

# Surprising Deliverance

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 3:7-31

Pastor Curt Romig

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Good morning, church! My name is Curt, and I'm one of the pastors here. It's my joy to continue in our series on Judges this morning. Pastor Josh did a fantastic job the last two weeks getting us going in this fascinating Old Testament book. Last week he showed us the cycles that we see in the book of Judges. As the book goes along, we'll see stories that include this cycle: relationship, rebellion, retribution, repentance, rescue, rest, and repeat. So basically, Israel rebels, God disciplines them, Israel cries out to God, God saves them through a judge, and Israel has rest. We'll see this over and over again throughout the book. This morning, we'll see it take place through the characters of Othniel and Ehud, with one little verse at the end about another guy named Shamgar. So as we read the passage together, be looking for this cycle. You'll even notice how this cycle begins. Each time it starts with the sentence, "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." Then the author takes us through the cycle in the story. Also remember that in Judges we see a downward spiral. Each judge and their story gets progressively worse. Othniel is the first and the model judge. Then, with the second judge Ehud, you'll see a mostly positive story. But there are pieces of deception that show the start of the downward spiral. And there are certainly some bizarre details in the Ehud story as well. So let's dive in.

## Judges 3:7-31<sup>1</sup>

<sup>7</sup>And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

<sup>12</sup>And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. <sup>13</sup>He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms.

<sup>14</sup>And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

<sup>15</sup>Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, 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. <sup>16</sup>And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes.

<sup>17</sup>And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. <sup>18</sup>And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. <sup>19</sup>But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he commanded, "Silence." And all his attendants went out from his presence. <sup>20</sup>And Ehud came to him as 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. <sup>21</sup>And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. <sup>22</sup>And the hilt also went in after the blade, and

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version<sup>®</sup> unless otherwise noted.

*the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly; and the dung came out.* <sup>23</sup>Then Ehud went out into the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them.

<sup>24</sup>When he had gone, the servants came, and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, “Surely he is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber.” <sup>25</sup>And they waited till they were embarrassed. But when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them, and there lay their lord dead on the floor.

<sup>26</sup>Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Seirah. <sup>27</sup>When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. <sup>28</sup>And he said to them, “Follow after me, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.” So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites and did not allow anyone to pass over. <sup>29</sup>And they killed at that time about 10,000 of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; not a man escaped. <sup>30</sup>So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.

<sup>31</sup>After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.

This is the Word of the Lord.

If this is your first time going through Judges, you may be thinking, “What? This is in the Bible?” Yes, it is. The Bible has some bizarre stories in it, probably because we humans sometimes do such bizarre things. In these stories, there are reasons that such bizarre details are included. So let’s see what the Holy Spirit wants to say through Judges 3. The sermon title this morning is “Surprising Deliverance,” and we’re going to have three main points related to that theme.

## **GOD DELIVERS THROUGH SURPRISING PEOPLE AND WAYS.**

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The first one is this: God delivers through surprising people and ways. To understand all the surprising things in this passage, we have to put on our ancient history, Israelite shoes for a bit. As twenty-first century postmodern people, we are prone to miss many of the cultural elements going on here that would’ve surprised the Jews. We have three people that God uses for his rescue in this passage: Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. Each of them is surprising in their own ways. Let’s start with the shortest one, Shamgar. We’re not sure if Shamgar actually held the position of judge in Israel, but we do see in verse 31 that he saved Israel. So God certainly used him! What’s surprising about Shamgar? First of all, his name suggests that he was a Gentile, not a Jew. He probably belonged to an ancient group called the Hurrians. Second, Shamgar is described as “the son of Anath.” Do you know who Anath was? Anath was a Canaanite war goddess! Anath was such an important Canaanite goddess that even the Egyptians recognized her as a goddess in their pantheon of gods. Now, remember how a big theme in this book is the Canaanization of Israel? How Israel is becoming like the evil Canaanites in the land? Imagine how surprised the Jews would be from being delivered by this Shamgar, the Son of Anath! Shamgar was possibly not even a follower of Yahweh, and yet God used him to save Israel. In some ways, I think God includes this verse to shame Israel. They need a Hurrian, a son of Anath, to deliver them from the Philistines. How pitiful. But it also shows us that God can use whoever he wants!

Let’s look now at Othniel in verses 7-11. Othniel is the model deliverer. There is nothing negative about him in this passage. In fact, Othniel’s name means “Lion of God,” and he is with the tribe of Judah. This is the perfect cycle in Judges. At the start of our passage in verse 7, we see the cycle begin with Israel doing evil in the sight of the Lord. Then it says, “They forgot the Lord their God

and served the Baals and the Asheroth.” This is the only place in the book that the word “forget” is used, and it’s significant. This isn’t an innocent forgetting, like I forgot where I put my wallet or keys. This is more intentional; they are turning their back on the Lord and turning toward the Baals.<sup>2</sup> This is a serious indictment of Israel. In verse 8, God is angry, and Israel is sold to another king. In verse 9, they cry out to the Lord, and the Lord raises up a deliverer. But not just any deliverer. This is the model deliverer in the book. He’s the best one! So what’s surprising about Othniel? Look at verse 9. It says, “Othniel, the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother.” Othniel is a Kenizzite, and along with Caleb and Achsah, he is not ethnically Israelite. They had joined Israel in the tribe of Judah in the past.<sup>3</sup> Othniel is a Gentile by blood. And while Israel is sinfully intermarrying with all of the peoples of the land in verse 6, Othniel, a Gentile by blood who joined Israel, is the faithful deliverer. What a source of shame to Israel, that two of their three deliverers here aren’t even ethnic Israelites. And what a truth, that God can use who he wants to deliver! He can deliver through surprising people!

To wrap up this point, let’s look at what’s surprising about Ehud. The author makes sure that we know that Ehud is left-handed. That’s a strange detail to include, right? There is a lot of irony to this. First, culturally it was not a good thing to be left-handed in that day. Even in the Bible, “the right hand was a symbol of power and ability.”<sup>4</sup> Being left-handed often meant that your right hand was disabled in some way. Second, this is a play on words. In verse 15, we see that Ehud is a Benjaminite. Do you know what Benjamin literally means? It means, “Son of my right hand.” So here’s a left-handed son of the right hand. A surprising detail! And third, Ehud’s left-handedness actually enables him to sneak in and kill King Eglon. Most warriors were right-handed then, and would’ve carried their daggers on their left leg. It was unusual for someone to carry a dagger on their right leg, and so it’s possible that Eglon’s attendants only searched Ehud’s left leg for a dagger. Then they let him through, thinking he didn’t have a weapon.<sup>5</sup> So yet again, God’s deliverer is surprising to Israel. It’s not what they would’ve naturally expected. They would’ve expected a strong, right-handed, Jewish man. Someone like their first king, King Saul, who was a head taller than everyone else! But he failed as a king. God uses weak, flawed, even sinful human beings to accomplish his purposes.

Have you ever seen God work in an unexpected way, or through an unexpected person? Several months ago, I was going through a hard situation. I don’t even remember what it was now. But I do remember that as I was putting my daughter Izzy to bed that night, I said to her, “Izzy, I’m having a hard day. I’m having trouble trusting that God is big enough for this thing that’s going on.” And Izzy, who was four at the time, said to me in the most matter-of-fact way, “Of course God is big enough! He’s bigger than everything!” Tears welled up in my eyes, as I thought, “Yep, that’s right.” God used a four-year-old to encourage this pastor! He’s a master of surprises, raising up whoever he wants to accomplish his will.

## **GOD’S SURPRISING DELIVERANCE SHOWS HIS POWER AND FAITHFULNESS.**

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Our second main point will continue this idea. The passage shows that God’s surprising deliverance shows his power and faithfulness. We’ve seen some surprises about the judges in these stories, and now we’ll see some more surprises that tell us more about God.

<sup>2</sup> Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> For a full explanation of this, see Younger, K. Lawson. *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002, p. 66, footnotes 17.

<sup>4</sup> Keller, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Keller

With Othniel, we have very little detail about *how* God delivers Israel. He just does. Some people think the Othniel story is too boring. Where's the fat king or left-handed hero? One commentator says, "it is likely that we have this first episode in such stripped-down style precisely so that we will see clearly what is most essential—the activity of Yahweh."<sup>6</sup> The surprising dullness of Othniel's story shows that God is the true deliverer. God is the one doing this. But the Ehud story is where this point really comes out. Why does the author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, draw out so much bizarre detail of this story? What does the detail accomplish? He certainly could have avoided all the detail and just said, "Ehud killed King Eglon, and the Lord delivered Israel." But no, he makes sure we know about Eglon's fat covering over the blade and the dung coming out! The commentators largely agree that this passage is supposed to be funny. The Jews would've laughed as they read this story. Why is it included? I'll offer three reasons for the humor.

First, it shows how foolish Eglon and his team are. The name Eglon is a play on words in the Hebrew. The roots "Eg" and "Lon" are the roots for "round" and "bull."<sup>7</sup> So his name essentially means "the fattened calf." This fattened calf is so large that the 18-inch blade of Ehud is swallowed up by Eglon's belly. This isn't a man who simply wrestled with a lack of disciplined eating habits; this is a man who must've indulged in greed and gluttony in an extreme way.

Then think about this: What kind of king and what kind of king's bodyguards allow an enemy into his inner chamber by himself with the king? They didn't think to search both of Ehud's legs for weapons? These leaders are utter fools, and the author wants us to know that. Their king ends up dead on the floor in his own dung.

Second, the humor and details are there to shame Israel. Verse 12 says the Lord strengthened Eglon, so God in his sovereignty is disciplining Israel. Then verse 14 says the people of Israel served Eglon for 18 years. What shame! The Israelites, the people of God, who had been rescued out of Egypt under God's mighty hand, are now serving a fattened calf of a king for 18 years. They should've cried out to God after 18 days, not 18 years! All of these details show how foolish Eglon is, but also how foolish Israel is. So much so that God uses a total fool to discipline them.

And third, the details show how easy it is for God to deliver Israel. This isn't hard! He raises up one left-handed man with a plan. This isn't the greatest military victory of all time. This isn't the most clever scheme in the history of the world. If you submitted this story as a script to Hollywood, I don't think they'd make it into a movie. How clever: the guy made a dagger and strapped it to his right leg instead of his left! Not exactly a must-see television show. But that's all it took for God to dispose of the Moabites; one imperfect, left-handed man. It's easy for God to take down the Moabites, just like it was easy for him to take down the Egyptians, and it'll be easy for him to destroy Satan completely at the end of days. God is sovereign over all! He made the whole universe. He made Eglon, so it's easy for God to raise him up and then dispose of evil.

Those are the reasons the Holy Spirit and the human author of Judges included these humorous details in the Ehud story. It shames both the Moabites and Israelites, and shows God's power to do what he wants, even in surprising and humorous ways.

## TWO APPLICATIONS

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Before we move on to the third point, I want us to really think on these first two points and offer two applications. With application of Old Testament texts, sometimes we are too quick to identify

<sup>6</sup> Davis, Dale Ralph. *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*. Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2007, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Block, Daniel Isaac. *Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999, p. 158.

with the heroes of the story. With today's text, it would be easy to think, "Have courage like Ehud." Or "Be a lion for God like Othniel." That's not wrong; of course we should have courage. God does want to use us, even in our weakness! But it's also not the main point of the text. I think the weight of this passage for us is to relate with Israel, and think about how pitiful our idolatry can be when we forget about God.

### *Repent*

So our first application point is to repent, to turn from the silly, pitiful things we so often devote ourselves to. Here's a question for you at this point: Is there an area of your life that you have forgotten the Lord, and you're serving a fool? Is there an idol in your life as silly as the fattened calf king that you're giving your devotion to? Let today be the day that you remember the Lord and turn back to him, forsaking the fool. It's way better to serve Yahweh than Eglon! It's way better to serve Yahweh, the King of Kings, than material things, or vain pursuits, or temporary relationships. Don't let 18 years pass by serving those things. You can serve him today!

### *Remember*

Even more than that, our second response should be to remember God's power and faithfulness to deliver. In the Old Testament, Israel repeatedly worships horrible idols. But God repeatedly delivers them, even with very flawed deliverers and in very surprising ways. God is faithful to his people. That's who he is. He will keep his promises, no matter how weak his people are. He keeps delivering Israel, and he'll keep delivering and building his people today, his church, until the return of Christ.

I want to share one quick story from my life of God working in a surprising way, because he is still delivering today! When I was in college, I was a part of a ministry to international students. Through that ministry, I became friends with a guy from Taiwan named Roy. Roy didn't know Jesus, so I started talking with Roy about the Bible and Jesus, and even gave him a copy of the Gospel of Mark to read. He was curious about it all, but it didn't seem to be hitting his heart. Then God did something that I could've never drawn up myself. Roy went out to a driving range with one of my other Christian friends from the ministry. While they were there hitting golf balls, Roy accidentally swung his club back and hit my friend in the face. It wasn't a pretty sight. They had to go to the hospital and I think he got stitches. But this golf club incident was the turning point for Roy. You see, Roy was absolutely shocked that my friend didn't get mad at him. It was a picture of forgiveness. He demonstrated grace. And suddenly, the Bible passages I had been sharing with Roy started to make sense. When I met with him a week or two later, he had given his life to Christ. God works in surprising ways that we can't even draw up! God always works through his Word, but the surprise is often how he draws people *to* his Word and opens their eyes to understand. Many of your stories have crazy twists that show God's power to save you. Many of your stories are dull, like Othniel's, which also show God's power to save you. My point is this: God still shows his power and faithfulness today by delivering people. This text in Judges calls us to remember that! And we must remember the ultimate source of our deliverance is not in clever schemes like Ehud's, or in oxgoads like that used by Shamgar.

### **GOD'S DELIVERANCE IS TEMPORARY IN JUDGES, BUT COMPLETE IN CHRIST.**

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And that brings us to our third and final point: God's deliverance is temporary in Judges, but complete in Christ. Look back at the text with me, because I want you to see something about these cycles in Judges. Look at verse 11. "The land had rest for 40 years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died." Verse 12, "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." And the

second half of verse 30. “The land had rest for 80 years.” Then we see one verse about Shamgar, and continue with chapter 4, verse 1: “And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died.” Do you see what these verses have in common? The rest for Israel only lasted as long as the life of the deliverer. When the deliverer died, Israel went back to sin and idolatry and oppression.

But you know who’s not dead? Brothers and sisters, all of these sinful, imperfect, dead deliverers point us to Christ! They are foreshadowing how God will send his Messiah, the perfect one to deliver Israel AND Gentiles from their sins, AND raise them from the dead! No deliverer was as surprising as Jesus. Think about all of the surprises in his life and ministry. He came in a manger, not a palace! He condemned hypocritical religious leaders, the Pharisees, and consistently spent time with sinners, like tax collectors. He treated women with dignity and respect far above what was typical in the culture, even crossing huge cultural boundaries. He conversed with a hated Samaritan woman. He welcomed a prostitute. There’s even a story in Matthew 15 about Jesus healing a Canaanite woman’s daughter! With all that we know about the Canaanites from Joshua and Judges, this is a great surprise! He even says to the Canaanite woman, “Great is your faith!” And her daughter was healed instantly. Then think about Jesus’ death. Even though Jesus told his disciples several times that he would suffer and die, they still didn’t believe him. They thought he would take a throne, not a cross. And we would expect that too. But unlike in Judges, where the deliverance ended with the death of the judge, Jesus deliverance came through his death. Jesus took all of our sin and shame, all of the wrath of God, upon himself when he hung on that cross. That’s why he cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” God’s wrath was on him. And then he cried out, “It is finished.” Our sins were paid for. Dealt with. Finished. He paid the price for our sins. In the surprise of Jesus’ death, God’s people were delivered forever.

And one more thing! Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and all the others are dead. Their bodies have been eaten by worms or decomposed somewhere. But not Jesus. Jesus’ resurrection proved he is the ultimate deliverer. He’s not dead! He’s alive! Our deliverance is sure, because our deliverer is God the Son. He’s sitting at the right hand of God the Father! He’s interceding for us! His Holy Spirit is living in us! He is the seal of our deliverance. We don’t have to wait for the next judge. We don’t have to look to an earthly king, or to some politician or pastor or parent to deliver us. Those people will all fail us somehow, and they’ll all die. But Jesus fully, eternally delivers us. We just have to wait for him to fulfill all the prophecies of Scripture, and then he’ll come back and complete the deliverance over evil, and we’ll be in his kingdom forever.

So friends, let Judges hit your heart this morning. We need to *remember* the Lord and forsake the fool. This means having hearts of repentance, desiring to serve God wholeheartedly, without devoting ourselves to fattened calves that will perish in the end. We need to *remember* how faithful God is to his people. If you know Jesus, he is faithful to you. He is faithful to guide you, convict you, comfort you, encourage you, use you, sanctify you, and deliver you. We need to *remember* that our deliverer is Jesus. His surprising deliverance is our hope.