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Why Do We Choose Oppression?

Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series

Judges 3

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There are people all around the world that suffer oppression and bondage through no fault of their own. But why would anyone willingly choose bondage? That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Judges, Chapter 3. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the book of Judges. Last week we took a little trip to the *Visitor Center*, got an overview of what we're likely to see as we wander through these stories. Chapter 3, verses 1 through 6, is kind of the last little bit at the *Visitor Center* before we start wandering through these stories. Verse 1:

Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them (*that is, all the Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly*). *These nations are: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. They were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses. The sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.* (*NASB, Judges 3:1-6)

So it's kind of a summary of what we talked about last week. Just a couple of points to make: The language may seem really odd to us when it says they needed to **be taught war**. But again, we have to understand this was a generation that now possessed the land, or at least they lived in the land, but they hadn't done anything in order to fight for the land. They simply received it. The previous generations had fought the battles. They were now the recipients of that, and the question was whether or not they would trust God. Again, you can't read 21st century sensibilities back into an ancient culture. This land was extremely violent. It wasn't conquered and possessed by one dominant country, but these little city states or tribes all over the land, each led by a king, or what we would probably refer to as a warlord. It was "Kill or be killed". It's hard to describe how exceedingly violent this culture was. But God's vision was that they would drive out all these pagan people—all this violence out of the land—that the people of Israel would possess the land, that God would be their King, and they would live life according to God's laws and God's way, and create a place of flourishing as a witness to the world to say, "There's a better way to live," that they, too, might turn to the God of the Hebrews. But this vision God had was virtually impossible if the Israelites blended in with the culture, if they melted into the culture. If they worshipped the gods of the culture, there simply was no way for that to happen. So that's what has happened, and we begin these cycles that we talked about last week, starting in verse 7:

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 hand of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim for eight years. (Vs. 7-8)

So this is the beginning of the first cycle. The people were determined to do what was evil in the sight of God, to worship the gods of the culture, to betray God, to walk away from God. So, in order to discipline them, in order to get their attention, to turn them back to God, He allows them to be conquered and oppressed by the king of Mesopotamia **Cushan-rishathaim**. So that name literally means *double wicked*. These tribal leaders were wicked, but it probably was a nickname given to this king as he was considered double wicked. Mesopotamia—the word literally means *between two rivers*. We're talking about a place that was way up to the north, between the Tigris and the Euphrates. So this is just a picture of the color that you get in the book of Judges. Essentially what we're talking about is *old double wicked from double rivers*,” and that's just kind of the creativity you'll find in the book of Judges. So, he is oppressing the Israelites for eight long years. Verse 9:

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 to war, the LORD handed over to him Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land was at rest for forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died. (Vs. 9-11)

So here's the cycle: The people rebel against God. God allows them to be oppressed. They cry out to God. God raises up a deliverer. The deliverer frees them. As long as the deliverer lives, the people live in peace. We learned that last week in the *Visitor Center*. This is the first of those cycles. When the text says the people **cried out**, that Hebrew word does not mean repentance. It's just a cry of pain. It's a cry of anguish. It was typically used to describe an animal in pain. But because God is faithful, God is gracious, God is forgiving, God hears their cry, and raises up a deliverer—what is called a judge—a military spiritual leader in the land. The Hebrew word is *Yasha*. A deliverer is a Yasha. It's actually a derivative from the word Yeshua, which is the Hebrew name for Jesus. So each of these deliverers, these judges, is a glimpse, a picture of the great Savior Deliverer to come. The way the text words it, is interesting. God raises up a deliverer to what? To deliver them!

Last week we learned that when you make friends with the plunderers, what do they do? They plunder you. When you make friends with the wicked, they do wicked things to you. So just as a plunderer is going to plunder you, a deliverer is going to deliver you. So, God raises up a familiar deliverer by the name of Othniel. We met Othniel in chapter one. Othniel is a nephew to Caleb. He comes from a great family heritage, people of faith and courage. He's the logical hero. He's a classic hero. The name Othniel means *force of God*. Whenever you see a name in the Old Testament that has the letters “el” in it, remember, God's name is El - Elohim. So whenever there's a name with the letters el, it means something of God. So Joel, (JoEl), Michael (MichEL); Samu(EL) Othni(EL). In his case, it means *force of God*.

In chapter one, he wins great victory. He gets the girl. He gets the land. So this, in many ways, is the kind of hero we would expect. The Spirit of the Lord is with him. That's the formula for all these deliverers. It's the Spirit of God that empowers them to win the victory, and God gives them a great victory. They are released from this oppression and bondage and for the next 40 years, these people live in peace, as long as Othniel lives. So I would refer to that as kind of the classic story. There are not many details. It's pretty black and white. There it is, which does raise kind of an interesting question. Is that the way the rest of the stories in Judges will be recorded? Not much drama, not much detail? There it is, Othniel wins! All I'm going to say to that question is, "Fasten your seat belt," because it's about to get crazy! Verse 12:

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 took possession of the city of the palm trees. And the sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab for eighteen years. (Vs. 12-14)

So once again, this cycle repeats itself; the people do evil. That's mentioned twice in verse 12, to make sure we understand this didn't need to happen. There was no reason for them to live in bondage and oppression for 18 years, other than that's what they chose by doing evil and rebelling against God. So now God allows Eglon, the king of Moab, with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, to oppress them. So we're talking east of the Jordan River. There were a few tribes that possess the land east of the Jordan river: the Moabites, Ammonites, Amalekites were all east. So they come together as one people; they cross the Jordan River to the West. Now they're in the territory we think more classically of the land of Israel, and they take the City of the Palms, which is Jericho.

Now Jericho would have been a bit of an oasis in this land. That's why they called it the City of Palms. This was what we probably would refer to as the signature victory for Joshua. You know when we sing the song, "Joshua fit the battle of..." What? Of Jericho, because that was his signature victory. Now the Moabites have taken the area of Jericho. They probably did not live in the old city, which was now in ruins, but just simply set up and built their own place as a base of operation to oppress and control the land. So now everything seems like it's starting to fall apart. So the sons of Israel were oppressed for 18 long years. Verse 15:

But when the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer (a Yasha) 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.

So here's our cycle; the people **cried out**. Again, this isn't a cry of repentance. This is a cry of agony. This is a cry of pain. They've been oppressed for 18 long years. So God raises up, this time, a rather unlikely hero, a Yasha—a deliverer—by the name of Ehud. The name Ehud means *Where is the splendor?* It carries the idea that Ehud was jealous for the splendor and glory of God. Why were the people of God living under oppression to a foreign king in their own land? This wasn't right. He was a Benjamite, which makes sense, because Jericho is under the control of the Benjamites. And we're told a rather unusual detail: He was a left-handed man,

to which we would say, “Who really cares?” Was Moses right-handed or left-handed? Was Joshua right-handed or left-handed? Was Othniel right-handed or left-handed? Typically, a Hebrew narrative gives no details like that. So it's really quite unusual.

Now there's a lot of debate about what that actually means. Later in the text we learn that there's a whole group of Benjamites who are left-handed warriors. In the ancient world, everything was organized around right-handed warriors. So you, if you were left-handed, you had significant advantages. There was a tribe, the Benjamites, who actually banded a lot of the right arms of the children in order to force them to be left-handed to create left-handed warriors. Some people think that's what it's referring to. I think that's unlikely. Literally, the Hebrew here is a man restricted in his right hand. I think we just take the text at face value. There was something wrong with his right arm. He was handicapped in some way, so he had to use his left hand. That makes the most sense as we go through the story. Now, one of the interesting details is he's from the tribe of Benjamin. The name Benjamin means *the son of my right hand*. So the son of my right hand, is a left-handed hero. One of the commentators said that's because this whole story is left-handed, meaning it's all backwards, and I think that's correct. So, a most unlikely hero, and he's sending a tribute to Eglon, king of Moab. So when it says in verse 15, **and the sons of Israel sent tribute by him**, literally the Hebrew there is not **him** but **by his hand**. So we're focused in. He's got a handicapped right arm; he's got a left hand, and God's going to deliver with this one-handed Yasha deliverer. That's the idea there. Verse 16:

Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges (we'd call it a dagger), a cubit in length (so 12-18 inches), and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak.

So it's probably talking about the inside of his right thigh. If he had a defective right arm, the enemy would never expect a weapon on his right side. So he hides it on the inside of his right thigh under his cloak. You can kind of feel where this story is going:

He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. But Ehud himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” And the king said, “Keep silence!” And all who attended him left him. Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. (Vs. 17-20a)

So there's so much color in the language here. The idea of a **tribute**—the word literally means offering or a sacrifice or a gift. It was most likely food. It was extortion. So Eglon, the king of Moab, is now possessing the land that was given to Israel, and he's forcing them to pay a tribute to live in their own land. We are told that **Eglon was a very fat man**. So here's another question: Was Moses fat or skinny? Was Joshua fat or skinny? Was Othniel tall or short, fat, skinny, right or left-handed? It is so unusual to have these kinds of details in a Hebrew narrative. But here's the imagery. In the ancient world, fat equaled prosperity. Most people didn't have enough food to be fat. The Israelites are starving to death in their own land. Meanwhile, a foreign king has so much to eat, and they're delivering more food to this fat king, while their own people starve. The word fat is a word typically used of animals—a fat calf or goat, typically referring to the fatted calf. The name Eglon literally means bull or calf. So here's the imagery:

Ehud is delivering a sacrifice, but the sacrifice is actually going to be the fatted calf—the king of Moab. It’s just full of color and description.

So it came about, when he had finished the tribute, he sends the people away. Ehud and those helping carry the tribute leave. But when Ehud gets to the idols of Gilgal—I think that’s symbolic that this is the whole problem; the people of God are worshipping the gods of the culture—that is his signal to, all by himself, turn around and go back to the king. And he tells the king, **“I have a secret message for you.”** Eglon then tells him to be quiet. That word **silence** is what we refer to as an onomatopoeia, meaning the word sounded like what it was. We have the same thing in English; it’s the word, Shhhh. So basically Ehud gets shushed, while Eglon clears the room. Now, again, there’s no way this Moabite king would allow himself to be all alone with someone he was oppressing if Ehud presented himself as a strong, capable, ambidextrous warrior. This again goes to the credibility that he was clearly disabled and seemed like no threat. So the king clears the room, and then we’re told that the king is just chilling in a nice, cool, upper room in the palace. This is the idea that everything in this story is left-handed. It’s all backwards. You have a Moabite, pagan, idol-worshipping king, that is fat off the food that the Israelites needed to survive, running the show in the land that belonged to the Israelites. And while they’re oppressed in the desert sun, he’s chilling on the roof of his chambers. But that’s about to change!

And Ehud said, “I have a message from God for you.” And he arose from his seat. 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, the king’s 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.” 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. (Vs. 20b-25)

Now, again, I want you to think about the description of the battle with Othniel. There is no detail. This is so different than that. So Ehud says, **“I have a message from God for you.”** Eglon stands to his feet; Ehud grabs the dagger from his right thigh, thrusts it into his belly; it goes in so far that even the handle goes in. Eglon is so fat that the fat closes in around the knife to where Ehud can’t even get the knife out, and he leaves it in there. Whatever it does to Eglon, it causes him to discharge his bowels. Then Ehud goes to the doors, shuts them, locks them from the inside, probably departs out a window, and he’s on his way. The servants come and they see the doors are locked, most likely they smelled the discharge, and they figure the king is going to the bathroom. So they wait...and they wait...and they wait. One can only imagine the conversation: “What is this guy doing?” (*laughter*) “How long does it take this guy to go?” Finally, they figure out that something must be wrong. So they get the key; they open the door, and there is their master dead on the earth. A couple of things to notice: One is the text says **on the floor**; the Hebrew is **on the earth**. It’s a reminder he’s just a man. There was no reason for the people of God to live in oppression for 18 years. Eglon was no threat. He’s just a man.

It's interesting he's not called the king; he's called the **master**. The great master is dead. This is a Hebrew word that was sometimes used to describe people, but often used to describe God—over 430 times in the Old Testament. This is the word used to describe God, their Master; this was their great God. Three times in verses 24 and 25 the writer uses the word **behold**. It's almost comical, “Behold, the doors are shut, must be going to the bathroom.” “Behold, this is sure taking a long time.” “Behold, the master is dead.” Now this whole story is backwards. And it's written in such an unusual fashion, almost comical in the way it's written. While they're bumbling along trying to figure this out, Ehud is escaping back to the hill country.

It's a way of saying there was no reason for the people of God to live this way. There was no reason to be oppressed. Eglon was not that powerful. He was not really a threat compared to the God of Israel. The only way they were living in such bondage and oppression is because they chose to do so. Why would anyone choose to live that way? Verse 26:

Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. It came about when he 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. 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. 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. (Vs. 26-30)

So Ehud, probably out a window, makes his escape, goes by the idols again—symbolic of what was about to change—goes to the hill country that was roughly three thousand feet above Jericho, blows his trumpet, and the people gather. It's very interesting what Ehud says is “**The Lord has** (past tense) **given you the victory.**” “Hey, the battles already been won. Let's do this thing.” So the people rally. They cut off the escape route of the Moabites back to their homeland. They wipe them out, and for the next 80 years—as long as Ehud lives—there is peace in the land. That is the longest stretch in the book of Judges, where there was peace in the land. And it came from a most unlikely hero. Verse 31:

After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

Well, that's a short story. (*laughter*) You talk about a lack of detail. So, this is now down in the coastal plain, where the cities of the Philistines were. All we know is that Shamgar is armed with an oxgoad—basically a garden hoe. At one end was a bronze end for poking the oxen; at the other end was like a scraper for cleaning out the plow. We know the Philistines not only took all the weapons of the Israelites, they also took all the blacksmiths who made the weapons for the Israelites, so what do you have left? You have a garden hoe. But if you're willing to trust God, that's all you need. And God used Shamgar, whether he was alone or led a group of people, to defeat a troop of 600 Philistines. One of the interesting things about Shamgar is Shamgar is not even a Hebrew name. He probably wasn't even an Israelite. But he was jealous for the reputation and glory of the God of Israel. And God used him to save Israel. It is interesting that it says, “*Used him also to save Israel*”, which is the writer inviting us to compare.

There was Shamgar; there was Ehud; there was Othniel—three very different heroes! Othniel, the classic hero, comes from a great family, a family of faith, a family of courage, and who was willing to trust God. “Sign me up. Where do you want me to go?” And that’s kind of what we expect. Ehud and Shamgar were very unlikely heroes. Ehud with a defective right arm, and Shamgar probably wasn’t even an Israelite, and had nothing but a garden hoe.

So here’s the question. When you look in the mirror, what do you see? I think we have a room with lots of potential heroes this morning. But you’ve got to wrestle with this question when you look in the mirror. What do you see? Some of you see an Othniel. You have a great spiritual heritage. You’re passionate for the glory and reputation of God. You seek to live in obedience to God and you’re ready to go. “Sign me up. What do you want, Lord? Use me.” I do think there are people like that here this morning. It’s a beautiful thing. God’s going to use you to do great things.

But, let’s be honest. Most of us, when we look in the mirror, that’s not what we see. We see an Ehud. We see a Shamgar. “God, what could you possibly do with me? I’m handicapped. I’m left-handed. You know my story. How could you possibly use me? God, I don’t have anything but a garden hoe. How could you possibly use me to deliver Israel?” But that’s the whole point of this opening series of stories. God’s going to use some of the most unlikely people to do some of the most amazing things in the book of Judges. People just like you, if you’re willing to trust Him, if you’re willing to have courage and faith, if you’re willing to walk in obedience, to do that which is right in the eyes of God, to be jealous for the glory and the reputation of God. God has a long track record of using the most unusual, unlikely people to do the most amazing things for His glory. People just like you, if you’re willing to trust him.

Yasha is a derivative of Yeshua—Jesus—the ultimate Deliverer, the ultimate Savior that came to set us free. God calls us as heroes to give people around us just a glimpse of this ultimate Hero that can set them free, that they too might know that Jesus who has delivered us. God is calling you if you’re willing to trust him.

And again, I have to ask the question: Why would anyone choose to live in oppression and bondage, when God offers them freedom? You don’t have to live that way. God offers you freedom, if you just choose to trust the ultimate Savior of the world.

Our Father, we’re thankful this morning that You sent Your Son to be the ultimate Deliverer, the Savior of the world. There isn’t a person in this room this morning that has to live in bondage, bondage to sin, bondage to negative emotions, bondage to fear. But we don’t have to live that way. God, I’m asking that You would raise up heroes from among the people here this morning, that You will use to do something significant for Your glory in this dark and needy world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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