

What kind of Saviour?'

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[0 : 00] Beyond this day, no thinking person could fail to see what would happen.

I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system. The unforgettable lifesaver of 1,200 persecuted Jews.

On the 24th of June 1993, Oscar Schindler and his wife, Emily, were declared righteous among the nations. A distinction given by the state of Israel to the non-Jews who actively participated in the saving of Jews in the Holocaust.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with the story of Oscar Schindler or perhaps have seen the film adaptation of his life, Schindler's List.

It's a remarkable story of bravery, of self-sacrifice that even made him penniless as he sought to protect Jews and bribe officials in order to stop them from being sent to death camps.

[1 : 22] It's a remarkable story. And yet, if you were to read Oscar Schindler's biography, if you were to take out his saving of the Jews, well, what would you find?

He was a member of the Nazi party. He spied for the counterintelligence arm of the German military. He was an excessive drinker and he abused his wife, cheated on his wife.

He's an SUV that he was a slave. It's not exactly the CV you would expect of someone declared righteous among the nations, is it? It's not the CV of someone you would expect who would rescue 1,200 people from certain death.

The book of Judges is littered with unexpected people who God uses in unexpected ways. and the book of Judges is littered with people like this because the people of God are under oppression from enemies. They are deep in their afflictions.

With the beginning of Solomon's reign, as has often been called the Golden Ages, we are very much this morning descending into the dark ages of Israelite history.

[2 : 53] You know, it's quite telling that one of the author's most repeated refrains throughout the book is one that we've seen in our passage twice already. I wonder if you notice it. Chapter 3, verse 7, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. And verse 12, once again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Seven times we're told this through the book of Judges, and it's really no surprise that by the time we get to the end of the book, it closes like this. In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit.

Now, this morning, we are going to be looking at the first three of these judges that God raises up to rescue his people. But it's important to see why Israel needs rescuing. You know, why have they begun to spiral into increasing moral chaos? If you turn back with me to Judges, chapter 1, verse 1, you will see the time marker for this book. After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, who of us is to go up first to fight against the Canaanites?

At the beginning of the book of Joshua, we're, which, at the beginning of the book of Judges, we find ourselves looking at the second movement of the Israelites' conquest of Canaan.

We are following on from the book of Joshua, which told of the process of the Israelites entering this land. Now, for the most part, the people had obediently trusted God, and God had granted them the victory. But as Joshua nears the end of his days, there is still much to be done. You know, the land, it lies open to Israel, but they still need to settle it. They still need to trust God to push out the current inhabitants. And so in chapter 1 here, we have the narrative of how the Israelites' mission goes. And at least at the start, it seems to be going well. Look, verse 4, the Lord gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands. But then we reach verse 19 with the men of Judah.

The Lord was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains because they had chariots fitted with iron. And with it, verse 19 seems to be the beginning of a spiral of failure to drive out the people in the land. They had the

might over them, and yet they did not drive them out.

[6 : 08] You know, maybe that might not seem to have mattered. But the next thing we know is that the northern tribes are cozying up to the Canaanites. They're buying into their culture, to their religion, and their values.

Coexisting leads to co-worshipping. And in chapter 2, we get God's perspective on the whole matter. Chapter 2, verse 1.

The angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochum and said, I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land I swore to give to your ancestors. I said, I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars. Yet you have disobeyed me.

And so God gives them over to what they want. Verse 3. I will not drive them out before you. They will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares for you.

Because of the Israelites' unfaithfulness, the land is no longer a place of blessing, but a place of threat. And so we're given this pattern, or a cycle of Israel's spiritual and moral deterioration.

[7 : 28] A framework, if you like, through which to look at the rest of the judges. And there are three key stages in this cycle. The three R's to help us remember.

The first stage is rebellion. Time and time again, the people of God turn away from him. They flagrantly disobey his covenant and worship false gods.

And yet in his kindness, God doesn't abandon his people to the worship of Baal, but punishes them by sending them a foreign power to oppress them. That's the second stage, the rescue stage of the cycle.

The retribution stage, sorry. But then God would have pity on his people. He'd send a judge to defeat the enemy and save the Israelites from their oppression.

And that is a rescue stage of the cycle. And then rest would follow, but only as long as the judge would live. And then they'd go back to their unfaithfulness in increasing measure.

[8 : 38] So that's the three R's. Rebellion, retribution, and rescue. And it's into this context that we arrive at in chapter 3, where we encounter three of the judges in which the Lord raised up to save his people.

So please turn back with me to 3, verse 7 to 11, And as we've noted already, we see that first stage of the cycle.

Verse 7, The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.

Their rebellion, their sin is twofold here. They forgot the Lord their God. And secondly, they served the Baals and the Asherahs.

In a span of a generation, the people of Israel have gone from a people who served the Lord, who knew of the wonderful things of rescue that he had done for his people.

[9 : 52] And now they neither know God nor what he has done for them. And this clearly isn't just an intellectual knowledge, is it? No, in fact, this is more than that.

It's a statement about the nation no longer knowing him deeply. For knowing God, knowing God in the Christian understanding is never just intellectual assent.

No, it's about knowing him relationally. Knowing him intimately and responding to him in light of who he is. And that's why the forgetting of the Lord leads to the service of the Baals and the Asherahs. Notice that the contrast isn't with remembering or thinking about the Baals and the Asherahs, but of serving.

The Baals and the Asherahs have claimed their allegiance. They've been lured in and enticed by the false promises of these gods of fertility. And so it leads to the second stage of the cycle, God's retribution in verse 8.

[11 : 04] The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan, Rishithaim, king of Aram, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years.

Now, names are often significant in the Bible. And that's true, I think, here of Cushan Rishithaim. The name literally means Cushan of double wickedness.

The people of God have been wicked and done evil in the sight of the Lord. And God says, well, you want wickedness? Well, on you go then. Have your double portion. And into the long subjection of king double wickedness they go for eight long years.

Until verse 9. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel. Now, much ink has been spilled over what verse 9, the first half of verse 9, means here.

The question is really a matter of, is what the Israelites are doing here, is it repentance? You know, are they coming to the Lord and repenting and turning from what they're doing?

[12:25] Or is it just a cry? You know, is this just a cry of mourning at the situation they find themselves in? Now, I'm persuaded that it's the second of those two, that this isn't so much repentance, but crying out in pain for the oppression that they find themselves in.

And I think that is significant and important precisely because of God's response. For God's Caesar anguish, anguish caused by their own flagrant sin.

And, well, how would you finish that sentence? What would you expect? How would you respond to that?

You know, imagine a friend comes to you for advice in a particular area of life. You advise them, give them some godly advice, and they turn around and do the opposite.

You see them the next week in the pain of their mistake, licking their wounds. What is it that we love to say to people like that? I told you so.

[13:40] You know, you should have listened to me. Or perhaps you're sitting there refusing to help them again. You know, if you're not going to bother to listen to me, that's it.

Or maybe you just want to pick them up and shake them by their shoulders until they're rid of their stupidity. It's not what God does, though, is it?

This is why it's significant. Because he raised up for them a deliverer. Into their sin and their folly, he sends them one to save them.

It's the beauty of the gospel, isn't it? Whilst we were still sinners, God sent his son to die for us. Not whilst we were sufficiently contrite for our sin.

Not whilst God already knew we would choose him one day in the future. No, whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[14:46] The initiative in salvation is God's. Today and back here in the book of Judges. So clear in our passage, isn't it?

Just look again at verse 9. He, God, raised up for them a deliverer. In verse 10. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him so that he became Israel's judge.

Verse 10. The Lord gave Cushan Rishapheim into the hands of Othniel. It's a story all about God's rescue.

And as God rescues, verse 11, so the land had peace for 40 years.

This is a story of God's rescue and God taking initiative in his rescue. But it's also a story of the type of rescuer that he uses.

[15:52] I wonder what you made of Othniel. You know, we're not told an awful lot about him, are we? I think that's part of the point that the writer is making here.

Now, as you go through the book of Judges, it's always helpful to ask yourself the question, you know, what is different about this judge? Now, how is he different to the next one and the one after that or the previous one?

Or what is the writer deciding to tell you about this judge? And what difference does that make? So look again at what we're told about Othniel.

Well, verse 9, he is the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. Now, if we'd been doing a series in Judges, we would have come across Othniel before.

In chapter 1, verses 11 to 14, we see that Othniel was also given Caleb's daughter, Aksa, in marriage after conquering Kiri of Sefer.

[16:53] And here we have a reminder that he descends from Kenaz, who was Caleb's younger brother. Caleb, one of the only two faithful spies for God's people.

It's as if the writer is saying, look at Othniel. Here is a successful warrior who comes from the faithful line of God's people.

You know, unlike all the other judges, there is not a blot on his character, no visible fault that we're told about. He rescues and he brings about peace.

And yet, here is the problem. He dies. The land had peace for 40 years, verse 11, until Othniel, son of Kenaz, died.

Death brings about the end of peace and the start of the cycle again. Look, verse 12. Once again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

[18:02] And stage two of the cycle, retribution. Because they did this evil, the Lord gave Eglon, king of Moab, power over Israel. This brings us on to our second story of Eglon the eater and Ehud the left field left-hander.

So Eglon the eater and Ehud the left field left-hander. Now, there are already hints of the cycle becoming an ever-increasing downward spiral already.

It's not just one king this time, but the king of Moab gets the Ammonites and the Amalekites to join him. And their subjection has increased, not from eight years, but all the way to 18 years.

And so again, stage three, we have the rescue, verse 15. The Israelites cried out to the Lord and he gave them a deliverer. And what follows is a really rather entertaining and humorous story.

I think I heard a couple of smirks. That's a good thing. We're supposed to laugh at this story. It's what the author wants us to do. He wants us to laugh along as we read it.

[19:18] You know, just imagine the retelling of the story around the Israelite campfire. You know, someone shouts at the back, go on, tell the one about Ehud and Eglon again. You know, tell the story about how we were oppressed by our enemies for 18 long years.

And then in our suffering, God sent a savior. He sent Ehud. And as you remember that the pain and the suffering, here you are told about Ehud again, a left-handed man, the Benjamite who was sent with the best gifts to the king they could give.

For not only at this time were they subject to this king, but they also had to bring tribute. They had to pay respects to their oppressor. The people are enslaved and under his control.

But here we find something out that the king doesn't know about. Something he's not in control of.

Verse 16. Ehud had made a double-edged sword, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing.

Ehud was going to the king with more than one present. And he was going to a king who clearly wasn't lacking in food tributes, was he? No. Verse 19.

[20:32] He was a very fat man. Now, I don't think the author is trying to be a sizist here. But I think that what he's trying to show is that Eglon is not exactly the picture of a warrior king type, is he?

He's not the type of king you'd back to ride out into battle with. But back to the story. Ehud heads to the king and presents a tribute.

And yet, surprisingly, he leaves again with the men. Do you notice that? But, verse 19. At the idols near Gilgal, he himself turned back and said, I have a secret message for you, O king.

Now, we're not really told why he went back and then went again. But it is interesting, isn't it? It's at the idols near Gilgal that he turns back.

You know, perhaps he had planned on assassinating the king. But then he feared his life and decided to go back.

[21:40] When he saw the idols, he realized that he needed to go back. Now, we don't know for sure. But what we do know is it's precisely because of the idols, of the wickedness of the nations, that God is handing them over to defeat from his judges.

I don't know how you felt or what you thought when I read the passage earlier. I mean, in a mere 25 verses, we've got two wars.

We have an assassination brought about by a lie. And the death of, well, in other translations, at least 10,000 people.

It's hard for many of us to stomach, isn't it? Well, let me encourage you. If you're struggling with that this morning, let me encourage you to get inside the Bible's perspective of it.

To get inside the Israelites' perspective of it. To get and climb inside God's perspective of it. For these people were not innocent. And God was not giving the Israelites Canaan because they were innocent, but because of how grossly wicked the Canaanites were.

[23:06] God was using Israel as an instrument for his justice. And so as we turn back towards Eglon with Ehud, we see that Ehud has a secret message for the king.

And the king, in his infinite wisdom, decides, I think it would be a good idea to send all my security guards away. You know, I'll send my posse away and just be left alone with one of my sworn enemies.

That sounds like a good idea. Perhaps his lust for a secret message from God, perhaps his longing for another gift, brings him to this. And as he's brought to his feet, Ehud draws his sword and plunges it into the king's belly.

The writer is so detailed, isn't he? You know, verse 22, even the handle sank in after the blade, which came at his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it. The hidden message became hidden again. And so Ehud, he makes an escape. He locks the king in his own quarters.

[24 : 20] And then eventually the servants come back, wondering to see if he's okay. And I think they probably would have wished that they hadn't bothered, because they're met with a rather pungent smell, and makes him think that the king is otherwise engaged.

Only he takes a rather long time, doesn't he? Too long, in fact. Verse 25, that his servants, and I think pretty bravely, open the door. I'm not sure I'd want to be the one doing that.

And they do that only to find their lord dead. But here's the beauty of the story. Here's where the Israelites are laughing around the campfire, because all the while Ehud is escaping.

And what's he doing? He's bringing back the Israelites to defeat the Moabites. And it concludes verse 30. That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for 80 years.

So we rejoice, for God has rescued his people through his judge Ehud. Then we have the question again.

[25 : 30] Why did God save through Ehud? You know, why does God get himself involved in such a messy story like this? You know, what is God trying to tell us through his saving through Ehud?

You know, he seems a rather unexpected choice. The evidence stacks up against him. Verse 15. As we looked at with the children earlier, he was a left-handed man.

Now, some scholars have argued that because he was a left-handed man, it probably meant he had some sort of deformity with his right. Perhaps that's why the writer stresses that the Moabites were all vigorous and strong men in comparison to Ehud in verse 29.

But what is certainly true is he is an unexpected savior. And he saves in an unexpected means too, doesn't he? Lying in order to assassinate.

Now, I don't think the narrator is inviting us to make moral judgments on Ehud here. But it is true that he's showing us that Israel has been rescued by an unexpected rescuer in an unexpected way.

[26 : 57] And that is exactly the point. I think the writer's making a similar point with Shamgar. He's not given much airtime in this story, is he?

Just one verse. And yet he too saves Israel. And with what? An ox code.

A stick with a pointy end to spur on some ox in the Zaytoa cart. God is showing us unexpected rescuers rescuing in an unexpected way for that is the way that our God saves.

For who would expect that one day in Bethlehem, in a lowly manger, in a lowly stable, a child would be born? Who would expect that someone who had nothing in his appearance that we should desire him?

That someone who was despised and rejected by men would be the rescuer of the world? And who would expect the way in which he rescues?

[28 : 08] For who would expect the saviour of the world to deliver his people, not through great triumph, but through crushing defeat? Who would expect the most shameful form of death would bring about the hope of eternal life?

Who would have thought that what the world sees as foolishness would be the very wisdom of God? Who would have thought what is weak in the world's eyes would be the very power of salvation for those who believe?

Oh, we need this salvation because the story did not end at verse 31. It did not end with peace in the land.

Yes, there was peace in the land for 80 years, but what about the 81st? Well, 4 verse 1, after Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

The cycle continues. The spiral worsens. We've loved a rescue. We've laughed at the folly of the king. We've rejoiced at triumph over the enemies.

[29 : 24] And yet back we are again, enslaved to another king because of our sin. For that is their problem. They are enslaved to sin.

They are under sin, as the Apostle Paul describes. They are under its power, under its vice-like grip.

For sin is not merely something that we do. We are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners. And that is true of us all by nature.

We are all subject to something or someone. We all worship something. We all bow to a king. The question is, what or who do we bow down to?

Those questions are running right the way throughout our narrative, aren't they? Are you serving God or the Asherahs? Are you subject to God or another king?

[30 : 29] Are you enjoying peace or war? And the same is true today. What is your king? Who do you worship?

Maybe this is your first time here this morning that you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. Maybe you've never thought about that question before. Maybe you don't think of yourself as a worshiper. Maybe you think that's just for the religious. Maybe you don't think of yourself. Well, ask yourself this question. What if you lost in this world?

Could you not live without? What do you spend the most amount of your money and time on? What do you spend your day thinking about? For there you will find what you worship.

It's what you're enslaved to. I'm not saying these things are bad things. I'm sure many of them, most of them are goods, noble things.

[31 : 33] But good gifts make very bad gods. They do not last. They cannot provide satisfaction. And they do not deal with the problem of death.

Because only one person can. One who not only has a record that looks as spotless and as unblemished as Othniel's, but one whose record actually is spotless.

One who not only provides peace for 40 years or 80 years, but eternally. One whose reign is not ended by death, because he is not just a man, but he is God and reigns eternal and will never die. We need one who does not merely deal with the temporal bondage of Moabites or fat kings or economic oppression. We need one who does not only stay sin for a while, but breaks its power over us.

We need Jesus. We need the one who calls all who are weary and need rest to come to him and they will find rest.

[32 : 51] We need the one with nail-scarred hands. We need him who loves us and has set us free from our sins at the cost of his blood.

Oh, friends, see the power of God and the wisdom of God at the cross. We need that kind of saviour. Amen.