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3 Judges - the Lion, the Witch and the Ox-Goad

Judges 3

Introduction

Have you ever been on a rollercoaster? They're a central part of most theme parks, from Disneyland, to Alton Towers to M&D's at Strathclyde Park. It's a simple idea: you sit in a carriage that gets dragged to the highest point and then let go, and gravity does the rest. There are ups and downs, but generally you get lower and lower until you end up at the bottom.

Overview

Well, Judges is a rollercoaster of a book. As you work through it you'll see that there are repeated ups and downs - there are highs and lows - but the general trend is downwards. There's a cyclical nature to the stories of judge after judge, following a general pattern:

- Israel's sin and rebellion against God, usually following other gods
- God sends in a nation to defeat and oppress them
- A period of oppression
- The Israelites cry out to God
- God sends a saviour
- The enemy is routed
- There is peace while the judge lives
- The judge dies and the cycle repeats

In chapter 3 we have the first 3 cycles, the first 3 judges and we can already spot the pattern as we read it.

Judges is actually a strange name for the book, and for the individuals that God raises up. Perhaps they should be called saviours rather than judges, as each one rescues the country from some foreign oppressor and brings peace. The judging comes after the rescue, when the judge acts as a kind of ruler or wise man that the people look to for guidance. And actually we should remember that the times of peace were generally longer than the times of oppression. It doesn't seem like it because the book concentrates on the changes. Imagine a rollercoaster which has nice gentle sections at the high points where you can relax for a bit before it plunges you down into terror again.

Looking to Christ

As we look at these judges we should also be looking forward to Jesus. They point the way to him, as imperfect and incomplete shadows of the saviour to come. This is a common theme in the old testament:

- The high priests come with a yearly sacrifice for sin, offering it up to God. But the high priests are imperfect and their sacrifices are unable to complete the job. Instead they point the way to the one that the book of Hebrews calls the “Great High Priest”, better than the others because he is sinless, and made a single sacrifice that paid the price for sin for all.
- We also have the kings. They rule the people and lead them in their attitude to God, yet even the best of them is an adulterer and murderer. But they point the way to the eternal king, who will establish a kingdom that he will reign over forever.
- And now we see the judges, men and women who rescued their country from oppression and slavery, who judged their people, but had all the flaws that are common among humanity. Again they point the way to the true saviour and judge, who saves the world from the oppression of sin, and one day will judge the nations. We read in Acts: *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. [Acts 17 v 31]*

What Can God Use

With this in mind, let’s have a look at these 3 judges. We’ll see the cycle we talked about and see the difference in character between them. But one thing I’d like to concentrate on is what or who God is able to use for his purposes.

A number of years back I worked in an office and a whole group of folk joined us at once. There was one guy who stuck out. He was very loud and brash. He talked loudly on the phone to his old colleagues a lot and if there was one thing I didn’t want it was to sit next to this guy.

I ended up sitting next to this guy. However it turned out he was a Christian. One day he came into work wearing a t-shirt that had a Christian message on it. Here I’d been looking down on this guy a bit, and it turned out he was a braver and more effective witness than I was. He became a good and valued friend.

In Judges chapter 3 we find God using the unusual and the unexpected to rescue and to judge his people. Look at the start of the chapter: *These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan [Judges 3 v 1]*. These people still existed because of Israel’s failure. God had commanded them to wipe out all the nations that were in the land they were to conquer and inhabit. And yet all these peoples were still left around them. They were not Godly peoples, but God would use them to teach his own people a lesson. And then he uses the likely and unlikely as rescuers.

The Lion

First we have Othniel. If anything this man is the closest picture of Christ we have among the judges. Remember the rollercoaster starts at its highest point. This man has heritage - he is the nephew of Caleb, one of the two good spies who trusted God to give them the promised land. He is a mighty warrior: when Caleb asked for someone to conquer the town of Debir, Othniel stepped up, and he was given land and Caleb's daughter in marriage as a reward. He has a great name: we think Othniel means Lion of God. He was from the tribe of Judah, so there's definitely a forward reference there to the Lion of Judah, a name for Jesus mentioned in Revelation.

Let's look at his story:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the Lord came on him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died. [Judges 3 v 7-11]

So we have all the signs of the cycle here:

- Israel rebelled and followed other gods
- God handed them over to an enemy, the Arameans from modern northern Syria
- They were oppressed for 8 years
- God raised up Othniel
- Othniel defeated the Arameans and restored the land to the Israelites
- They had a peace for 40 years before Othniel died

So we find that first of all God can use the noble and mighty man to rescue his people.

The Witch

The cycle starts again. When Othniel dies the people return to their idolatry and God sends another nation against them, the Moabites this time. The Israelites are under the rule of King Eglon for 18 years, and he sets his palace up in the city of Jericho.

This time God raises up Ehud:

Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. [Judges 3 v 15]

Why does it mention he was left-handed? If you were left handed a hundred years ago it was seen as a sign of evil. The latin word for left is "sinister", and through the ages left-handers were looked upon with suspicion. It wasn't all that long ago that schoolchildren who wrote with their left hands were forced to change to their right hand instead. It's not clear whether

there was such a prejudice in biblical times, but the right hand was certainly seen as the place of privilege. And yet God uses this seeming disadvantage for his purpose.

Ehud is sent to Eglon with the tribute for the Jewish people. As he and his men return he turns back to see the king on his own. He claims he has a secret message and the king ushers his servants out. How did he get such close access with a weapon? Well perhaps because he had hidden it at his right thigh. Any right-handed soldier would carry his weapon on the left, and that would be where the guards would check. So it could be his left-handedness was what got him the opportunity to assassinate King Eglon.

The passage is very explicit as it describes the confrontation, even concentrating on the king's fatness as a crucial part of the story. Commentators suggest this is a satirical remark. The king's fatness showed he was rich and the food that had made him fat was the tribute food from the Jews. However as Ehud stabbed him the scene is more like a fatted calf being slaughtered. In fact Eglon's name means "little calf".

Even the smell plays a part: as the king's servants nervously wait outside his chamber, thinking he is relieving himself, Ehud has time to make his exit and escape as far as his own people. It is there he raises an army to go and defeat the Moabite oppressors:

When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them. "Follow me," he ordered, "for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands." So they followed him down and took possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab; they allowed no one to cross over. At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not one escaped. That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years. [Judges 3 v 27-30]

The Ox-Goad

And so the cycle continues. The third judge in our chapter only gets a single verse, though:

After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad. He too saved Israel. [Judges 3 v 31]

Now some scholars think this account has been moved from later on in the book. The next chapter starts with Ehud's death, not Shamgar's. However in Deborah's song, Shamgar gets a mention, so maybe he appeared during the 80 years of peace, in a brief event where the Philistines tried to invade Israel. In any event we know very little about Shamgar other than his weapon. An ox-goad was an 8 foot long pole, with a point at one end to direct the oxen from behind the plough, and a spade at the other to dig out obstructions. Not a conventional weapon, but it was the means of saving Israel.

Application

So we have a mighty man, the "Lion of God". Then an unfavoured left-hander, and finally a farmer using his farming utensil. This made me think of titling the sermon "The Lion, the

Witch and the Ox-Goad". It shows us that God can use anyone or anything to carry out his plans.

What about us? Can we be used by God for mighty works?

We instantly look for excuses, like Moses, don't we?

- "I couldn't speak in front of lots of people" - no, but how about speaking to one person?
- "I can't play the piano or anything like that" - no, but what if someone hears you singing a hymn at work? Even if it's terrible singing?
- "I have health problems that limit what I can do" - ok, but that's an amazing opportunity to sympathise with others who have similar problems, to be an encourager.
- "I'm so busy that I don't have time to help" - then serve the Lord in everything you do, in work, in school, with family. Ecclesiastes tells us to take joy in the work God has given us. If your work place is anything like mine there's a lot of moaning. Imagine if you were joyful. At the very least it will confuse people.

So keep an eye on these unlikely heroes as you work your way through Judges. See the endless failures of the people, sure, but see the endless mercy of God, how he uses them in their weakness to do great things for him. They were incomplete saviours and judges, but we have the complete and perfect saviour and judge, the Lord Jesus Christ. What can he do with you?