



THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

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Judges 3:7-31
Fourth Message
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Stories about underdogs are always very popular. When an unknown, unlikely, and overmatched individual goes up against the big guys and wins, we all take pleasure in the accomplishment, don't we? I think we love these stories because we see ourselves as underdogs. It gives us hope and motivation if someone like us has a great victory. Today, we will look at three underdogs in the book of Judges. I have called these three heroes "The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly." No, we're not going to watch a Clint Eastwood western. We're going to study the scriptures, although our text will remind you somewhat of a "spaghetti" western.

In our study in Judges up to this point we have looked at the negative side of this narrative. Here is the verse that sets the theme so far: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." (17:6.) Joshua had led the nation into the land, defeating 31 kings in the process, but in Judges, Israel suffered great failure. The people did not drive the enemies out of the land. Another generation had arisen that "did not know the Lord nor the work he had done." The nation experienced this cycle of slavery time and time again.

But there is a positive side to this book, too. God raised up judges, men and women of faith, unknown and unlikely heroes, who led Israel out of bondage. Today, we will examine the stories of three of these men. Chapter 3, verse 7:

And the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. And when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees. And the sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera,

the Benjamite, a left-handed man. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. And Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length; and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak. And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. And it came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. But he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he said, "Keep silence." And all who attended him left him. And Ehud came to him while 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. And Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out. Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.

When he had gone out, his servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room." And they waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.

Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. And it came about when he had arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was in front of them. And he said to them, "Pursue them, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands." So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan opposite Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross. And they struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men; and no one escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years.

And after him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel. (3:7-31, NASB)

Here again we encounter the four stages in the cycle of sin, which we discussed last week. Apostasy, we learned, is the first stage. Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. The second stage is servitude: God sold

them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim (literally, “Cushan of double wickedness,” the king of Mesopotamia). Israel served him eight years. The third stage is supplication: Israel cried out to the Lord. The fourth is salvation: the Lord raises up a deliverer. Othniel, Caleb’s nephew, is the deliverer in this case. Caleb, as you recall, was one of the spies who went into the land when Moses led the nation out of Egypt. Both Caleb and Joshua were all for entering the land, but the rest of the people responded negatively. So these two men remained 40 years in the wilderness, until another generation arose and took Israel into the land. In chapter 1, Caleb promised his daughter Achsah to the man who would take the city of Kiriath-sepher. Othniel took that city, and married Caleb’s daughter. So this man married into a good family, we would say. And he himself demonstrated a willingness to take on new ground—a strong spiritual characteristic. Othniel, therefore, is the “good” in our story of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The second judge we encounter is Ehud, a very interesting character. Not too many preachers would choose to preach on Ehud. Who would want to read that text? Here again we see the cycle of sin. First, the apostasy: the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord (v. 12). Then, servitude: God sold them into the hands of Eglon, king of Moab. Moab was the son of Lot by an incestuous relationship with his eldest daughter. (The Moabites lived across the Jordan to the south of Israel.) Israel served Eglon for 18 years. Then, once again, we see supplication (v. 15): They cried out to the Lord. And, finally, salvation: God raised up a deliverer named Ehud. This deliverer came to Gilgal to present his tribute to Eglon, and killed him in the process. Ehud blew a trumpet, and all of Israel joined in the fight as he led a rout of the Moabites.

Ehud, of course, is the “ugly” in our story this morning. It would be safe to say that you would not want to display his poster in your son’s bedroom, next to that of Will Clark. But Ehud is a tremendous character, really. He was a son of Gera, a Benjamite. We also know some things about his make-up. He must have been a prominent individual because he was given the responsibility of taking the tribute to present to Eglon. And he must have been courageous, because he was willing to go it alone. Unlike the Terminator or Rambo, he didn’t go in with a lot of heavy artillery. All he took was a double-edged, 13-inch dagger. Ehud was a military strategist. He plotted to kill Eglon, to get him alone, to tantalize him with something very special. And he had an escape route planned. Then, he was able to rally all of Israel. Instead of attacking the city he went down to the Jordan because he knew the Moabites were going to retreat across the river into their own country. There is where he headed them off, and the Israelites killed 10,000 Moabites, all robust, mighty men.

It’s interesting to note the several references in this text to the fact that Ehud was left-handed (literally, “hindered in the right hand”). Twice the text says that he put the dagger on his right side because he was left-handed. Ehud, we know, came from the tribe of Benjamin, a name that means “son of my right hand”—a term of strength. But the text is clear: Ehud was left-handed. He was “hindered in the right hand,” meaning, he was weak and physically limited. He was an awkward man—“gauche,” “left-handed,” as the French would say. Something that is wicked or evil we call sinister, which is the Latin word for the left hand. Someone with skill and ability is called dexterous, which

means right-handed in Latin. Ehud was a left-hander; he was handicapped.

Now the third judge we meet in our text is Shamgar. He is mentioned in only one verse, but we can learn some things about him. Shamgar is the “bad” in our account. His father’s name was Anath, which is the name of a Canaanite god of sex and war. It’s likely that Shamgar was not an Israelite at all. He may well have been a Canaanite. His weapon, an oxgoad, a long handled, pointed instrument tipped with metal, indicates that he was probably a peasant and this was the only weapon available to him. His enemy was the Philistines, but he had the same mission as Othniel and Ehud, and he also saved Israel.

Thus we have the setting for our text this morning. We’ve already seen how relevant the book of Judges is to life today. Just as Israel faced enemies in the land, we, too, face the enemies of sin and the flesh when we become believers in Jesus Christ and enter into the land—the Spirit-filled life in Christ. And, just like Israel, we fail to drive the enemies out of the land. We forget God, we serve idols and become the slaves of sin. And finally, just as Israel had deliverers and judges, we, too, have a Deliverer in the person of Jesus Christ to save us and free us from the bondage of sin.

We want to examine three specific areas of application. The first has to do with sin. You can’t read the book of Judges without talking about sin. There are some things here that give us added perspectives and dimensions on what we’ve talked about already. For instance, sin can grow to an obese state. We see this in Eglon, the king of Moab. If you let sin go unchecked, it just grows, and it can become obese. And sin is ugly. I think the story of Ehud is given to us for shock value. We can justify sin, we can paint it in pretty colors, we can deny its importance or relevance, but when we look at it for what it is, it’s just plain ugly. And it’s not easy to kill. It doesn’t go away by ignoring it. It must be faced head-on—like Ehud takes on Eglon—even if it’s gory and disgusting. When you want to weed out sin from your life, you have to get down and dirty, so to speak. You’ve got to get your work clothes on. You can’t deal with it wearing white gloves.

We also learn that people are content to stay enslaved for a long period of time. When Israel first came under bondage, it was eight years before they cried out to the Lord. The next time it took 18 years. We have to ask ourselves, why did they wait so long? Why do we wait so long when we become addicted to patterns of sin? Perhaps we’re afraid or ashamed to face the reality or the ugliness of these patterns and addictions. Maybe we feel we’re going to lose something we enjoy too much. Or maybe we’re content to remain where we are and our misery becomes comfortable. But we have a Redeemer, a Savior, a Deliverer whose name is Jesus, and he saves us from the dominion and power of sin in our lives. Whether it’s been eight years or 18 years, we can cry out to the Lord today. We can turn away from sin and he will begin to free us from our enslavement to patterns and addictions.

Then we see the result of coming to Christ, of turning away from our idols and having him deliver us. The result is rest and peace. When Othniel judged Israel, there was rest in the land for 40 years. After Ehud judged Israel, there was rest in the land for 80 years. “For the wages of sin is death,” says Paul, “but the free gift of God is eternal

life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Sin makes us miserable; it robs us of our sense of joy and well-being. But God restores our life in Christ and gives us rest from our enslavement to sin.

A few weeks ago, a man called me on the phone to inquire about getting married at Peninsula Bible Church. I asked him if he and his fiancée were both Christians, and he said he was, but she was not. We talked about that for a little bit, and we were even able to talk about some of the patterns that had developed in his life and in his relationship with this woman. Finally, I said, “I have to be honest with you. I cannot be involved in your marriage because of what the scriptures say about Christians marrying non-believers.” I could tell that it was a real blow to him. A couple of weeks ago we had lunch together, and he told me that he had called off the marriage and was in the process of severing the relationship completely. He had begun to see the patterns that had developed in his life over the last few years, and how he had become dependent on women. In this relationship he was dependent upon her, not God. She controlled his life. So for the first time he said no to the flesh, no to what he thought he wanted to do, and yes to God. He was learning about God again. He was back in church, he was growing, and becoming dependent upon God. He’s in the process of being delivered and being made whole. His face was radiant, as he kept saying over and over again, “This is a very difficult thing for me to do, but it feels good.” In other words, there was rest; rest had entered the land once again. He had said no to the flesh; he had said yes to God. After years of enslavement he was experiencing rest.

The second area I want to talk about is the potential we have in our relationship with God, despite what might seem like an apparent lack of credentials. In our text we encounter at least two unlikely heroes; men who were not that well known, who didn’t have a lot of credentials. In Shamgar’s case, our information is limited to one verse. We encounter these people all throughout the book of Judges. (Samson, the judge who had the most going for him, is the one who messed up the most.) What we have here are underdogs, obscure people, men and women whom God chose to use to his glory. Granted, Othniel came from a good family. It can be a very good thing to grow up in a Christian home and have a Christian heritage; God can use you there. But Ehud is a no-name. He is weak and limited. Shamgar wasn’t even an Israelite. He, too, was a nobody, and yet God used him. David was an unlikely hero. Samuel looked at all the brothers in the family, and David was the last one—but he was the one God wanted to use.

Jesus was a most unlikely hero. Isaiah says that “He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He had no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hid their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isa. 53:2-3). Yet Jesus accomplished the single most important act in history: He died for our sins, thus becoming the greatest hero of all. No one recognized him when he came upon the scene. There was no red carpet, no fanfare. An unlikely hero.

Now here we are in Christ. We, too, might feel like un-

derdogs; that we don’t have the right credentials. Our family background is not good enough, we think. We feel we’re too ordinary. But our text tells us that God can use us in amazing ways. This room is filled with Othniels and Ehuds and Shamgars. It doesn’t matter what your family background is. It doesn’t matter if you’re limited in some capacity. God sees you as very much more than ordinary. He takes each one of us from our different backgrounds, with our different talents and our different gifts, and he molds us uniquely into a representation of himself. There’s no pattern, no mold. We don’t have to look alike. He uses us, each one of us, in unique ways. And God is excited about how he wants to use you. Our own Judy Squier was honored last November in Washington at a special dinner to honor the handicapped. Maybe you saw the article in this month’s “Focus on the Family” magazine. Judy was born without legs, and she has been walking on artificial limbs since she was 10 years old. When she was born, the obstetrician told her father, “Your daughter is going to live, I’m sorry to say.” But at 10, Judy was able to ride a bicycle that her father had modified. At 16, she was able to drive a car that had been equipped with hand controls. Social workers told her not to bother thinking about college, but that made her even more determined. She graduated from the University of Illinois with undergraduate and graduate degrees. Now she and her husband have three beautiful daughters. At the dinner in Washington, she said, “I am convinced that this old world needs handicapped people. God designed it that way. Handicapped people make a unique contribution that cannot be synthesized.”

To me, this is the miracle of Christianity, the miracle of Christ. We live in a world that loves the miraculous and the dramatic. It was the same in Jesus’ day. Those who wanted to be healed thronged to him. They wanted him to heal them and cast out demons, and he did that at times. He does some of that today, too. But to me, the real miracle is when God takes someone ordinary, someone just like you and me, and uses him or her to his glory. He doesn’t heal all the problems or the handicaps at first. The miracle is, he uses us when we’re limited. This is how he used Ehud and Shamgar. He takes a life that the world discards and uses it to his glory. Paul says in 1 Cor 1:27, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong.” Sometimes it takes only one person to motivate many to righteousness. That’s what happened in Ehud’s case. He was willing to go on the attack first, but then he blew the trumpet and all of Israel joined in the battle, routing the enemy.

There may be just one person here this morning who wants to influence his or her generation for Jesus Christ. We live in similar times to the book of Judges, don’t we? Everyone “does what is right in his own eyes.” The cover story in *Time* magazine last week was “The Fraying of America.” We’re coming apart at the seams. Candidates for public office are put on trial by the tabloids. We even have ticket scalping at rape trials. But then there are the Ehuds, the Shamgars and the Othniels. You’ve got to love them! These men would make the All-Madden Football Team. They get down and dirty. Whatever God wanted them to do is exactly what they wanted to do, using whatever God gave them. Do you believe that about yourself? Do you believe that God can use you in these ways, that

you're valuable and important to him and that you can make a difference?

A little boy was heard talking to himself as he walked across the backyard, baseball cap in place, ball and bat in his hands. "I am the greatest hitter in the world," he said. He threw the ball up, swung and missed. "Strike one," he said. But again, he told himself, "I am the greatest hitter ever." He threw the ball up again, swung and missed. He looked at the ball, and at the bat, and said, "I'm the greatest hitter that ever lived." He threw the ball up again and swung and missed a third time. This time he said, "Wow! Strike three! What a pitcher! I'm the greatest pitcher in the world!"

God thinks you're great at something. It may not be what you envisioned, but you're great in his eyes. He sees your heart; he knows what you want to do. He will take you, with your limitations and weaknesses, and use you to his glory.

The third area of application (and it falls closely on the heels of the second) concerns the resources to do what God wants us to accomplish. The thing that allows us to have victory, to serve God and to be used by God, is not our own strength, or our list of credentials, it's our faith in God. We're not "adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves; our adequacy is from God," as Paul reminds us (2 Cor 3:5). The Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel, says our text, and the Moabites were given into the hand of Ehud. Shamgar used what was available to him, which was an oxgoad. But he used it, trusting God for the results. God asks us to do the same, to use whatever he has given us, and then trust him. The Spirit that came upon Othniel is the same Spirit that lives in you and me. In the church of Jesus Christ we don't need more knowledge, more programs or more degrees. What we need is simple faith and trust in God. We need to believe that God is alive today and that as we step out in faith he, not us, will empower us and strengthen us. Hannah waited a long time to have a son. Through many years she prayed to God. God at last remembered her, and Sam-

uel was born. Hannah exulted, "He keeps the feet of His godly ones, but the wicked ones are silenced in darkness; for not by might shall a man prevail" (1 Sam. 2:9).

Last week, I was at a high school meeting where parents were up in arms about a change in the high school curriculum—and for some very good reasons. One man said, "I'm the vice president of a research and development firm, and I want the best curriculum for my child." Another said, "I'm the president of my own company, and I have to have the best for my child." There were a lot of good arguments raised, but as I sat there my heart began to sink. The pressure on our children is intense. If you don't get the right classes in the seventh grade, you can be prohibited from going to certain schools. The push for degrees, credentials and requirements is almost overwhelming in our society, especially in this valley. This is how the world views effectiveness and importance. But it's not so in the kingdom of God. What God requires is faith and faith alone. This is why he chooses the weak and the limited—because he can't use the proud. It's only when we become weak that we are willing to trust in him, and then he can use us. The people who are handicapped and limited are rich in faith. They have the great resources in God made available to them. This is why he uses the weak, like Othniel and Ehud and Shamgar, to topple the proud. Hudson Taylor said, "God is sufficient for God's work . . . God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do his great works by large committees. He trains someone to be quiet enough and little enough, and then he uses him."

Our text this morning encourages us in three ways. First, we need to be willing to confront areas of sin in our lives, even if they are ugly. When we do this, we can enter into God's rest. Second, we need to see how valuable we are in God's eyes. No matter how weak or limited we might feel, we are capable of great things for God. And third, we need to remember that it is unreserved faith in the strength and grace of our living God that will enable us to do what he wants us to do. We may be weak, but he is strong.

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