

JUDGES—WEEK 3

CYCLICAL APOSTASY



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Over and over, the Israelis forget about God, end up enslaved, cry out for deliverance, and are delivered by a judge. It gets worse as it goes along, and God's response gets more creative.

This all forms a beautiful lesson in God's love and creativity, contrasted against our sinful stupidity.

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Joshua, Week 3 — Cyclical Apostasy
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1 Judges 3:7–11

So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs. Therefore the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years. When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD delivered Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim. So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

This is the first of many cycles of 1) forgetting, 2) practicing evil, 3) being conquered, 4) suffering, 5) crying out to the LORD, and 6) being delivered by a judge.

It might seem that the Israelites quickly forget, but this first case shows that it's not so quick. Step one lasts a long time.

We don't know exactly how long it has been since Joshua died, but we do know, from Judges 2:10, that it was on the order of generations.

When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel. — Judges 2:10

This is important. As bad as the Israelites are, they aren't forgetting individually; the forgetting comes when the generation that held the memory died off.

This is going to happen over and over unless a way is found for them to pass the faith on to their children.

We have the same problem. It's one thing to teach our children about the faith. It's quite another to teach them the faith itself.

Our children's education is usually rote memorization. They learn all about the Old Testament characters: Adam and Eve, Noah, David and Solomon. We also teach them about Jesus and many of the New Testament saints.

But are they ready to head off to college? There they will encounter challenges to their faith just as bad as the Baals and Asherahs. Will they "go along to get along" or will they have a backbone of faith that allows them to stand? They've memorized what is true but do they know why it's true well enough to stand their ground in an argument.

This is the purpose for "Faith in What." It builds a logical sequence case for the historicity of Jesus's resurrection. Our kids need to take knowledge of things like this with them when they leave home.

<https://www.ailbe.org/resources/item/14728-faith-in-what>

2 Judges 3:12–25 (ESV)

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. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

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. 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. And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. 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. 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. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly; and the dung came out. Then Ehud went out into the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them.

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.” 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.

The Septuagint translates verse 15 as saying that Ehud was ambidextrous.

“I’d give my right arm to be ambidextrous.” — Yogi Berra

The Hebrew literally says that Ehud’s right hand was bound. So, this passage sounds close to a real example of Yogi’s quip

In context, it seems that his right hand (or side) was somewhat disabled, or at least looked like that, which explains why Eglon dismissed all of his attendants despite Ehud’s presence. He looked harmless.

That provided the perfect opportunity for Ehud to kill the king.

It’s possible that Ehud having a weak right hand was a ruse. Given that he spent the time to make a custom sword for a deceptive purpose, such advanced trickery wouldn’t be surprising.

Origin and St. Jerome make much of the idea that Ehud was ambidextrous. Origin sees great symbolism in Ehud’s “two right hands” (“ambi dextrous” in Latin) representing righteousness, and also in the sword—which he compares to the word of the gospel in Ephesians.

the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, — Ephesians 6:17b (ESV)

3 Judges 3:26–31

But Ehud had escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the stone images and escaped to Seirah. And it happened, when he arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the mountains of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the mountains; and he led them. Then he said to them, “Follow me, for the LORD has delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand.” So they went down after him, seized the fords of the Jordan leading to Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross over. And at that time they killed about ten thousand men of Moab, all stout men of valor; not a man escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.

After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad; and he also delivered Israel.

The LORD’s blessing on Ehud is obvious. Eglon didn’t cry out when he was stabbed in the gut, which is amazing. This makes Ehud’s getaway a piece of cake. He’s long gone before anyone discovers what happened.

Clearly buoyed by this, Ehud raises an army and confidently blocks the exits. Then he wipes out all the Moab warriors stationed on the west side of the Jordan. This leads to an extraordinary period of peace, twice as long as they had after Othniel.

Then we get a curious, one-verse description of *Shamgar the son of Anath*. Shamgar is not a Hebrew name and Anath is the name of a Canaanite warrior god. It might be that calling Shamgar the son of Anath just means he’s a mighty warrior. In any case, we know almost nothing about the guy.

It isn’t clear that Shamgar should be called a judge based on such scant evidence, though that’s the consensus based on his supernaturally powerful action and that he “*delivered Israel*.”

But Shamgar’s deliverance doesn’t get assigned a separate time period of peace. Nor do we see a separate cycle of Israel forgetting about the LORD and crying out for deliverance.

Thus it seems that Shamgar’s feat of killing 600 Philistines with an ox goad was part of why the land had rest for 80 years. “The land” didn’t consider his singular act to be a war that disrupted its rest.

There are two significant takeaways from the one sentence description of Shamgar’s “ministry.” First, the Old Testament just reports the facts, without any spin. This can feel way too terse for the modern reader. We’re used to, at minimum, some “storytelling” embellishment.

Second, the irony just lays there, confronting us with God’s style. It’s not easy to get used to how God’s ways are not our ways. Absent any storytelling, or “color commentary,” we don’t see why God would choose a non-Israeli to be a judge.

And we don’t get an answer; we’re just left scratching our heads.

Maybe that’s there just to loosen us up. The next judge is a girl.

4 Judges 4:1–10 (ESV)

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh- Naphtali and said to him, “Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, ‘Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?’” Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” And she said, “I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called out Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh. And 10,000 men went up at his heels, and Deborah went up with him.

After the usual Israelite collapse of faith, enslavement, and cries for relief, God raises up a woman to rescue Israel. The text emphasizes this fact by repeating that she’s a woman. The Hebrew (וְדִבְרָה אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אִשְׁתֵּי לַפִּי־דוֹת oo-de-vor-ah ee-sha nvee-ah eh-shet la-pee-dote) literally says, “Now Deborah, a woman, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth.” Most translations leave out, “a woman,” as redundant.

This point becomes more pointed when Barak says, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” Many commentators (though not all) view this as timidity on Barak’s part.

Deborah has already prophesied, in detail, how they will be victorious. What’s the point of her being there in person? Barak should have the courage to do this without her.

So, Deborah’s comeback is one for the ages. “I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.”

Sisera will be killed by a girl. Barak can’t do it, even with the Lord’s blessing. He gets none of the glory.

This emphasis on women heroes is part of a pattern. Ehud was a lefty, which has traditional sinister connotations (sinister is literally the Latin word for left). Shamgar was apparently not an Israelite. Now Israel is being rescued by women. So, what the point?

It must have something to do with humility. They aren’t being saved by any means they would expect, or even respect. They’re embarrassed, enslaved, and broken, over and over. Then they are repeatedly rescued in ways that amplify their embarrassment. Yet, over and over, they don’t get a clue.

But we do get this book out of it all. That gets the clue out to a larger audience.

5 Judges 4:11–16

Now Heber the Kenite, of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, had separated himself from the Kenites and pitched his tent near the terebinth tree at Zaanaim, which is beside Kedesh.

And they reported to Sisera that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. So Sisera gathered together all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth Hagoyim to the River Kishon.

Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

There’s a key detail about this battle that isn’t revealed until Judges 5:21. Sisera’s chariots got stuck (or even swept away) in the River Kishon. Chariots are great on dry ground, but get stuck in mud.

Deborah’s song in chapter five indicates that the LORD brought extra rain to facilitate this. The resulting mire explains why Sisera abandoned his chariot, which would normally be faster transportation, and fled on foot.

Sisera’s 900 chariots were sitting ducks—easy pickings for Barak’s army of 10,000 men.

Weather is often a significant factor in war, even a decisive one. Three events from WWII illustrate this.

Reid Bryson, a major in the Weather Service of the U.S. Army Air Corps, made two forecasts that were ignored, at great cost. His forecast for a 30,000+ foot altitude bombing run (an unprecedented mission) predicted 168-knot headwinds (blowing east to west) over Tokyo. The commanding general ignored Bryson. Unfortunately for the general, Bryson was right, and the mission failed. Bryson’s predicted high-altitude westerly wind is now known as the jet stream.

<https://news.wisc.edu/pioneer-of-climatology-dies-at-88/>

Bryson’s forecast of Typhoon Cobra was similarly ignored, resulting in the sinking of three destroyers, the death of 790 sailors, damage to nine other warships, and the loss of many aircraft.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typhoon_Cobra

But the one that was decisive, and felt more like divine intervention, was the cold snap that froze Hitler’s army on the outskirts of Moscow and made them sitting ducks for the Russian soldiers who showed up on skis.

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle_of_Moscow

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Are you comfortable defending your faith?
2. Is deception in the service of God okay?
3. When do you think Ehud realized that his success was a special calling?
4. What is God teaching us with all these surprising twists?
5. Have you seen a weather-related answer to prayer?

Items for prayer: