

It's fascinating to watch a good craftsman at work, isn't it? I'm amazed by the expertise and skill that come from years of experience and technical know-how, like the men and women on those remodeling shows who use their tools like an extension of their own arm. It's not just people in the trades either—musicians, athletes, doctors. In any field, it's amazing to watch a master at work.

But the people you really have to admire are the ones who are so good, it doesn't matter what tools they have available; they can still get the job done. You know, like MacGyver, who falls into a pit but conjures a way out using a gum wrapper, an ink pen, a snowflake and the Pythagorean theorem. Or the Dread Pirate Roberts, who runs off 60 men and rescues the princess with a wheelbarrow and holocaust cloak. These are the heroes who can make something out of nothing. There's one right here in our text:

v31 *After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.*

For most mortals, the math is simple: 600 Philistines + 1 pointed stick = swift and painful death. But if Shamgar is the guy, somehow it adds up to a battalion of dead bad guys. What a hero!

Shamgar is the last of three judges we meet in chapter 3, along with Othniel and Ehud. The author is careful to link his ministry with the other two: "After him [i.e., Ehud]... he also saved Israel." Shamgar only gets one verse; but the point is, he was in the same category as the other two guys. All saviors, all heroes. Guys who make something out of nothing.

But there's a subtle hint here that there's more going on than meets the eye. This phrase "son of Anath" would have stood out to an early Israelite reading this story. Anath is the name of a Canaanite warrior goddess. Archeologists have found arrowheads etched with different men's name, followed by this phrase "son of Anath," possibly indicating that there was a league of warriors this region who had taken Anath as their patron deity. Was Shamgar one of them? Or was he simply born to a woman named after this Canaanite goddess? Either way, it's pretty clear this guy was probably not even an Israelite—or at least not one

with a pedigree of spiritual fidelity to Yahweh. We're left to wonder, how could God use someone like this to deliver Israel?

And THAT is precisely the point! Shamgar, Ehud, and Othniel aren't the real heroes of these stories. God is. He is the master whose skill and creativity is so boundless, He can even use tools like this to get His work done.

Othniel is the model judge. You read his story and think, "This guy was exactly the right choice. No wonder God used him." But then Ehud comes along and he's nothing like you'd expect—disabled, deceitful, operating alone. His whole story actually reads like a dark comedy. Here's the point: **God uses both paragons and punch lines.** Model Christians and mess-ups. Prototypes and total surprises. **Both tell us something about ourselves—and about how God saves us in Jesus.**

The Paragon: Othniel

v7a *And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.* This refrain—"Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD"—appears 6x in the book, introducing the ministry of every one of the 6 major judges (3:7, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1). It's a narrative signal that we've come to a new section but not a new problem. The repetition of the phrase gives us some important insights about sin:

- 1) It's boring. Satan has nothing new to offer. Nothing creative, nothing original. Same old, same old. Promises much, offers little.
- 2) It's addictive. Sin is a power we can't break in our own strength. Israel is free, but they still act like slaves. Have any old habits that have plagued you for years? Yeah, Judges is for people like us.
- 3) It's perverse. Israel's lapse into evil always follows great blessing from God (v11 40 years of rest). Profoundly ungrateful.

Notice how the rest of v7 puts it:

v7b *They forgot the LORD their God...*

IOW, their salvation stopped being real to them. They forgot the cruelty of sin's bondage and the sweetness of God's deliverance. Their hearts froze over and their faith became routine. Ever happen to you?

vv7-8 *...[they] served the Baals and the Asheroth. ⁸ 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.

Notice the poetic justice: “they served Baal; therefore, the LORD sold them and they served Cushan-rishathaim.” The Lord gives them what they want. They went after the gods of the surrounding people, so the Lord gave them the full experience of the surrounding people. Jesus is the only Lord who will fulfill you completely if you serve Him faithfully.

This foreign king is no such benefactor. “Cushan-rishathaim” – unknown figure, name means “Cushan of the double-wickedness.” The title might be a sarcastic play on his real name, e.g., Napoleon Blownapart). That he was “king of Mesopotamia” means his empire must have been extensive to reach all the way to Israel. This is a powerful, bad man.

Did you notice the repetition of his name in v8?

v8 ...[He] sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

Twice in quick succession. Kind of odd, right? Same at the end of v10:

v10b ...the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

And did you notice his title, “king of Mesopotamia,” wedged in there between the double use of his name in both places? It’s a structural clue the author is using to highlight the main point. He has created a verbal frame, guiding our attention to the sentences in the middle:

vv9-10 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. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand.

The author isn’t just telling us a story. This structure tells us he’s making a point. Yes, there’s a wicked and powerful king, but the main character is this one here in the center.

Othniel is the ideal judge. He’s Caleb’s brother, which means he was part of the earlier generation who knew God. We know from the earlier account (1:12-13) he married an Israelite woman. He was from the tribe of Judah. The Lord raised him, the Spirit came upon him, he went to war, and he saved Israel. It’s obvious why God used this guy.

But actually, Othniel is not the hero. Yes, he’s the pattern for all the judges who follow, but the point of this story isn’t to draw attention to

Othniel. It can’t be. Look at what’s NOT here. No dialogue. No dramatic details. No tension or exciting climax. How big were the armies? How did the battle go? What turned the tide? The story is too plain to be about Othniel. Obviously, the author’s intention is not to magnify him.

Notice the other main character in vv9-10: “The LORD raised up a deliverer. The Spirit of the LORD was upon him. The LORD gave Cushan into his hand.” Yes, Othniel was the right man for the job. But what this story really shows is how even the best, most gifted, most well-suited deliverers still need the help of God.

These are the best kind of leaders – the ones we barely notice because God’s work stands out so clearly. Sometimes people can be so interesting, so attractive, so charismatic, the work of God through them gets obscured. Not this guy. This... what was his name—this guy God used so powerfully? Yeah, exactly.

1 Corinthians 3:4-7 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being [typical men]? ⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

This is the lifestyle God calls us to: anonymous service, magnifying Christ. Happy to be a nobody, as long as Jesus looks good. Draw attention to Jesus, die, be forgotten.

I want you to notice something else about Othniel’s story. These judge stories follow a standard cycle (cf. 2:10-19). All five are clear here:

1. Israel does evil in the eyes of Yahweh. (v7)
2. Yahweh gives/sells them into the hands of oppressors. Israel serves the oppressor for X years. (v8)
3. Israel cries out to Yahweh. (v9)
4. Yahweh raises up a deliverer, empowers with His Spirit. (vv9-10)
5. The oppressor is routed. The land has “rest” for X years. (10-11)

There’s a point here for our own lives, namely, God’s people need continual spiritual renewal. Spiritual decline is a constant threat, and spiritual renewal is the continual need. Judges is the best OT book to understand renewal. It tells us how decline happens (forgetting our salvation), how renewal comes (coming under the power of a new master), how to experience it (repentance, fresh outpouring of the

Spirit). But there's another book in the Bible that also teaches us about spiritual renewal, but from the NT perspective—the book of Acts. Fresh outpourings of the Spirit, powerful encounters with spiritual enemies, temporary setbacks and remarkable advances for God's people. But there's a tremendous difference in the tone and trend between Judges and Acts, isn't there? In Judges, the renewal cycles grow weaker and weaker, but in Acts they grow stronger as the story progresses.

Only Othniel's story follows the 5-step cycle perfectly. After him, the cycle is altered in some way—elaboration on the oppression, the manner in which the deliverer is raised up, etc. Most of these changes demonstrate the deteriorating conditions in Israel, politically and spiritually. In fact, by the time of Samson, the standard cycle has almost disappeared. In the Samson cycle, the people do not cry out to Yahweh, the oppressor isn't subdued, and the land does not rest. This unraveling of the cycle highlights the unraveling of Israel's spiritual life.

Why are things spiraling down in Judges but spinning up in Acts? One answer: the presence of the Holy Spirit. In Judges, the Spirit came on only certain people for a certain task for a certain moment. In Acts, Jesus gives His Spirit to everyone. Even you! Do you see what that means for you? You will not spiral downward, if you have God's Spirit. You will grow! You are not who you were yesterday, and you will not be the same tomorrow. You have God's presence to do His work. Yes, we still need renewal—fresh outpourings of His power in all its fullness. But what you have is real and better even than Othniel. Everything is because of Jesus:

v11 *So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. Othniel was God's man for this moment. He brought the people into God's rest. But he was only human, and after 40 years of being used by God's grace, he died. He was not enough. What the people really need is a Deliverer who will never die, who can break the cycle by dealing with their sin once and for all, who can bring God's people into His perfect rest once and for all.*

The Punch Line

And so we come to the story of Ehud:

vv12-14 *And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the*

LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. ¹³ He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. ¹⁴ And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

- Obviously an able politician, creating a coalition like this.
- Plus such a dominant power, it was embarrassing to Israel: "City of Palms" = Jericho (Dt 34:3; cf. 1:16), their first victory

vv15-17 *Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. ¹⁶ And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes. ¹⁷ And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.*

- "the LORD raised up a deliverer" – you get the sense from the story that only God knows Ehud is His man at first (cf. v27 "he was their leader"). Even Ehud might not have known he was God's special man—no indication of a divine call. The plan seems to be something he does of his own initiative.
- "left-handed man" – lit: "restricted in his right hand," i.e., disabled, viewed as a deficiency in this culture, not a threat. Israel "sent tribute by him" – lit: "by his hand." The point: Ehud has a physical abnormality that appears to fit him for one job (carrying tribute) but actually empowers him for another (assassination and deliverance)
- Ehud sees an opportunity in his appointment to deliver tribute, makes short sword, conceals it on his right thigh, brings tribute

vv18-19 *And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. ¹⁹ But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he commanded, "Silence." And all his attendants went out from his presence.*

- "idols near Gilgal" – Ehud reaches the carved stones which probably marked the border between Israelite & Moabite territory. He sends his companions away and turns back.
- "secret message" – by returning as far as the idols it would have appeared that he had received an oracle from the gods.
- As greedy for inside information as he was for food, Eglon sends away his protection and waits alone for Ehud's message.

Everything starts to move in slow motion:

vv20-22 *And Ehud came to him as 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. ²¹ And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. ²² And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly; and the dung came out.*

It's a gory, stomach-turning scene. Meanwhile, Ehud ensures his escape:

vv23-25 *Then Ehud went out into the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them. ²⁴ When he had gone, the servants came, and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, "Surely he is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber." ²⁵ And they waited till they were embarrassed. But when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them, and there lay their lord dead on the floor.*

The battle is essentially won; all that remains is mop-up duty:

vv26-30 *Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Seirah. ²⁷ When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. ²⁸ And he said to them, "Follow after me, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand." So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites and did not allow anyone to pass over. ²⁹ And they killed at that time about 10,000 of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; not a man escaped. ³⁰ So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.*

Several conclusions we can draw from the Ehud story:

1. God is generous in spirit toward His servants—quick to praise, slow to critique. Tolerant. Forgiving.

Ehud is so deceptive and violent, people sometimes wonder how God could use this guy. But that's not the tone of the story at all! God raised him up and calls him a "deliverer," not deceiver or vigilante. Our reaction to this story should not be "What kind of God would use a guy like this?" but rather "How kind of God to save His people like this!"

This was one of the central applications of this story to my own life: the reminder that God isn't critical toward His unorthodox, uncouth servants. Ehud doesn't deliver like Othniel, but God doesn't denounce him. He receives his courageous act and preserves the story for us.

2. God uses unlikely heroes.

- Unorthodox qualifications. Unorthodox style. Violent. Disabled. Deceitful. Operating alone.

God almost never saves us the way we expect to be saved. His chosen means are not what we would expect.

Ehud points to ourselves. 1 Cor 1:26-7. God loves to use people who bring nothing to the table! What an encouragement to take a risk, do something impossible, not because you are amazing, because God is!

And how humbling to see ourselves in Ehud. Would we want somebody like that in our church—life is a disaster, messy past, radical... would we let them be a member? Sure! We'd even let you be a member!

3. God loves to save. You can tell from the fun he has doing it here.

- Eglon's name means "bull calf" or "little bull." Tribute was probably produce, which Eglon could have used to make himself fat. Eglon was initially quite an able leader (cf. v13), but by now he has turned himself into an easy target.
- v17 The words used for "tribute" and "present" have religious overtones—used most often in connection within the sacrificial system for offerings the people would bring to God. The "little bull" is actually a "fatted calf," ready for sacrifice.
- He's also gullible. He dismisses his own guards (v19) and rises from his chair to receive the secret message, making himself all the more vulnerable (v20).
- The servants are just as gullible as their master, as they wait outside his door assuming he is reading the paper on the pot.
- Plus, I'm sorry to be crass, but did you notice the poop jokes (vv22, 24)?
- Fat Eglon's demise prefigures the defeat of his own troops, whom the author describes with the *double entendres* "stout" and "substantial" men (cf. ESV, "strong, able-bodied"). The author's point is that, even a king who has reigned unchallenged for 18 years is no match for God's deliverer. Eglon is dispatched with such ease, it's laughable.

Eglon was a capable leader and terrifying tyrant. But to God, he was a joke. Ehud is handicapped and he takes out the ruthless ruler. "He who sits in the heavens laughs..." (Ps 2:4).

God loves to save His people!! Did you notice how out of proportion the length of rest is to the length of apostasy. The people seem to be growing more stubborn (8 yrs, 18 yrs). But God's grace is growing greater (40 yrs of rest after 8 yrs of rebellion, 80 yrs after 18). "Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more."

For some of you, this is exactly the message you need to hear! In all your troubles—whether self-inflicted or not—you have a compassionate God who hears your cries and comes to save you in your distress! And He is happy to save you!

Ultimately, Othniel and Ehud point us to Christ. We need a savior like Othniel—right lineage, the paragon, the sinless one. But we also need a savior like Ehud... weakness vs. strength, struck a lethal blow only later proven to be victorious, invited others to share in their victory, overcame the enemy & achieved rest for God's people, made a spectacle of hostile powers. In Jesus, this is the Savior we have.