

“Here Comes the Judge!”
A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges
Session 2 September 30, 2020
Othniel, the 1st Judge Judges 3:7 – 11

Session 1 Recap: The Judges’ Cycle

The Judges’ Cycle (found in Judges, Chapter 1, verses 10 through 19 in chapter 2) is as follows...

1. The tribes of Israel rebel against God, often worshipping the gods of the people of Canaan (Baal, Ashteroth, etc.)
2. God is provoked to anger by the Israelites actions, and allows another people group to rise up and invade, plunder, or oppress the tribes of Israel.
3. The distress causes the tribes of Israel to cry out to the Lord, asking for repentance for their actions.
4. God sends rescue through a chosen leader, a “judge” to put down the oppressors, creating a time of peace for the tribes.
5. When the “judge” dies, the tribes once again turn away from God and rebel again.

Session 2: Othniel, the 1st Judge

Judges 3:7 - 11

This week, we begin our journey through the list of “Judges” by focusing on Othniel. From the beginning, there exists a tension between God’s holy commands and His faithful promise. He desired obedience from the tribes of Israel, yet after they disobeyed, in the end He always promised to save His people. What we will see over the coming weeks is a cyclical pattern of God humbling His people for their sin, but then delivering the tribes, through the judges, from their demise. God never casts the Israelites off.

The “case study” of the judge, Othniel, fits the perfect pattern of the Judges’ Cycle. Unlike the other judges that we will examine, where pieces of the cycle may be missing or not clearly spelled out, Othniel’s case as the first judge outlines the cycle perfectly.

(1) Cycle Step One: Judges 3:7

The tribes of Israel did “evil” in the sight of the Lord. God has defined what is evil as a two part decision – to turn away (forget) from Him and to serve other “gods” or worship false idols. This verse tells us that the sons of Israel “forgot the Lord their God.” Forget God? We have to think of “forgetting” in a spiritual sense. A better way to understand this is that their actions were no longer controlled by what they “knew”. It was not real to them anymore. We know it in our “heads”, but do not follow it with our “hearts”.

So, the tribes of Israel turned to serving the gods of Baal and Asheroth. Baal was the most worshipped god of the Canaanites (God told the tribes to destroy the altars of the other gods because of the peer pressure...) Most often cast as a bull, Baal was an agriculture god that symbolized strength and fertility. Asheroth (Asherah) was Baal’s female partner, goddess of the sea. Wooden pillars were often used to symbolize her manifestation.

(2) Cycle Step Two: Judges 3:8

God’s anger was kindled against the tribes of Israel, and he allows the king of Mesopotamia, Cushan-rishathaim to invade and conquer them. Just as the people “sold themselves into the hands of the idols”, God sold the tribes into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim. The king’s name in Hebrew translates literally to “Cusan of Double Wickedness,” the epitome of any great villain! In some translations, Cushan is king of a more specific region in Mesopotamia, “Aram”. This designates a region in northwest Mesopotamia where two rivers flow together.

This “punishment” for their evil lasted for eight years. One might say, “Isn’t this a long time to punish a people?” We have to remember this is a learning process for the tribes of Israel. This time challenged the tribes of Israel to focus on where they had lost their way. Remember, it took the tribes of Israel eight years to recognize their fault and cry out to God...

(3) Cycle Step Three: Judges 3:9

The only thing the people of Israel contributed to the “rescue” was a cry out to God! One can imply from this “cry” that they are remorseful for their actions and they seek repentance from God. It took the tribes eight years to realize it (this is one of the shorter periods of oppression in Judges).

(4) Cycle Step Four: Judges 3:9 – 10

The Lord sends in a deliverer, a spiritual leader, and a whole-hearted disciple to serve as the first judge for the tribes of Israel. He chose Othniel, a man we are introduced to in Judges Chapter 1, who acted on behalf of his uncle Caleb in driving the inhabitants out of Caleb's allotted land. (Othniel receives the hand of Achsah, Caleb's daughter, in marriage as payment for this action and his obedience.) Othniel was a part of the southern tribe of Judah. Other than Joshua, Othniel is the only other man throughout Judges whose life is shared in detail who is not explicitly flawed.

In verse 10, we are told, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him..." referring to Othniel. We will see this phrase used on multiple occasions with other judges. What does this mean? For a temporary time, there is a spontaneous increase in strength – physical, mental, and spiritual. The result from the Spirit coming upon Othniel is that he was able to conquer Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia, in battle. In this case, the Spirit of the Lord appearing is positive. Later on in the book of Judges (Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson), we will see that the Spirit's presence becomes dangerous and destructive in the extreme. One thing to note, while Othniel was the "judge", God was the one who delivered the king into Othniel's hands.

(5) Cycle Step Five: Judges 3:11

Othniel is able to usher in a period of peace for the tribes of Israel for forty years. This time of peace was definitely from physical oppression, but more importantly, spiritual oppression brought on by their own actions of worshipping Baal and Asherah. They were obedient to the Lord for these forty years, roughly one generation. This lasted until Othniel dies.

Questions to Reflect On...

The tribes of Israel fell into the traps of the other gods and “idols” by forgetting whom God was “in their heart” (actions) even though they still knew it “in their head”. How should Christians insure their “heart” follows their “head” when it comes to God?

Have you ever felt “one with the Spirit”? Judges 3:10 tells us that, “The Spirit of the Lord came upon him...” referring to Othniel. How did your experience with the Spirit empower you? In what ways can we make ourselves available, even vulnerable, to the Spirit?

Next Week...

“Here Comes the Judge” – Session 3

Wednesday, October 7 6:30 PM

Focus – Ehud & Shamgar

Judges 3:12 – 30, 3:31