jdg 10:14-16).

In spite of this, God had pity on them. Even without true repentance, God responded with compassion on their distress under a wicked tyrant. So “*the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them*” (verse 9).

## “The Spirit of the LORD Was Upon Him”

This deliverer was named Othniel, son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. Othniel is the same man mentioned in Chapter 1, to whom Caleb gave his daughter Achsah as a reward for capturing the city of Kiriath-sepher. Although Caleb and Othniel are said to be of the tribe of Judah, there is evidence that they were originally outside of the tribe. Kenaz his father might have been a descendant of Esau (or Edom).

We are told that *“the Spirit of the LORD was upon”* Othniel. Three other judges are said to have had the Spirit being upon them: Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. The Spirit enabled them to be mighty warriors. But even so, they did not have wisdom to be good leaders and stay away from trouble, as we will see in the next sermons. The Old Testament often says that the Spirit empowers individuals to perform a work God assigns them to do. But does this mean that all these individuals were regenerated by the Spirit? The answer is obviously no, as in the case of King Saul. Samuel said to Saul, *“the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you”* (1 Sam 10:6). But the LORD gave him the Spirit on that day to show the people that he had been chosen as king.

Othniel was empowered by the Spirit to perform his duties as a judge of Israel, leading the army in war and the people in their spiritual affairs.

## “The LORD Gave the King into His Hand”

So what did Othniel do? By the power of the Spirit, he overpowered Cushan the double-wicked king of Aram. We read that it was actually the LORD who did the work through his servant Othniel, *“the LORD gave [the king] into his hand”* (verse 10). The description of Othniel's victory is simple compared with the other judges: no deception, no outside help, no vows to God. Only that the LORD gave Cushan into his hand.

This phrase *“to give/sell into the hand”* usually serve to describe God's action in punishing Israel, not in conquering Israel's enemies. In the introduction, whenever the people did evil, the LORD sold them to their oppressors. During the time of Deborah, the LORD sold the Israelites to their enemy Jabin (4:2; cf 1 Sam 12:9). So in Othniel's story, God was acting on behalf of Israel, not punishing them.

The cycle is completed when we read that *“the land had rest forty years.”* Again, it was God who gave them rest. This is the usual conclusion to the work of the judges (3:30; 5:31; 8:28). They lived in peace, security and prosperity during the time of the judges. Then Othniel died. And the next verse (12) begins another cycle, *“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD,”* with the story of a judge named Ehud.

**D**ear friends, the story of the judge Othniel is not really his story. It is the story of God doing his work through a righteous, holy servant of God. The LORD, not Othniel, is mentioned the most, a total of seven times. Even Cushan is mentioned more than Othniel, four to two. How do we know that Othniel is a righteous man?

First, of all the judges, nothing negative is written about him. All the others have faults, many not exercising wisdom. If a sermon were to be preached about “Be Like So-And-So, it

would be “Be Like Othniel.” He is a great example to be imitated, the “ideal” judge. This is not to say that Othniel did not sin, for no human being is sinless.

Second, we know that Othniel was not like the other Israelites who took wives and husbands from their pagan neighbors. Othniel married Achsah, a godly woman. This practice violated God's strict command. We know how this turned out for Israel: these Israelites ended up worshiping the pagan gods of their spouses. And we know how marrying unbelievers ends up for Christians and their children. Not what we like.

Third, Othniel had compassion on the people when he heard their cries for help. He let God use him to deliver the people from their oppression by a wicked king. He did not look only after his own interests, but after the interests of his own countrymen.

Fourth, he did all that the LORD assigned him to do. He judged Israel, which means he reformed the people, turning them from their evil and idolatrous ways. He led them as a shepherd leads his flock. Then, against all odds, he obeyed the LORD in defeating Cushan.

We also see in this story that God is the sovereign actor in all happens in the world. When Israel sinned, he was angry, and he punished them. In like manner, when we sin, he acts to discipline us. He allows us to wallow in our sinful desires, but then disciplines us afterwards. Our sins always result in undesirable, even tragic, consequences. We don't usually think about our sins until it is too late, when our relationships are broken, our finances are a mess, our bodies are addicted to alcohol or drugs, or our minds are distorted.

But God does not stop in discipline. After discipline, through the Holy Spirit, comes confession and repentance. And after repentance, deliverance from sin through our Savior Jesus Christ.

God is also sovereign over all rulers and kings. He uses his servants like Othniel to overpower wicked kings. He even uses wicked kings to defeat other wicked kings, as when Babylon destroyed the wicked kings of Israel. Later, wicked Babylon was overthrown by wicked Medo-Persia. God can turn a king's heart to whatever he wills, “*The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will*” (Prv 21:1). This means that we are not to despair when there are wicked rulers in the world, because God can dispose of the most powerful and wicked of them.

But Paul also tells us in Romans 13 that we are to be law-abiding citizens, paying what is lawfully due to the government. Paul's commandment to the Christians in Rome is to be subject to the governing authorities. How can he say that, knowing that the Roman emperor is a wicked and cruel pagan ruler? Because, he says, as we have seen in the story of Othniel, that no ruler is in power without God's appointment. The only time that it is Biblically lawful to disobey government authorities is when they contradict God's commandment. The best examples are Daniel who refused to bow down to the emperor's image; and Peter, who refused to stop preaching the gospel. Daniel was sentenced to death by being eaten by lions, and Peter was sent to prison.

Othniel did not let his background as a Gentile Kennizite, not a true Israelite, prevent him from obeying God's call to be his servant. No matter what your human limitations are, when you are called by God to do a specific task, big or small, are you willing to try? Are you willing to be a servant of God, using your spiritual gifts joyfully without compulsion, instead of pointing to others to do the work?

Lastly, Othniel, in his role as judge, deliverer and savior, is a picture of Christ. The Spirit of the LORD was upon both. When Jesus came into the world, the Spirit of the LORD empowered him to preach the gospel, perform signs, and willingly suffer and die on the cross for our sake. Though a sinful man, Othniel did not have any negative aspects in this story. But Jesus, though tempted like all of us, did not sin. Othniel was in the midst of a corrupt and wicked people, but he refused to participate in their wickedness. Jesus also was in the midst of an evil and adulterous generation. He glorified only his Father in heaven, not himself, not anyone else. While Othniel delivered God's people from foreign oppressors, Jesus delivered us from slavery to sin and Satan the oppressor. Othniel was called a "savior" of Israel, while Jesus is "the Savior of the world," saving his people from all their sins.