

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. 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. 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. 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 had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

(Judges 3:7–1)

## Introduction

Tim Hawkins is a comedian, who, Christian himself, is wildly popular among Christians seeking wholesome entertainment. Hawkins frequently performs stand-up routines to sold-out crowds in churches, seminaries, and Christian universities.

In [one YouTube video clip](#), Hawkins, performing a stand-up routine, tells the story of an earlier routine performed to a crowd of 1,500 people in a church building. After the show, a hundred-or-so fans stayed behind to greet him and ask for his autograph. The first old woman approached him and asked, along with his autograph, for his favourite Bible verse. Hawkins notes that his favourite verse is Psalm 34:8—“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him”—but that, on that fateful night, after a tiring stand-up routine, his mind went blank and he could not recall the reference. Not wanting to look foolish, he picked a verse from the Psalms at random and jotted it down for the old woman. “Tim Hawkins. Psalm 38:7.”

Feeling that it was a good message to leave, Hawkins proceeded to sign every autograph that night the same way. As he was driving home after the meet-and-greet, he suddenly realised that it may not have been the best idea to write down a random verse without knowing what it says. Arriving home, he pulled an old Bible off the shelf and turned to Psalm 38:7: “For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease” (KJV)!

In the video clip, laughter erupts in the room. Hawkins repeats the verse and then asks the crowd, “Did you know that’s in the Bible? I do now! And I signed it a hundred times, and sent it out to my own little mission field: ‘Take the word of my loin problem!’”

Humorous as it is, Hawkins’s sketch paints an important truth: There are some texts in Scripture with which we are horribly unfamiliar, and which we can scarcely believe are in the Bible. You may remember the first time you came upon the account of Elisha summoning two she-bears to maul 42 youths who mocked his baldness (2 Kings 2:23–25), or the first time you read Solomon complimenting his bride by comparing her nose to the tower of Lebanon (Song of Songs 7:4). There are some verses and Bible stories that you read for the first time and ask, “Did you know that’s in the Bible?”

That ignorance rings true when it comes to the book of Judges. We are deeply familiar with some of the judges—Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson—but many of the others remain more enigmatic to us: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.

As we continue our journey through the book of Judges, we come in this particular study to the story of Othniel, Israel's first judge. Othniel's story is quite bland. While there is a pericope of reasonable length assigned to him, it's one that is devoid of the flash and sparkle that fills some of the other accounts. There are no lefthanders or obese kings. Othniel does not wield an oxgoad, attack an overwhelming army with three hundred men, or catch foxes and tie them together by the tails. He does not drive a tent peg through an enemy's head, nor is he the father of thirty sons with thirty donkeys. His story is reported in a very bland, matter-of-fact fashion. But that is by design.

What the author of Judges is doing here is giving us a flesh-and-blood example of the summary he offered in 2:11–23. There, he gave the general pattern of events during the days of the judges; now, as if to underscore his point, he gives a living example of that pattern. Othniel serves as a model of what Old Testament judgeship looked like.

But there is another reason that his story is so bland: because it really isn't about him. The writer seems to be deliberately downplaying Othniel's gifts and talents and drawing the reader's attention to the real Judge and Deliverer: Yahweh.

As we study the record of his judgeship, then, we want to learn what an ideal judge looked like, but also look beyond human judges to “the Judge of all the earth” (Genesis 18:25). We will consider this narrative under four broad headings.

## The Need for a Deliverer

The writer opens the account by relating to us the need for a deliverer. Israel needed a deliverer for two major reasons: first, because of what they did; and, second, because of how the Lord responded:

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. 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.

(Judges 3:7–8)

## Israel's Rebellion

The opening words will become increasingly familiar to us as we continue our journey through this book: “And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.” Their “evil” in this instance manifested itself in two ways.

First, they did evil when “they forgot the LORD their God.” As we use language, forgetting implies a certain moral indemnity. If someone “forgets” something, we may castigate them for failing to write it down or set a reminder on their phone, but at least we recognise that their inaction was not deliberate—

they simply forgot. That is not how the Bible uses the term—at least when it comes to people forgetting God.

The word translated “forgot” carries a degree of moral agency with it. To forget the Lord is a sin for which God holds the forgetter morally responsible. We have the same sense when we read the language of forgetting in the Old Testament.

For example, when the cupbearer “forgot” Joseph after Joseph interpreted his dream (Genesis 40:23), the reader’s agitation is aroused. We hold the man accountable for forgetting. In light of everything that Joseph had done for him, it is inexcusable that he “forgot” Joseph.

God tells his people that care and diligence will prevent forgetting (Deuteronomy 4:9, 23; etc.) and explicitly commands them not to forget their covenant obligations (2 Kings 17:38). Those who “forget” are “godless” (Job 8:13) and therefore forgetting the Lord invites divine chastening (Isaiah 17:10–11).

This act of “forgetting” God was therefore an act of sin—particularly in light of how good he had been to them. As Fausset notes, “If too they remembered all that they owe to him, in the past and in the present, they could not but love him; and knowing his infinite love, they would shrink back with horror from the thought of forsaking him for any earthly idol.” Sadly, this was a generation that “did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (2:10), and so they forgot him. They forgot God because they did not take deliberate care and exercise due diligence to remember him. They were morally culpable for this act of forgetfulness. They needed a deliverer to help them remember the Lord.

Second, they did evil when they “served the Baals and the Asheroth.” Baal was the male Canaanite fertility deity, and Asherah was his female counterpart. Because there were many manifestations of these gods, they were often referred to in the plural. There was no singular manifestation of Baal or Asherah; there were “Baals” and “the Asheroth.”

The Israelites who “forgot” the Lord “served”—literally, they worked for—the Baals and the Asheroth. They became enslaved to the gods and goddesses of the people around them. They needed a deliverer to save them from slavery to idolatry.

There is an important principle here: We will serve somebody or something; the only question is, who or what? If you are not diligent in guarding your allegiance to the Lord, you will end up serving the gods of this age. If you do not diligently guard your walk with the Lord, don’t be surprised when you find yourself serving the god of pleasure, or wealth, or education, or sport. When your devotion to the Lord takes a backseat to other things, it is only because you have not guarded your allegiance to him. And when you fail to guard your devotion to the Lord, you soon find yourself in need of a deliverer.

Israel’s Canaanite neighbours wanted nothing more than for Israel to abandon her devotion to Yahweh. They insisted that Israel must not only tolerate, but in fact worship, their gods. And, as we saw in an earlier study in Judges, we live in an age in which the world demands tolerance and celebration of those things that the Lord abhors. If we are not careful and diligent in guarding what the Lord commands of us, we may well find ourselves serving contemporary Baals and Asheroth.

In the period of the Judges, there was a discernible slide into apostasy. It began by a failure to completely drive out the inhabitants of the land. They forced the natives into servitude, to be fair, but pretty soon the Israelites became comfortable with the Canaanites. Then they found themselves not only comfortable, but actively integrating—marrying Canaanite women and giving their daughters to Canaanite men. This eventually led to toleration of idolatry in the home, and eventually to full-blooded, nation-wide idol worship.

This pattern has been repeated time and again in the history of God's people. There is something to be said for the slippery slope argument. When you start questioning God's authority in one area, don't be surprised when you are soon questioning it in a multitude of areas. Twenty years ago, Christian leaders with biblical insight warned that those who had started to embrace unbiblical arguments in favour of female pastors would soon cave on a wide range of gender-related issues, and their words have proved prophetic. There has never been as much gender confusion in the church as there is today.

At the 2015 United States Supreme Court case in which same sex marriage was federally legalised, lawyers for the opposition warned that the legalisation of same sex marriage would evolve into calls for the legalisation of polygamy. They were decried as sensationalising matters. Supporters of same sex marriage accused opponents of same sex marriage of crying wolf, seeing ghosts where there were none to be seen. Two years later, one media outlet published this article: "Support for polygamy in the United States is at an all-time high ... with 17 percent of people saying the practice is 'morally acceptable.' That number marked the highest rate on record dating back to 2003, according to Gallup data." While sociologists consider "the exact cause of the trend" to be a "tricky" matter to pin down, no one with biblical insight is at all surprised. Those who reject one part of God's law quickly find it easier to reject more of it.

For Christians, that means that we must be deliberate in our efforts to know God's standard and to live by it. And we must be proactive, not reactive, in this. The truth is, in many ways, the contemporary church's discussion regarding same sex marriage is ten years too late. We should really be thinking about where the culture is going next and start having that discussion now.

What lies beyond the normalisation and celebration of same sex marriage? One of the biggest issues on the horizon right now is polyamory—the practice of (or desire for) multiple intimate relationships, with the full consent of all partners involved. Preston Sprinkle, founder and president of The Center for Faith, Sexuality and Gender, warns,

Polyamory is much more common than some people think. According to one estimate "as many as 5 percent of Americans are currently in relationships involving consensual nonmonogamy" which is about the same as those who identify as LGBTQ. Another recent study, published in a peer reviewed journal, found that 1 in 5 Americans have been in a consensual non-monogamous relationship at least some point in their life. Another survey showed that nearly 70% of non-religious Americans between the ages of 24–35 believe that consensual polyamory is okay—even if it's not their cup of tea. What about church going folks of the same age? Roughly 24% said they were fine.

Here is the point: That is where the culture is heading, and you can be sure that they will demand that the church celebrates what it celebrates. If we—the church at large—don't want to be in the same mess

we are in when it comes to gender issues today, we should start thinking about polyamory now. In ten years' time, it will be ten years too late to have that discussion. By then, we will already find that we have forgotten the Lord and have bowed to the Baals and the Asheroth of our age.

Deliberate worship of and devotion to the one true God is the surest antidote against idolatry.

## Yahweh's Response

Yahweh responded to Israel's apostasy with "anger," which was "kindled against Israel" so that "he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia," whom they "served ... eight years."

The Lord's love is not somehow at odds with his anger. He is perfectly capable of being both loving and angry without somehow compromising his character. We see here that the Lord's chastening fit the crime: Israel had "served" idols (v. 7) and the Lord gave them over so that they now "served" this enigmatic king. This is *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye—in action. When the Lord punishes, you can be sure that the punishment will fit the crime.

We don't know a whole lot about Cushan-rishathaim. We are told that he was "king of Mesopotamia." "Mesopotamia" in our English translations literally translates the Hebrew word "Aram-Naharaim." The word literally means "Aram of double rivers," and since Mesopotamia was situated between the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers, scholars conclude that that is where he was from.

But the real significance of the literal rendering is that the writer almost appears to be playing with words here. The king's name and the name of the territory over which he ruled rhyme. "Cushan-rishathaim" literally means "Cushan of double wickedness." This was likely not his real name (can you imagine naming your firstborn "double wickedness"?) but a nickname given to him by the writer. Israel was sold into the hands of Cushan-double-wickedness from Aram-double-rivers.

Why would the author give the king of Mesopotamia this nickname? I can think of two possible reasons.

First, he may be highlighting that this king was very bad news, indeed. He is writing to a generation who lived a long time after the events recorded, and he is trying to persuade them of just how evil this king was. He was not only wicked—he was doubly wicked.

Second, he may be poking a little fun at mighty King Double Wickedness, who is soundly defeated by an Israeli octogenarian. As we will see below, Othniel was very likely in his eighties when he became judge of Israel. Yet as fierce as King Double Wickedness was, he subdued Israel for only eight years, while Othniel—or, more correctly, Yahweh through Othniel—gave forty years of rest. When your narrative highlights the sovereignty of God, you have good cause to make fun of the oppressor that once seemed so fierce!

The important thing to note in all of this is the Lord's direction. This was not simply "history unfolding," but the deliberate orchestration of events by a sovereign God for a sovereign purpose. King Double Wickedness did not just happen to be more powerful than Israel; Yahweh handed Israel to him. He did so for a specific purpose. And what was that purpose? To lead his people to despair so that they would call upon him.

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In a recent sermon from Mark 5:1–20, our pastor made the following helpful comment: “To be humanly hopeless is a great place to be.” This is true, because human hopelessness drives us to divine sufficiency. When we are brought to the place of utter hopelessness, we realise that God is our sufficiency. Israel needed to be brought to the end of themselves before they would cry to the Lord for help. And we often need to be brought to the end of ourselves so that we will flee to God as our refuge. As Dale Ralph Davis observes, “The burning anger of Yahweh is certainly no picnic, but it may be the only sign of hope for God’s people, even though they may be yet unaware of that fact.”

## The Cry for a Deliverer

The Lord’s design achieved its intended purpose, for “the people of Israel cried out to the LORD” (v. 9). There is no hint of repentance in these verses; it is simply a cry of misery. But it is a cry to which the Lord wonderfully responded.

We should learn to rest in God’s designs for our afflictions. We don’t have to understand what God is doing; we have to trust that he knows what he is doing. The psalmist learned this when he wrote, “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces” (Psalm 119:71–72). When we come to grips with God’s designs, we learn to stop relying on our frail idols and instead place our hope in him. We learn that we can confidently call upon the Lord, knowing that he is eagerly waiting to respond to the faith-filled prayers of his people.

It has often been said that prayer is, at its core, an admission of dependence. Those who rest in their self-sufficiency have no need to pray to God. As you grow personally in your understanding of your utter dependence on God, you will grow personally in your prayer life. As the local church grows corporately in its understanding of its utter dependence on God, it will likewise grow corporately in its commitment to prayer.

As a church, we have in recent time faced more upheaval than at any time than I can personally recall. Certain events that have unfolded have led to great heartache and confusion and suspicion in the church. How ought we to respond? If we learn anything, let us learn how much we must rely on God, and let us show it by our commitment to corporate prayer.

## The Provision of a Deliverer

Dale Ralph Davis has laboured to show that the Hebrew verb translated “cried out” is no evidence of repentance. He has written at length to show that

whenever [“cried out”] appears associated with repentance or confession of sins (Judg. 10:10; 1 Sam. 12:10; Neh. 9:28) that repentance or confession is explicitly expressed by some additional clause or second verb, a factor which implies that [“cried out”] by itself cannot and does not carry any idea of repentance.

In other words, not only is there no evidence to show that there was repentance, but there is every reason to think that there was no repentance in this instance. And yet

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the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. 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.

(Judges 3:9–10)

The noun “judge” is not applied to Othniel in this account, though the verb is (v. 10). His story shows what a judge was meant to do. He is called a “deliverer” and one who “saved” Israel. Before we get into how he delivered and saved Israel, and how all the judges were meant to do so, let's first ask what we can know about Othniel.

Unlike the other judges in this book, Othniel does not show up out of the blue. We have at least a little bit of background biographical information on him.

We first encounter this man in Joshua 15:13–19. There, an aging Caleb—Othniel's uncle—makes a faith-filled foray into the Promised Land territory assigned to him by Joshua. Already in his eighties, Caleb offers his daughter as wife to the first man who will stand up to attack and capture Kiriath-sepher. His nephew Othniel, likely in his fifties, rose to the occasion and so acquired Caleb's daughter as his wife. This story is repeated in Judges 1:11–15.

Now, some thirty years later, into his eighties himself, Othniel once again rises to the occasion to deliver God's people. He was not a man who had bought into the myth of ministerial retirement. He did not decide that he had served the Lord faithfully in his younger years, and that it was now time to hand the reigns of leadership to a fresher generation while he spent his retirement visiting tourist attractions, playing golf, and collecting seashells on the beach. No, he saw that there was kingdom work to be done and was available to be used by God to accomplish what needed to be accomplished.

There is a lesson there for us. God certainly calls us to sober, faithful ministerial work while we are young. We are to remember our Creator in the days of our youth (Ecclesiastes 12:1ff) and to serve the Lord with youthful fervency. But God's call to faithful service is a call to all of life. May God deliver us from the attitude of thinking that we have done our bit and it is now time for a younger generation to take over while we just rest and reap the benefits of their labours. God calls his people to serve him all their days, and that is a commission that we must take seriously.

Othniel, then, was a man of faith and a capable warrior. These two qualities highlight what God expected of his judges, as we see in v. 10.

First, God expected his judges to judge his people (v. 10a). Judging Israel included civil oversight, as we see in the account of Deborah (4:4–5). But the ideal judge also exercised some form of spiritual oversight. “The Spirit of the LORD was upon him” implies some degree of religious oversight. We glean this from texts like Isaiah 11:1–5. There, the Spirit of the Lord is “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” Isaiah was prophesying the coming of Messiah, but it was the same Spirit who “was upon” Othniel, and the Spirit would have produced the same things in the judge.

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A judge, in other words, was responsible to give spiritual oversight to God's people. The judge was expected to know and obey God's law, and to therefore help God's people to know and obey his law. Othniel modelled this aspect of judging God's people.

Second, God expected his judges to deliver his people militarily (v. 10b). This is the second aspect of Othniel's work: "He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim." The judge was both a spiritual and a military leader.

In the flow of redemptive history, this sets us up for another kind of leader—a king. Judges laments the lack of a king in Israel. The time of the judges would come and go because the judges could not serve as the ideal leaders. But then the time of the kings would likewise come and go, for even they would prove inadequate to perfectly deliver and save God's people. A greater Judge, and a greater King, was needed to save God's people. But more on that later.

Without detracting from his spiritual and military prowess, we want to remember that the text gives us scant details of Othniel's efforts precisely because it intends us to focus on Yahweh as Israel's deliverer. He gave Israel into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim, and he gave Cushan-rishathaim into the hand of Othniel. This is a story of God at work. He is the central character in the narrative.

## The Fruit of the Deliverer

Finally, we see the fruit that flowed from God providing a deliverer: "So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died" (v. 11). English translations give the impression that Othniel died after the forty years of rest, but that is not necessarily the case. Hebrew scholars tell us that the chronological flow suggested in the English translation is not present in Hebrew. He may have died at any point during the rest period. The point is that he brought rest, but that the rest did not last—because the deliverer died.

Rest plays an important role in the book of Judges, as it did in Joshua. God raised up judges who delivered Israel and gave the people rest. But the rest that the judges provided never lasted, because the judge who brought the rest always died. Rest could never be fully attained because death still reigned in the land.

The kings, who came after the judges, likewise sought to bring rest to the people. At the peak of Israel's monarchy, during Solomon's reign, God gave rest to Israel (1 Kings 8:56; 1 Chronicles 22:9). The historian tells us that Solomon "had peace on all sides around him. And Judah and Israel lived in safety from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon" (1 Kings 4:24–25). But even the rest that Solomon brought was shortlived, because Solomon, Israel's greatest rest-bringer, died.

The Old Testament longs for someone who would bring greater—permanent—rest for God's people. And permanent rest ultimately comes in Jesus Christ. Hebrews reminds us that the rest that Joshua gave, and the rest that the judges gave, was temporary (see Hebrews 4:8), but Jesus Christ gives eternal rest. The reason that Christ can provide eternal rest is because, though he died, he rose again and

“always lives to make intercession” for his people (Hebrews 7:25). Those who would find eternal rest for their souls need simply to come to him over whom death has no claim (Matthew 11:28–30; Hebrews 4:8–13).

Perhaps you are an unbeliever who knows nothing of the rest that is freely offered in Jesus Christ. You may feel burdened by the weight of sin, longing for rest that you simply cannot find. If that is you, come to Jesus Christ, who promises rest. Call on him in faith, repenting of your sins, and asking him to save you from those sins, and you will find eternal rest for your soul.

Perhaps you are a believer who finds yourself beleaguered by the world. Perhaps you find yourself weighed under by a particular sin. Perhaps the stresses of life are lying heavily on you, and you feel like you alone are carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. If that is you, then come to Jesus Christ, the ultimate Judge and Deliverer, who is able to give rest now and forevermore to those who call on him.

AMEN