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Judges 3:7-31

Sin, Judgment, Pleading, Deliverance, Repeat

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, then you might have noticed that our sermon text today - and the plans for our entire sermon series through the book of Judges - changed pretty significantly. Originally, I announced that I would preach through the whole book in 3 sermons, and that our next sermon text would be 3:7 through the end of chapter 16. Obviously, I've changed the plans, as our sermon text today is much, much shorter, covering only one chapter instead of 14! So, you may be wondering, "Why the change of plans?", and I suppose I owe an explanation. The short answer is: it is very difficult to adequately cover 14 chapters in one sermon! I think it can be done well - but not by me. It's difficult to adequately cover so many chapters at once. So as I had an extra week to look it over, while I was sick with Covid, I began to regret choosing to preach all 14 chapters at once. To do so, we would have had to skim over the vast majority of the intriguing characters and stories of the Judges, which contain many powerful and needed messages for us as Christians today. Or to put it differently: I realized I bit off more than I could chew, and I was worried that I wouldn't be able to rightly handle such a large text at one time. But I was torn. You see, I knew on the front end that preaching such a large section at once would be difficult, but I thought it would be worth it, so that we could see what is going in this book as a whole. And that's because there's a very clear pattern that repeats itself throughout the bulk of Judges that I wanted us to be able to see, in order to understand what the book is doing and showing us.

As the name of the book suggests, the book of Judges is all about the stories of specific *judges* - saviors that God raised up from Israel, to deliver them from their enemies, save God's people, and lead them back to God. There are 12 judges mentioned: 6 minor judges, of whom we're only given about a verse or two of information; and 6 major judges who have longer, often colorful and exciting stories: Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. But this book is not just a collection of "hero stories"; the book does not hold up these men virtuous examples of morality and godliness for us to imitate. On the contrary, as the book goes on, the stories and judges become more colorful, but also edgier and more flawed. But there is still something very intentional going on with giving us the stories of these 6 judges. YOU see, each story of the 6

major judges follows a set *pattern* throughout the book, with 4 stages: 1. sin, 2. judgment, 3. turning to the Lord, and 4. deliverance that we see play out over and over again, in each of the 6 cycles of major Judges. But that's not all we see: each time the cycle ends, after the Judge dies, Israel goes *right back into sin*. The pattern repeats itself; but not only that: it gets worse, so that throughout the book, we see Israel spiraling downward into more and more sin, idolatry, judgment, and oppression with each cycle. We even see this reflected in the judges themselves becoming worse and worse each time. Seeing this pattern is very important for us to understand the book of Judges; this pattern is for *our instruction*, that we might have a better understanding of how the Lord deals with His people, even with us today, and how we are to respond to Him.

So I was torn: I wanted us to see this big picture pattern, while also getting to walk through the book just a little more slowly, and see the significance of each judge's story as well. But thankfully, chapter 3 does just that: it shows us this pattern, being repeated in these first two cycles of judges, Othniel and Ehud, so that we can recognize it throughout the rest of the book. And this is most explicitly clear in the first story, of Othniel, in verses 7-11. In fact, this brief story is giving us a *paradigm* of this pattern, acting like a template of how this pattern is supposed to go, to help us understand the cycles of judges and the downward spiral of Israel more clearly. So this morning, I want us to first walk through the story of Othniel, and see this pattern clearly, and then walk through the Ehud and see how the pattern repeats. And as we do so, we'll unpack the significance of it for us today.

Othniel: A Paradigm of Judgment and Salvation (3:7-11)

The story of Othniel is clear, simple, and to the point. It's not nearly as colorful and provocative as the many stories of the Judges that follow. For that reason, we might even consider it less exciting, maybe even "boring." But Othniel is actually being presented to us as the most virtuous and faithful out of the Judges, setting the standard for how the cycle is supposed to go. So the first thing we see is: 1. Israel's sin and idolatry. We see this in v. 7: "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD." Then, 2. *the Lord responds in the second stage of the pattern: the Lord responds to their sin in righteous anger and judgment*. V.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." 3. Next, we see *the third stage: Israel cries out to the Lord*, in the first half of v. 9. And then, finally, 4. God responds in mercy and salvation: "the LORD raised up a deliverer for

the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother" (v.9). We've already heard about Othniel before, in chapter 1; his uncle, Caleb, was Joshua's faithful companion, and Othniel shows faithful obedience as well. God raises him up to save Israel from their enemies, making it clear that the victory and deliverance of Othniel comes from God Himself. We see this in vv.10-11: "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. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. So the land has rest forty years." The story is short and simple, the pattern and point is clear: 1. Israel sinned; 2. God poured out judgment on them by raising up enemies over them; 3. The people cried out to the Lord; and 4. God raised up a deliverer to save them. But then, at the end of v.11, "Othniel the son of Kenaz died." And the cycle begins again, repeating the pattern in the story of Ehud, the next judge. So let's walk through the next story a bit slower, looking at each stage of the cycle in a little more detail as they are repeated. So first we see:

I. God's People Doing What is Evil in the Sight of God (3:7, 12)

The story of Othniel began with Israel's sin and idolatry. And as soon as Othniel dies, Israel drifts right back into sin and idolatry: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD." All throughout the book of Judges, this is where each story starts, and ultimately, where each story ends: with the cycle repeating. Israel is supposed to be God's people, and yet they keep disobeying God and sinning against Him, leaving the one true God to instead chase after false idols. As v.7 says, "They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and Asheroth." And as time goes on, their sin and idolatry just keeps getting worse and worse. Even after God pours out His righteous anger on them, and even after he shows them mercy and saves them, they slip right back into sin, time and time again.

Now, it would be easy for us to sit back and judge the Israelites of old, saying, "Good grief, what idiots! Didn't they learn their lesson? How can they be so foolish to worship false gods and keep going into sin?" But we all do the exact same thing, don't we? The point is that this is human nature: sin and idolatry aren't the exception, it's the *default setting* of human beings. We're not born good, we're not even born neutral: we are all born sinners. Every single one of us sins; we all disobey God, not doing what we should do, and doing bad things that we shouldn't do. All of us have sinned against other people, by lying, stealing, gossiping, hurting with our angry words and actions. We all sin against God in our unfaithful thoughts, our pride

and selfishness, the lust of our eyes and flesh, our greedy desires. Anytime we act in a way that is against the nature of God and the commands of His Word, we are *sinning*; in fact, the text puts it even more provocatively: we do “what is evil in the sight of the LORD.” We’re not born as morally neutral; we’re not all good deep down; we all have a totally depraved sin nature, we’re all rebels against God, and our default mode as sinful humans is to do what is *evil* in the sight of God. Every single one of us needs to reckon with that fact; we all must admit our sinfulness; and that means, we all need to continually recognize and confess our *particular sins*. IN what ways are you tempted to sin? What are areas that you and I have disobeyed God and done what is evil in His sight? This past week? Today? Not a single one of us in this room can say that we haven’t fallen back into sin and done evil this week. We’re all prone to sin by nature.

So let us all search our hearts and be quick to recognize our sin that we might confess it and repent of it. We must take our sin seriously, because *the Lord* takes our sin seriously. Which leads us to point two...

II. God’s Righteous Anger and Judgment Against Sin (3:8, 12-14)

The second stage in the cycle is that God responds to Israel’s sin with righteous anger, raising up earthly enemies to oppress them as a sign of divine judgment against them. We saw this in v.8, where God’s anger was kindled and He “sold them into the hand of [the] King of Mesopotamia.” We see it again in vv.12-14, in the second cycle: “And the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of ISrael served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.” Israel suffers military defeat; they are oppressed by the pagan peoples of the land, becoming their slaves. And the Bible makes it clear: this is not simply a matter of one nation being stronger than the other, nor is this a sign of the weakness of God. Rather, this is *the judgment of God taking place*. GOD is sovereign, He is in control of all things, even all kings and nations. The passage makes it clear that *the Lord* is the one who allowed Israel to be given over into the hands of their enemies. God allow these pagan kings to come in and defeat His people, conquer their lands, and even oppress them, because God is using them to *pour out judgment* on Israel for their sins and idolatry. And there’s a ring of poetic irony to it, if we think about it. It’s as if God is saying, “Ok, so you want to forsake me as God and you want to be just like the

sinful, idolatrous, evil nations around you? Well then, I can make that happen! I'll let them defeat you so you can become their slaves and slaves to their gods whom you worship!"

Sin isn't a light matter, and it's never arbitrary. There are no tiny sins. Idolatry is never excusable. It's all *evil* in God's sight. When we sin, we provoke the Lord to anger - and if we actually understand what that means, then that should be the scariest thing in the world to us. "It is a fearful thing to fall in the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). When we read about God being provoked to righteous anger by the sins of His people in the Old Testament, like we do here, it ought to be sobering to us. It shows us that God always takes sin seriously; and that His righteous, holy, just anger burns against sin and is stirred up by it. Ultimately, this points us to the *final judgment*, the coming day of the Lord where we will all stand before the Lord in judgment, and all of God's enemies will be cast into Hell, condemned under the eternal wrath of God; that is, they will *face justice and righteous judgment*. And that's exactly what all of us deserve, because all of us have sinned against God, not obeyed and worshiped Him as He deserves, and have worshiped idols! Our only hope on that day is Christ Jesus; if we're trusting in Christ alone, then we will be saved by grace through faith in His gospel! But everyone outside of Christ will face the judgment of God. If you're not a Christian this morning, hear God's warning to you: you will face the wrath of God against your sin - *unless* you repent and turn to the Lord in faith! Run to the cross of Christ in faith and you will find forgiveness and mercy in Him! We'll talk more about this glorious hope of salvation in a little bit.

As Christians, we rest assured that we will be saved from the wrath of Hell that we deserve, because we believe in the gospel - as we should! - but this does not mean that we can just ignore the point of this text. We can't say, "Oh, well I'm saved, so I don't have to worry about sinning against God anymore," and then go on living in sin. This text is a warning to us: if we go on in deliberate sin and idolatry, we will provoke the Lord to anger. Just as the Lord brought judgment upon His people, Israel, so God at times pours out judgment upon His people, Christians, today! Now, if we're Christians, then it is true that we are completely forgiven and declared righteous before God, for Christ has borne all of God's wrath against us in our place! But if we start to forget God, and walk away from Him, and begin to deliberately head into sin and idolatry without repenting, without confessing it to the Lord and turning to Him, then we enter into a very dangerous place spiritually. When we walk in unrepentant sin, it either 1. Shows we're not Christians; or 2. If we are, then the Lord will bring *discipline* into our lives, as a sign

of judgment against us, in order to bring us into repentance and back to Him. As Heb. 10:26-27 says, “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.” And Heb. 12:6 tells us, “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” If we are His children, and we slip into deliberate and unrepentant sin, God will love us enough to bring judgment and discipline into our lives in order to convict us of our sin and bring us back to Him. Therefore, let us not provoke the Lord to anger, but let us be quick to repent! And this is the intended purpose of the Lord’s judgment, which leads us to point 3...

III. God’s People Cry Out to the Lord (3:9a, 15a)

As the Lord pours out righteous anger and judgment on Israel through the oppression of their enemies, it eventually leads them to turn back and cry out to Him for help. We saw this in v.9; we see it again in v.15: “Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord.” When we’re given over into the consequences of our sin and are under God’s judgment, the *only* place to turn for help is back to God Himself, begging Him for mercy! And gloriously, God is rich in mercy! Both times here, and throughout the book of Judges, when the people finally turn back and cry out to God, He hears them, and shows mercy.

But here’s the question: is Israel truly repenting here? Does this show them putting away their sin and idolatry and truly turning to the Lord with hearts of faith? We would very much like to think so, wouldn’t we? After all, they cry out to God for help, and he delivers them! But as we’ve already seen, right after the judge is gone, they just go right back into sin and idolatry, right back to their unfaithful ways. This is not the genuine repentance of faith. Not all that looks like repentance is truly repentance. Paul tells us this in 2 Cor. 7:10, where he contrasts “godly grief” over sin with “worldly grief” over sin: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” Worldly grief over sin is sorry to have to face the consequences for sin - but it does not actually produce repentance that turns to the Lord in faith. But *godly grief* over sin is sorry for the sin itself and leads to genuine repentance and faith.

It’s like if a kid regularly stays up after his bed time in order to play video games or watch TV when he thinks his parents are asleep, but then is one day caught, and his parents ground him by taking away his TV and video games. The kid may indeed be very sorry - sorry

that he got caught! - but not actually have any kind of heart change; he might even try to do the same thing again, if he thinks he can get away with it. This is worldly grief. And that's exactly what we see in the Israelites here. They cry out to the Lord because they don't like they're circumstances and they're desperate for help. They don't care where it comes from, be it from Yahweh or from Baal. It's like the modern day non-Christian who, when desperate in a time of crisis, says, "I'm not a religious man, but I guess now is the time to give prayer a shot." Such "turning to the Lord" is not real repentance and faith.

But godly grief is when someone is truly broken over their sin, knows that it's wrong, even knows that they deserve to be punished. True repentance is when we turn to the Lord in faith, turning away from sin, turning away from our idols, and turning to Christ alone as Lord, turning to His mercy and grace as our only hope! There is no true faith without true repentance. This is the only right response to our sin and the holy wrath of God. So let us turn to the Lord! Let us turn to the Lord in faith, for He alone can bring us salvation. Which brings us to our fourth and final point:

IV. God Raises Up a Savior and Delivers His People (3:9b-11, 15b-31)

When Israel cries out to God, he has mercy and raises up a deliverer to save them. First, He raises up Othniel. Now, he raises up Ehud, in verses 15-30. And this story is a bit longer, and much more colorful than the story of Othniel. In fact, it's even a little graphic, featuring language that makes us cringe a bit, and that we'd generally deem inappropriate for the kids in the room. So I'm going to be a bit vague on some of the details, but here's a general run-down of the story:

It begins in v.15: "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." Once again, God's answer is to save Israel by raising up a *deliverer* - this time named Ehud. He leads a delegation of Israelites sent to pay tribute to the King of Moab, since Israel was in servitude to Moab, their enemies. They come, pay tribute, leave; but then Ehud stops, let's his party keep going, and he turns back to the king, after they left. He says, "I have a secret message for you, O king" (v.19). And this catches the king's attention (whom we're told was very fat, as a nice piece of comedic relief), so he sends all of his guards and servants out of the room, leaving them alone - just King Eglon and Ehud. Now, you might think this is a very foolish thing for the king to do - and you would be right! Eglon's message for the king was a dagger he had in his pocket. As soon as they're alone, he proclaims, "I have a message from God

for you” (v.20), and he pulls out his sword and assassinates the King. Verses 23-26 then tell us how Ehud slips away quietly, while all of the servants stand around thinking that the King is just using the bathroom, until they finally wait so long that they’re embarrassed and finally work up the courage to check on him - only to find the king dead on the floor. But by this point Ehud is long gone. So Ehud heads back, musters up an army, and returns to drive out the Moabites, and the Lord gives them peace for 80 years (vv.27-30).

The story is colorful, even a bit humorous. It might even make us slightly uncomfortable. Not only does some of the language make us cringe, but the method of deliverance here is pretty edgy, isn’t it? Ehud goes in and *assassinates a king!* Not exactly a model picture of honor and bravery we hold up to our kids to imitate, right? Yet despite that, it’s undeniably a story of the Lord’s providence, working out all of the details, even using the over-confident foolishness of Eglon to bring about his downfall, and perfectly orchestrate Ehud’s escape. We see here the Lord’s deliverance of His people from their enemies, bringing them salvation and peace! The chapter then ends with another quick snapshot of the same thing, telling us about another deliverer, named Shamgar, in v.31: “After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.” Shamgar is one of those 6 minor judges; we’re not given all the details of his story, but it’s implied that the same cycle has taken place: because of Israel’s sin, the Philistines were ravaging them, so God raised up Shamgar to save them. And that’s the clear emphasis of the three stories we see in chapter 3: God raising up a deliverer and saving His people.

And yet, it is not a completely adequate salvation. Right after Ehud dies, Israel falls right back into sin and oppression again, as we’ll see in chapter 4, just as they did after Othniel died. Even though they deliver Israel from their earthly enemies, they can’t deliver Israel from their *real enemy* - their own sin. After all, the earthly oppression was just a symptom of their sin, showing God’s wrath and judgment against them! But the judges are inadequate saviors; they can’t deal with Israel’s sin problem, they cannot appease God’s wrath and judgment, they cannot truly stop the cycle of sin and judgment. And this is because, they are just finite, sinful human beings themselves. We get a little bit of a taste of that here, with the cringy, edgy details of Ehud’s assassination plot. And this point is made clear as the book of Judges goes on, where we see the individual judges get worse and worse, seeing more and more sin, and less faith. Yes, the Lord mercifully raises up deliverers to save Israel; and yet, it is only a partial, incomplete

deliverance, with inadequate saviors, bringing a salvation that is inadequate to truly deal with human sin and divine judgment, just leading into seemingly endless cycle of more and more sin, and more and more judgment. These stories of the Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and all the judges to follow leave us *longing for more* - longing for a greater savior, a greater salvation!

And thankfully, we know, that savior has come: the Lord Jesus Christ, a perfectly adequate savior. As the God-Man, he lived a perfect life, without sin; and in His sacrificial death on the Cross, He dealt with our sins and the wrath of God we deserve *once and for all*, laying down His life as a sacrifice in our place, purchasing atonement, forgiveness, and righteousness for us in His death and resurrection! This is the glorious news of the gospel of Jesus Christ: the savior has come! God's salvation from our sin and the wrath of God that we deserve is here! But *only* for those who cry out to the Lord - for those who *truly* cry out, who turn to the Lord in genuine repentance and faith. That's our only hope: that we turn to the Lord and beg Him for mercy! And as we do so, we rest in His gospel by faith, believing that it really is true: God will show unending mercy to all to cry out to Him, even raising us to eternal life, sparing us the judgment and wrath of Hell we deserve!

So let us turn to the Lord. And let us not forget Him or leave him; let us not turn back to sin and idolatry, but let us repent and believe, not just once, but every day of our lives, as we cling to Christ, our perfectly adequate savior! Brothers and sisters, let us not live in unrepentant sin and stir up the Lord to anger. Instead, let us be quick to recognize, confess, and turn from our sin and bring it to the Lord! Let us, every day, turn to Christ in faith, believing the good news of His gospel, the good news that we have true salvation, purely by grace through faith in Christ's perfectly sufficient life, death, and resurrection in our place! If we truly believe this, then let us live a life of faith and repentance as we follow him.

And if you're not a Christian, then I invite you to do this for the very first time! Acknowledge your sin and guilt, and the judgment of God you deserve, then turn to God and believe that Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised *for you!* Cry out to the Lord, and you will be saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! Then profess your faith publicly through baptism. If you have any questions about this gospel, about baptism, or about joining the church, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.