

*Series: God in the Midst of the Chaos*

*“Othniel: God’s Loving Discipline”*

Introduction: It is tempting to skip over the account of the first Judge, Othniel, and go right to the next one, whose name is Ehud. That’s because Ehud’s is a fascinating and even funny story about a Judge who delivers God’s people by plunging his sword into the bowels of the king of Moab while the king was going to the bathroom! By contrast, the account of Othniel is rather bland. One commentator notes, “The preacher, if he dares preach from this passage at all, will have to work hard to make it engaging.”

So, I guess you’ll have to be the judge of how engaging, or not, today’s message ends up being! But, I think Othniel is worth our study because he provides us with a case study of exactly the steps we noted last week that are part of the sad cycle of spiritual stubbornness this book reveals to us, and warns us against, over and over again.

The cycle we see in Judges goes as follows: Israel would fall into idolatry, serving the false gods of the land; God would become righteously angry at his people’s refusal to serve and worship him alone as the author and giver of life; God would give his people over to be disciplined; the people would groan under their oppression; God would raise up a Judge, not someone in a long black robe but a deliverer, an “establisher of justice;” the people would be rescued under the leadership of this Judge, and enjoy “rest,” but only until the judge died; the cycle of stubbornness would begin all over again. Throughout the book things actually go from bad to worse such that the final verse declares this: “In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (21:25).

The account with which Judges begins, Othniel, reveals the loving discipline of God. We see that while the discipline of the Lord is great, his love, out of which his discipline flows, is greater still.

I. Double Trouble

A. The account begins with what will become the sad refrain: the Israelites did evil in the sight of the LORD. Such evil is two-fold: the LORD of heaven and earth is forgotten, and the local gods are served. How, we might wonder, could the God who had brought his people out of Egypt in such a remarkable way, and then given them a land “filled with milk and honey” as a new home, get forgotten? Moses’ words, at the end of Deuteronomy, give us a hint: [Dt. 32:15-18]

Jeshurun (a poetic name for Israel meaning, somewhat sarcastically here, “the upright one”) grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek. They abandoned the God who made them and rejected the Rock their Savior. . . You forgot the God who gave you birth.

Essentially, they forgot the God who had done so much for them because things had gotten too good! It takes me back to our look at the closing words from James, and his discussion on prayer. Remember he said, “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.” But then he said next, “Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise” (Jas. 5:13). Songs of praise, as the psalmist has taught us, are a form of prayer. More importantly, such “songs” can help us to pray when things are going well so that we don’t forget the One from whose hand that goodness has come.

B. But Israel didn't just get so comfortable that they forgot the LORD; they also then began to serve the local fertility gods of the land they had entered. What made these gods so alluring and attractive? Well, when you think about it, the Israelites really had no experience growing their own food. When they were slaves in Egypt, Pharaoh fed them. When they wandered through the wilderness, God had sustained them with manna from heaven. But now the manna had stopped falling and they had to farm the soil and feed themselves as their neighbors did. The Canaanites seemed to do pretty well at this and attributed their success to a variety of nature gods, so why not incorporate some of these gods in their worship, the Israelites likely reasoned. What harm could there be in creating a kind of personalized spirituality?

C. The LORD saw great harm with his people flirting with the world in this way. The LORD is revealed as a jealous God because he wants us to be fully devoted to him, not because he needs us but because he loves us and wants what is best for our good, and through us, for the good of others. He knew there would be great harm in this flirtation because he knew that he was the one who was really behind the autumn spring rains, the changing seasons, the fertility of the soil, and the productivity of the livestock. Further, he knew that such false nature gods had no power to rescue, and no ability to satisfy. To put their ways into practice would result in the loss of the life that was truly life. It would lead to a life that pursued self-gratification and would never be truly satisfied. It would lead instead to the use, and abuse, of others, as Judges will go on to demonstrate.

D. Now, the challenge is that those who turn away from the living God to flirt with the world don't really think they are in trouble. They may, in fact, even find themselves to feel liberated, like the prodigal son, who went off from his father's house to pursue what he thought were new and exciting opportunities for pleasure and fulfillment. But trouble is sure to come, sooner or later. It comes because the gods of this world have no power to save or to satisfy. So, to wake his people up, God sometimes chooses to discipline them. The opening verses of Hebrews 12 talks about this, reminding us that God disciplines those he loves, that the children he embraces he also corrects, and that only an irresponsible parent would not exercise discipline. God's discipline, though never comfortable, is for our good. It is to help us live, as Eugene Peterson translates it, "God's holy best."

E. God's discipline in this case came through a king named Cushan-rishathaim. His name translates as "Cushan the doubly wicked," or "Double Trouble." We're not told much about him except that he was from somewhere in the region of Mesopotamia, to the north east of Israel. We also can conclude, I think, that the "double trouble" God's people had pursued in forgetting him and serving false gods was being turned back on them. God, we read, often gives us over to the desires of our hearts (cf. Romans 1:18-32). Those who served foreign gods were made to serve a foreign ruler; those who did evil were handed over to one who was wicked. Ultimately, in God's wisdom, something needed to wake them up, needed to arouse them from their slumber and their friendship with the world, needed to point out the chaos that they had gotten themselves into. Cushan the doubly wicked was the man!

## II. A Greater Hope

A. Now, left there, we would be lost in the chaos, not knowing how to find our way out. But, gratefully, God doesn't leave us there. What we see in the Othniel account, and in Scripture as a whole, is that when evil appears it is never ultimate. It never rules the world as God does. Notice, for instance, that Cushan the doubly wicked doesn't snatch God's people away but that God "sells" them, or gives them over, into Cushan's hands. It is a carefully measured act of discipline in which the punishment fits the crime, and also one in which Israel is never simply in the hands of the doubly wicked one but also still in the hands of the LORD who is sovereign over evil and remains relentlessly committed to the good of his people and his purposes. Further, when the people cry out, even if it's not a cry of repentance but simply of pain and desperation, God sees and hears and acts, just like he did to the similar cry of their ancestors in Egypt (Ex. 2:23-24).

B. This time God raises up a deliverer named Othniel. Othniel comes from good stock. He's the nephew of Caleb, one of only two of twelve men who spied out the Promised Land and encouraged the Israelites to enter in and conquer it. He's also from the tribe of Judah, the tribe that God had singled out for leadership. But the best and most fruitful thing about him is simply that God raised him up and empowered him with the Holy Spirit. And when he followed the Spirit's lead, God enabled Othniel to deliver his people and bring their land into a state of "rest" – a state of peace and the conditions for well-being – for forty years.

C. So there is hope in the midst of the chaos. Sinful though we may be, we are loved by a God who will not abandon us. Judges will teach us that again and again. But it will also remind us that the rescue these judges were able to provide was only temporary. As the next section begins, after forty years of rest, when Othniel died, the Israelites again did evil in the sight of the LORD (3:12). What this points us to is our need for a deliverer who is not of this world, who can offer us a rest that is more than temporary, that can rescue us from ourselves and empower us to live a life that is being transformed and which, while never perfect, can make progress over a lifetime. The good news is that this deliverer has come; his name is Jesus;