

The Weapons of our warfare. Judges 3:1-11, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Adapted from Wiersbe, *OT Commentary*, pgs 432-439.

Last week, our "All The Stories of the Bible" series came to the conclusion of the Book of Joshua with this comment: *Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel* (Joshua 24:31). But as you know, the history of Israel from the very start has been a continuous dance between rebellion followed by revival, which is exactly what you will find recorded in the next book: Judges.

In Judges, two verses can set the general theme for the entire book. The first verse is found at the beginning:

The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of [some foreign ruler]. But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them (Judges 3:7-9).

The second verse is then found at the very end of the book, ***In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes*** (Judges 21:25). In between these two verses are the stories of 12 judges that God raised up to rescue and restore Israel in their times of need. The greatest and last of these judges was Samuel who would need the next two books of the Bible just to record the events of his lifetime.

Since Philip Parker has already brought you three excellent messages on the most famous judges, Deborah, Gideon, and Samson, all that remains for me is to fill in some of the missing stories. Today you will meet the first three judges, Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. So, let's begin.

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. That statement could have been made by a space alien in a sci-fi novel, but it wasn't. The apostle Paul wrote those words to the believers in Corinth (2 Cor. 10:4), reminding them of a principle every Christian needs to take to heart: **When God goes to war, He usually chooses the most unlikely soldiers, hands them the most unusual weapons, and accomplishes through them the most unpredictable results.**

For example, since he had no other weapon, Shamgar used an ox goad to kill 600 men. The woman Jael used warm milk, a rug, a hammer, and a tent peg to kill an enemy captain. Gideon routed the whole Midianite army with just water pitchers and torches. Samson slaughtered 1,000 Philistines using the jawbone of an ass and young David killed the giant Goliath with a stone hurled from a shepherd's sling. Though I am sure

they would admire all this improvisation, West Point isn't likely to offer courses on how to use such weapons.

While our world has changed dramatically since the days of the judges, the "world system" is still the same because human nature hasn't changed. As long as we're in this world, God's people will be involved in a spiritual battle against Satan and his armies (Eph. 6:10-19), and **God is still looking for men and women who have what it takes to win: faith in God's guidance and the courage to follow His lead.** These essentials for victory are illustrated in the lives of the first three judges.

The book of Judges opens by noting that even though ordered to do so Israel had failed to clear all the pagan nations out of their land. Rather than finish the job for them, God left those nations in place both to test Israel's continued faithfulness towards their covenant with Him and to train future Israelites in art of warfare (3:1-4). As predicted, these remaining nations at first adopted a "good neighbor" policy toward the new residents which defeated Israel's faith from within. By swapping their sons and daughters in marriage, this eventually led to Israel worshipping their gods.

Of course, Israel should have been a witness to these remaining nations, seeking to win them to faith in the true and living God, but they failed in that responsibility as well. What a difference it would have made in their national history if the Israelites had won the Canaanites to the Lord instead of the Canaanites winning them over to Baal! Their idolatrous mates gradually stole the hearts of the Israelites away from worshipping Jehovah to worshipping false gods. King Solomon made this same mistake. After all, when you marry outside the will of God, you have to do something to keep peace in the family!

God had put a wall between Israel and her neighbors, not because Israel was better than any other nation, but because she was different.

- Instead of worshipping idols, the Israel worshipped the one true God who made the heavens and the earth.
- Humans did not devise the laws and covenants of Israel; God did.
- And only through Israel was the promise that one day all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

When Israel obeyed the Lord, He blessed them richly; both their conduct and God's blessing were to be a testimony for their unbelieving neighbors. Like **Rahab** the harlot, the pagan people should have seen that, "*these Israelites are different. The God they worship and serve is a great God!*" And the Hebrew people would then have had opportunities to tell their neighbors how to trust Jehovah and receive His forgiveness and blessing. But, instead of trusting God to change their neighbors, the gods of their neighbors changed the Israelites, and everything Moses warned them not to do, they did.

Is it any wonder that God became angry, and humiliated Israel by using pagan nations to discipline His own people? Had the Israelites been faithful to the Lord, He would have sold the other nations into Israel's hands, but now that they were acting like pagans, He sold them into the hands of their enemies (Deut. 32:30).

Charles Spurgeon said that *God never allows His people to sin successfully. Their sin will either destroy them or it will invite the chastening hand of God.* If the history of Israel teaches the United States of America anything it's the obvious lesson that

**righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace to any people"**

Prov. 14:34

Here is a side note. pay attention to people's given names in the Bible, they almost always say something about that person which is pertinent to their story. For instance, the first enemy king, who came from the region of Mesopotamia to defeat and enslave Israel was literally named, "**doubly wicked Cushan**;" a nickname probably given to him by his enemies.

After Israel suffered eight years of enslavement under Cushan, they were ready for another Exodus experience: "*God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.*" (Ex. 2:24-25). The deliverer He raised up was **Othniel**.

When God called Othniel, *the Spirit of the Lord came upon him and empowered him for battle* (Judg. 3:10).

**Not by might nor by power,
but by My Spirit.' says the Lord of hosts**

Zech. 4:6

This was the secret of Othniel's strength, as it was with all of the judges to lead Israel and it still must be the source of the believer's power today (Eph. 5:18).

Othniel not only rescued his nation from bondage under Doubly Bad Cushan, but he also served as Israel's judge for the next forty years. It was his spiritual and civil leadership that restored peace to the land. **Never underestimate the good that one person, who is obedient and filled with the Spirit of God, can do.**

However, unlike Moses, who appointed Joshua to lead Israel and the later kings who would pass the crown on to their sons, the judges had no authority to name a successor. When God called men and women to serve as judges, they obeyed, did His work, and then passed from the scene. One would hope that their godly influence

would make a lasting difference in the spiritual life of the nation, but such wasn't the case. No sooner was a judge off the scene than the people went back to worshipping Baal and forsaking the Lord. Somewhere the system broke down, and I think it was with the priests and the parents.

The priests and Levites were not only to officiate at the tabernacle, but they also were to teach the law to the people and encourage them to obey it. Israelite parents were expected to teach their children the ways of the Lord and be good examples for them to follow. During the period of the judges, however, it appears that the older generation neglected this important ministry of instructing the new generation about the fear of the Lord.

The armies of Mesopotamia came from a long distance away to invade Israel, but their next oppressors, the Moabites, Ammonites, and Amalekites were not only neighbors but also distant relatives of the Israelites. Lot, the nephew of Abraham, was the ancestor of Moab and Ammon; Esau, the brother of Jacob, was the ancestor of Amalek.

Eglon, the king of Moab, whose name meant "round" – *remember that* – had organized a confederacy out of these remnant nations and for the next eighteen years they made life miserable for the Israelites. It must have been especially galling for Israel to be under the heel of blood relatives who were also their longtime adversaries.

Ehud, the second judge to deliver Israel, was described as *a left-handed man*, but perhaps a better translation of the text was that he was "*a man crippled in the right hand.*" **So Ehud's story should be great encouragement for people with physical or mental disabilities who don't think that God can't use them in His service.** Working with his disability, Ehud successfully solved three problems in his plan to liberate Israel from their current captors.

First, to gain access to King Eglon, Ehud volunteered to lead the commission that brought Israel's annual tribute. This payment of tribute not only added to the king's wealth, but also acknowledged Moabite authority over Israel. Of course, Eglon didn't suspect that Ehud was God's next appointed judge, otherwise, he would have had him killed on sight.

The second problem was in securing a private audience with the king without raising the suspicions of his attendants and guards. Ehud did this by first leaving with his fellow emissaries after they had delivered their tribute, but then returning alone, claiming to have a secret message for the king, from God!

A solitary man with a crippled right hand couldn't be much of a threat to a powerful king and perhaps this despised Israelite really did have a personal message for him from God. Since Eglon was no doubt afraid not to listen to this message from God, he first dismissed his guards and attendants and gave Ehud a personal interview in his

private chambers. Eglon even stood up to receive his message from God, which for him was quite an effort because he was immensely fat (*remember the meaning of his name?*).

At which point, using his good left hand, Ehud reached into his robes for a custom made dagger strapped to his right thigh – a place that the guards would not have thought to look, especially on this cripple. And shoving the knife so far into obese Eglon that his fat closed over the entire blade, thus Ehud quickly dispatched the evil king. Then as he left, Ehud shut and locked the doors to the king's chamber behind him so that when the attendants returned they would think Eglon was resting and did not wish to be disturbed. With their king now dead, Ehud rallied the Israelites not only to defeat the Moabite confederacy, but also to turn the tables on them; thereafter the Moabites became subject to Israel and the land enjoyed another eighty years of peace.

If the Israelites had been voting on a leader, Ehud probably would have lost on the first ballot. But he was God's choice and God used him to set the nation free. Moses was slow of speech – meaning that he either stuttered or was tongue-tied – Paul, at the end of his life was not a pretty sight to look at, but Moses and Paul, like Ehud, were all giants of faith who led others to victory. **Ehud turned a disability into a possibility because he depended on the Lord.**

This brings us to **Shamgar**, who only gets mentioned in a single verse at the end of chapter three. He may or may not have been a judge, but he also "*delivered Israel.*" Shamgar was probably a contemporary of Judge **Deborah** and the warrior general **Barak**, because she mentions him in her victory song (5:6). While the name "Shamgar" translates as "*He is a stranger here,*" his designation as a "**son of Anath**" indicated that he was from the same tribe as Barak. That designation can also be translated as "*son of war,*" so we may assume that Shamgar was a warrior of distinction in Barak's campaign against their next oppressors.

What was significant about Shamgar was the weapon that he used. An ox goad was a strong pole about eight feet long. One end was either sharpened or had a metal point for prodding along the plowing oxen. The other end had an attached metal hook for cleaning dirt off the plow. This was the closest thing Shamgar could find to a spear because the enemy had confiscated all of the Israelites weapons.

Here was another man who obeyed God and defeated the enemy even though his resources were limited. Instead of complaining about not possessing a sword or spear, Shamgar gave what he had to the Lord, and the Lord used it. The 19th century preacher Joseph Parker said, "*What is a feeble instrument in the hands of one man is a mighty instrument in the hands of another, simply because the spirit of that other burns with holy determination to accomplish the work that has to be done.*"

Shamgar may have killed all 600 Philistines at one time in one place, but it's also possible that 600 is a cumulative total, since an ox goad would be an unwieldy weapon to use if 600 soldiers had attacked him at one time. While we don't know the details, we can be encouraged by knowing that God enabled him to overcome the enemy even with very limited resources.

The few words that are recorded about Shamgar give the impression that he was a man of persistent courage, to stand his ground against the enemy, having only a farmer's tool. Charles Spurgeon once gave a lecture at his Pastor's College entitled "*To Workers with Slender Apparatus.*" Shamgar didn't hear that lecture, but I'm sure he could have given it! And I suspect he would have closed his lecture by saying, "***Give whatever tools you have to the Lord, stand your ground courageously, and trust God to use what's in your hand to accomplish great things for His glory.***"

As the prophet Hanani would later tell King Asa of Judah,

*The eyes of the Lord range throughout the entire earth,
to strengthen those whose heart is true to Him*
2 Chronicles 16:9.

This was certainly true of Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.
May it also be true of us?
Let's pray about this.