

The First Judge of Israel: Othniel

Judges 3:1-11

Judges 3:1-11 - *“Now these are the nations which the LORD left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan ² (this was only so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it), ³ namely, five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal Hermon to the entrance of Hamath. ⁴ And they were left, that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*

⁵ Thus the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁶ And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods.

⁷ So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs. ⁸ Therefore the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years. ⁹ When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim. ¹¹ So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.”

Background Notes

The period of the Judges lasted for about 350 years in Israel’s history. It extended from the death of Joshua until the time of King Saul, the first king of Israel. The prophet Samuel, who anointed King Saul, was most likely the author of the book of Judges. Samuel is sometimes considered the last of the judges and the first of the prophets in Israel. In the first half of Judges 3 we have the record of Othniel, the first judge in Israel. He was the nephew of Caleb, and he was mentioned in Judges 1.

In Judges 3:7-11, we can see the five-stage sin cycle that we described in Judges 2. Let’s follow the five stages as we read the verses again.

1. Verse 7: *“So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs.”* This is stage number one – the **sin stage**, or the wandering away from the Lord stage.

2. Verse 8: *“Therefore the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years.”* This is stage two, **God’s discipline stage**, when God would allow a foreign power to come in and oppress the people.

3. Verse 9: “*When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer...*” This is stage three, or the **repentance and calling out to the Lord stage**.

4. Verses 9-10: “... *the LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim.*” This is stage four, or the **salvation and restoration stage**, when God would raise up a judge to deliver the people. In this case the judge was Othniel.

5. And finally verse 11: “*So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.*” This is stage five, or the **“rest” stage**. In this stage there would be a measure of moral reform and return to the Lord until the judge died, and the people would start to cycle downhill again. There were seven such sin cycles in the book of Judges. In Judges 3, we have the account of the first cycle, and Othniel, the first judge of Israel.

Doctrinal Points

1. God uses a believer's mistakes, along with His wisdom, for testing and training.

When God brought Israel into the Land of Promise, Israel was responsible before the Lord to **completely** cleanse the land of all enemies. God didn’t want any pockets or enclaves of the enemy Canaanites left in the Land to influence His people with their idolatrous and immoral practices. But Israel failed in their responsibility. They conquered the enemy, but they didn’t completely drive the enemy out of the land. These enclaves of leftover enemies began to influence God’s people, and it wasn’t long before the people of Israel intermarried with these pagans and adopted their gods (v5-7).

Did God give up and reject His people at this point? No, He didn’t. That’s the good news of the book of Judges. God continued to patiently work with His people, the children of Israel. He disciplined them, but when they cried out to Him, He raised up judges to deliver them.

Furthermore, God used their mistake of not completely driving out the enemy to test them and to train them. Look at what the Lord said in Judges 2:20-23 - “*Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not heeded My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the LORD, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not.*” *Therefore the LORD left those nations, without driving them out immediately; nor did He deliver them into the hand of Joshua.*”

Now look at Joshua 3:1 “*These are the nations the LORD left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan...*” And verse 4: “*And they were left, that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the LORD, that He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*”

So God used Israel's mistake in not driving out the enemy to **test** the new generation - and not only to test the people, but also to **teach** them and **train** them. Look at verse 2: "*this was only so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war...*" Israel's mistakes and failure were not justified, but God used their failure, along with His wisdom, to further test and train His people.

God does this in our lives as well. A believer's failures are never justified, but God can use our mistakes for testing us – and even for training us (and others) in spiritual warfare. An example might be mistakes in making major decisions in our lives -- like career decisions, marriage decisions, and use of money decisions. We can make some big mistakes in these areas if we don't follow the Lord, right? What happens when we fail in one of these areas? We will certainly "reap what we've sown," and God will discipline us, but here's the point: the Lord will continue to test us by the negative results or fallout from our bad decisions. Will we continue to make more mistakes - or will we pass the test, and let God guide us?

In addition, our mistakes and their consequences can become "case studies" from which other believers can learn. When I teach my students about the pitfalls of the sin of materialism, or the problems resulting from divorce, I have numerous real-life examples to describe to them. The students can see for themselves the consequences of sin, and learn for themselves what (or what not) to do to avoid making the same mistakes in their own lives.

Remember Romans 8:28 - "*And we know that God works all things together for good for those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*" This verse doesn't say that all things are good – it says that God will work all things together for good in our lives. This includes testing and training. Romans 8:29 tells us His purpose: to make us more like Christ-like. God uses the believer's mistakes, along with His wisdom, for testing and training.

2. God uses a believer's experience, along with His power, for victory and deliverance.

We see this lesson in the life of Othniel. Why was Othniel successful in his war against the army of Cushan-Rishathaim? You may say, "It was the power of the Lord, as we see in verse 10." Right on! But God also used Othniel's experience in battle. In Judges 1 we read that Othniel was already battle-hardened. Othniel had taken up Caleb's challenge and conquered a stronghold near Hebron. Othniel had both experience and a godly heritage – he was related to Caleb and he had battle experience. God uses our experiences and His power for victory and deliverance.

Recently we received a letter from a young man in Africa who heard the Talks for Growing Christians radio program. He said that he believes God has called him to "fight the good fight" as an evangelist. He's a new Christian and he wants to grow as a Christian at a very fast rate.

Question: Can God empower this young man as an evangelist, and use him greatly in "fighting the good fight"? Yes, He can. But this young man also needs to get some experience in the Word and in the things of God. Experience and God's power go together, as we see in the life of Othniel. God uses a believer's experience, along with His power, for victory and deliverance.

Practical Application

Beware of creeping compromise!

During the days of the judges, the children of Israel didn't immediately become idol worshipers. No, they gradually compromised with the enemy. Look at verses 5-6: *"Thus the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods."*

Notice the creeping compromise:

1. They lived with the enemy, then....
2. They intermarried with the enemy, and finally...
3. They served the gods of the enemy.

What a lesson for the church today. And what a lesson for us, as individual believers, as well. Beware of creeping compromise!

This lesson is so important for families. I know several Christian families that have lost their children to the "gods" of this world - and it didn't happen overnight. The parents gradually allowed worldliness and materialism to suck their children into this world's system of values and attitudes. As the children grew up, they lost interest in walking with the Lord. Eventually they married unbelievers. They now serve the gods of this world.

Beware of creeping compromise!