

OTHNIEL, THE INTRODUCTORY JUDGE

How often do we find ourselves falling short of the glory of God? If you are anything like me, struggles with prayer, attitude, leading your family and priorities in life make it seem like God's salvation is a daily reprieve. Thank God for grace and mercy. This, however, is a lot like we see the Israelites dealing with things several thousand years ago, so it is really nothing new. From the days of the Egyptian exodus we have seen a common theme with scripture that unfortunately still applies today; blessings, apostasy, punishment, cry out to God, He welcomes His children back, and the merry go round keeps going.

As we walk through the book of Judges, we can see this theme apply time and time again. Joshua had been a wonderful leader, but he was also merciful. He failed to drive out certain peoples from the Promised Land the way that he should have. As was the case with Judah and Simeon. So, the Lord allowed these people to remain in their habitat with their gods and the people of Israel would lose sight of God, mingle with said people and turn to their foreign gods. As we read in chapter two, God had promised to never break His covenant, however the people of Israel continuously broke their covenant with God, disobeyed His voice and bowed down to foreign gods. This led to God delivering them into the hands of the plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around so that they could no longer stand before their enemies (2:14). Because our Father is merciful and forgiving, He would raise up judges (military leaders), who would judge them and straighten their path and then deliver them out of the bondage of their captors. Enter the introductory judge, Othniel.

Othniel (God is my strength in the Hebrew) was no stranger to conflict or conquest, likely inherited from his uncle Caleb. Once upon a time, Caleb was one of 12 spies sent by Moses to the land of Canaan. Only he and Joshua would come back with the confidence from the Lord that they would conquer that land. His faith in God was not in vain and because of that confidence they were able to defeat Canaan. He spent his days eliminating imminent threats to the Jewish people and eventually came to the land of Debir. He had announced that whoever could take that land would be rewarded with his daughter, Achsah. His nephew Othniel was up to the task and defeated the land handily, winning the hand of his cousin.

Once the people of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, serving Baal and Ashtoreths, the Lord was provoked to anger. They were given up to the hands of their enemies (namely, Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia) and calamity was around every corner leading to much distress. After eight long years it finally occurred to them to call on the Lord. Isn't it peculiar how that works? When we are living well we are caught up in the joy of the moment and put the focus on our "stuff" and well-being. It isn't until things begin to go south that we remember the One who takes care of us and provided those comforts and provisions in the first place. After eight years the Lord hears their cries and has sympathy for them and calls upon a deliverer, but not until they called upon Him first. He would not have mercy on them until they

saw the error of their ways. God remembered His faithful servant Othniel and raised him up. Othniel had a history and was likely a legend looked upon favorably by the people of Israel for his family history and military conquests. He was certainly not an unknown man.

At this time, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel and he judged Israel. Although only a few words are used, here we see a process. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so although he had a love for God and had a penchant for winning battles already, the Spirit provoked him to take it a step further and step up as the leader of the Israelites. Now he must do more than lead militarily, he must judge the people of Israel. What would that look like? That would consist of adjudication, informing them of the sentence given them by God. It is possible that they had never put two and two together to associate their dilemma with their apostasy. Othniel had to open their eyes to their wickedness. They would have to eliminate all remnants of foreign gods that they may bow down to and turn to the one true God. Once that process was complete, Othniel assembled his army and went out to war. This battle could have lasted a day or a year, we don't know for sure, but we know that Othniel turned to God to win the battle of the land of Aram-Naharaim (northern Mesopotamia) from king Cushan-Rishathaim.

This conquest, we are told, led to rest for 40 years. Unfortunately, since the amount of time is given we know that the people of Israel will lose sight of the Lord once again after 40 years. Our level of sin varies from person to person and day to day but it's no matter, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When we read through the struggles of the Hebrew people of the Old Testament we are reading of the daily struggles in our lives that play out day to day in merely a different manner. That is why we have a savior, because we will not have prophets, judges or kings to turn to, only Jesus who said "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Mat. 11:28-30)