

Introduction

I received an unfortunate and unwelcome text the other day. Okay. I received about 27 of them. *That particular day*. It seems that democracy is completely and utterly dependent on whether I contribute ten dollars to secure a 500% match for Vice President Harris' campaign. No, wait. That was for President Trump's campaign. No, no. That was for...I don't know. I'm on both lists, apparently.

If you haven't heard yet there is an election coming up. One of the strange quirks of American politics is this claim that *this election is the most important election ever*. Therefore, the message seems to be, you must vote *against* this candidate by voting *for* this other candidate, or the earth will explode. Sometimes God does raise up an individual to do great things.

As we dive into the world of the judges and take a look at Israel's first judge, we see that God often raises up deliverers—rescuers—from the most unlikely of places. And no, we're not going to be drawing any parallels to the election on Tuesday. Rather, we will see how God rescues his people in surprising and unexpected ways. We will see how this is good news, for it points forward to a still greater and even more unexpected rescue.

We're in Judges 3.

Jdgs 3:1 Now these are the nations that the LORD left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. ² It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before. ³ These are the nations: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. ⁴ They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. ⁵ So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁶ And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

Judges 3:1–11

The Nations Left

In verses 1–2 the author gives two reasons the Lord left the nations in the land of Canaan. First, it was to test Israel. Then he makes a strong statement in verse 2: “It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before.” Let’s look at each of these reasons.

The author clarifies the first reason in verse 4. “These nations left behind were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord”. We must understand God is not the one gaining knowledge here. When God first appeared to Abraham in Genesis 12 and made the promise to bless all the nations on earth through Abraham and his offspring, God knew exactly how it would play out. God told him his family would end up in slavery in Egypt but then he would rescue Abraham’s family and punish the Egyptians for harming Abraham’s family. God knew this all along.

Hundreds of years later when God rescued Israel from Egypt, he knew he would lead them to Mount Sinai. He knew he would make a gracious covenant with them, promising them blessings and even more, promising to dwell among them in the tabernacle. He knew he would be with Moses at the top of the mountain and while giving the law to Moses, he knew Israel would be at the base of the mountain prostituting itself with the golden calf he knew they would make.

When God led them into the land with Joshua’s leadership, he knew Joshua would be faithful. He knew Israel would be largely faithful under his leadership. He also knew Judah would not go up against the iron chariots. He knew Manasseh would not drive out the inhabitants. He knew Ephraim would not. He knew Zebulun would not. He knew Asher would not. He knew Naphtali and Dan and all the other tribes would not be faithful to drive them out.

God knew all this when he made the promises. God knew all this when he issued his warnings. When God says the nations will be left to test Israel in order to know if Israel would be faithful to his covenant, he does not mean so that *he* would know; he already knows! God knows they will not be faithful. He is not surprised when Israel forgets the Lord and serves the Baals. He is not surprised when they do what is evil in his sight.

When God leaves the nations in the land in order to test Israel and see whether Israel would be faithful, only Israel would gain knowledge. The testing was to show *Israel* whether *Israel* would be faithful. Leaving the nations in the land would be a measuring stick by which Israel could see and know its own faithfulness—or unfaithfulness.

The nations listed for this testing is an unusual list. This is the first time the Philistines are mentioned. The Philistines are in the southwest of Canaan. The “Canaanites” are in the southeast. The Sidonians are in the northwest and the Hivites are in the northeast. The author lists the nations in a generally geographical way to show the nations were left *everywhere*. All of Israel would be tested. All of Israel would have opportunity to measure and gauge their faithfulness.

It's interesting that during the conquest under Joshua the Philistines were not mentioned. We know from history they arrived in that region around the year 1190BC. They were known historically as "the Sea Peoples" and they first attempted to settle in Egypt but were beaten by Rameses III. They turned instead to the land of Canaan and settled along the coast of the Mediterranean. This means they arrived in Canaan sometime after Joshua but early in Israel's history in the land.

The second reason the nations were left was to teach Israel war. Look carefully at verse 2: "It was *only* in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war". Think of what the author is saying. He's already stated another purpose: to test Israel. However, God knows the generation that took the land under Joshua is gone and the new generation that did not know the Lord also did not know warfare. The battle-hardened soldiers were dead and gone.

God's purpose from the beginning was to prepare his people for the ongoing battles they would experience and in order to teach them how to fight, he determined to let the nations remain, *and* the nations would remain because Israel refused to obey. God is using the occasion of their sin to bring about his purposes! In 2012 John Piper tweeted an incredible truth:

God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them.

John Piper

God is preparing his people. He is working behind the scenes, even through their own sin and rebellion, in order to bring about his purposes. The truth is God will remain true to his word, even when no one else will. As evidence of this verse 5 tells us the people of Israel "lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites". Israel were foreigners living in their own land.

The People Did Evil

Remember the primary rule: Israel was to devote the people to destruction. This does not mean to slaughter them as so many skeptics claim. Rather, it means to set them apart by not marrying them and not engaging in commerce with them and not making treaties with them. In short, Israel was to have nothing to do with the people living in the land. God himself would slowly drive them out of the land as Israel grew and occupied more and more land.

The nations were left to test Israel, to show Israel whether Israel would be faithful. Verse 6 says Israel took the daughters of the Canaanites as wives for their sons and they gave their daughters to the Canaanites as wives for their sons. Remember the prohibition! This was forbidden—not interracial marriage as such, but the inevitable outcome of intermarrying with the Canaanites as seen in verse 6: "and they served their gods".

Verse 7 essentially restates what we read in chapter 2. The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord. They served the Baals and other gods and goddesses of the Canaanites. God warned Israel what would happen if they did not devote the people to destruction. He told them they would intermarry. He told them

this would lead to idolatry, to worship false and foreign gods. He told them he would, in response, bring harsh discipline upon them:

Deut 8:19 And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. ²⁰ Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 8:19–20

Israel forgot the Lord their God. Israel went after other gods and served them and worshiped them. God remains true to his word, even when no one else will. Because he is true to his word we come to verse 8. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. They served Cushan-rishathaim for eight years. This largely means they were put to forced labor in the form of a heavy tax. Just as they had done to the Canaanites—wrongly!—so this king did to them.

God raises up this foreign king, this Cushan-rishathaim, to accomplish his purposes. We do not know who this particular man was, historically. This is in large part because his name wasn't actually Cushan-rishathaim. Rather than give us his real name the author makes a pun made on his actual name. In Hebrew the name "Cushan-rishathaim" means "Cushan double wickedness". Scholars believe this is a pun intended to reveal what God himself thinks of this king he himself raised up to discipline his people.

Just because someone ascends to a high and lofty and powerful position doesn't mean God approves of him—or her. Having power to lay hands on God's people is not a declaration of God's approval of bringing that harm, even if God himself sells his people into those same hands. For eight years Israel is forced to serve this foreign king. We're not told where this king oppressed Israel. It may be the northern tribes or it may be the central tribes such as Judah and Benjamin and Ephraim. It almost certainly was not the entire land.

The purpose of God raising up Cushan-double-wickedness was to discipline his people. It was to show them he remains true to his word even when they do not. His aim was their repentance. God called them to be his people; he wanted them to trust him. Even though Israel forgot the Lord and abandoned him and did what was evil in his sight and served the Baals and bowed down to them and violated the ban on intermarrying pagan Canaanites, after eight years of suffering they remembered the Lord and cried out to him for help.

In verse 9 we're told that when they finally did so the Lord "raised up a deliverer" from the tribe of Judah. Remember, the Lord told Israel "Judah shall go up; behold I have given the land into his hand". Here the judge is not called a judge, though in verse 10 it says he judged Israel. To judge is to impose justice. The deliverer brought *justice* to the land. Justice is simply that which is good and right. It is good and right for God to rescue Israel, *but only because God promised Israel*. God remains true to his word, even when no one else will.

The word for deliverer is the word messiah. God raised up a messiah, one who would act on behalf of his people and bring justice to them—and to their enemies. This first judge is none other than Othniel, the very same Othniel who demonstrated great faith in the God of Israel and boldly conquered the fortress of Debir and thereby won the hand of Achsah in marriage.

You may recall in chapter 1 that Othniel and his wife Achsah, along with Caleb, are presented as true Israelites—as God’s people who are faithfully obedient and who trust him no matter what. All three are foreigners who had been adopted into God’s family. Othniel, a non-Israelite by birth, is presented in Judges as the most faithful judge, with nothing negative about his character or life indicated anywhere. Being foreign-born, Othniel is the most unlikely messiah to be raised up to rescue Israel.

Othniel, the Israelite

Othniel’s ethnicity was not a barrier to his inclusion in the people of God. God chose Abraham in order to bless all the nations of the earth through his offspring. God made of him a great nation, and this nation was never limited to his ethnic offspring. Rather, all those who shared the faith of Abraham were counted among the people of God. At the forefront of these people here in Judges 3 is Othniel, the ethnic Kenizzite, from one of the tribes God specifically promised Abraham he would drive out:

Gen 15:18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, ~~the Kadmonites,~~²⁰ ~~the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,~~²¹ ~~the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”~~

Genesis 15:18–21

Though Othniel was a Kenizzite, by faith he was made an Israelite, and therefore one who inherits the land of his ethnic people. Here we see again that the thing God desires most of all from his people is their faith. Though *the Israelites* did evil by marrying the Canaanites, Othniel himself was not evil even though he was a Canaanite and was married to a Canaanite. It was never about ethnic identity, but about faith in the God of Israel. This is why Othniel is presented as the ideal Israelite. Mark Boda and Mary Conway explain:

More importantly, although it is recorded that the Israelites did the evil thing and forgot YHWH, in regard to Othniel there is no mention of sin, no reluctance or hesitation, no failure, and no suggestion of any words or actions that might sully the bright, ideal picture of the first judge. Unlike later judges, therefore, there is no tension or ambiguity in his character.

Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, ZECOT

Israel needs a rescuer. The people need a deliverer. If God is going to keep his promises—and he remains true to his word, even when no one else will—he must raise up a deliverer, a *messiah*, to rescue them. They will not rescue themselves. They *cannot* rescue themselves. The enemy is simply too powerful for them.

Old Testament scholar Havilah Dharamraj points out that Cushan-rishathaim is said to be king of Mesopotamia. She argues this means he is an emperor. She writes:

This would make Cushan an emperor, with Judah not much more than a province on the edges of his kingdom. It would appear that Othniel threw off the yoke of the most powerful oppressor in Judges.

Dr. Havilah Dharamraj, South Asia Bible Commentary

This means the least likely person to be a judge, for he was a Kenizzite by birth, was Israel's most faithful judge, and he defeated Israel's greatest enemy. He was their deliverer, a messiah—an unlikely messiah. Further, this judge from the tribe of Judah goes up against Israel's most formidable enemy during the time of the judges. Despite the incredible power of the enemy, one who could oppress God's people from such a great distance, the Spirit of the Lord was upon this ideal Israelite and verse 10 says he went out to war and the LORD gave Cushan-double-wickedness into his hand.

See the faithfulness of God in this. He said Judah should go up first. Israel commits great evil and this evil leads God to raise up Cushan-rishathaim, Israel's most powerful enemy, to bring discipline upon them. When they cry out to the Lord—this was the very purpose of the discipline!—God raises up a man from the tribe of Judah to defeat this great enemy on Israel's behalf. He was able to do so because the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, empowering him to be faithful and to engage in the battle, and to be victorious. God gives him victory over this king of double wickedness because God remains true to his word.

Othniel Died

I am ever amazed at how God chooses to work. I've often said God works through means. God can intervene directly. Sometimes he does. He sent the plagues, but when he parted the Red Sea, he used Moses. God knocked down the walls of Jericho, but he used Israel marching in circles. God raises up faithful men and women to bring about his purposes because God delights in using faithful people. What makes this story so incredible, however, is God uses a faithful man to rescue an unfaithful people. Daniel Block explains Israel's sin.

Israel has failed; she rightfully stands under the judgment of God. When the narrator begins to recount the sociopolitical crises the nation experiences, the reader should not feel sorry for this people. They have it coming, and more. And in the pattern of Israelite behavior expressed by the three verbs vv. 5–6, the modern reader should hear a warning for his or her own life: residing with, marrying, serving. Peaceful coexistence with the world leads to cohabitation and alliance with the world, which in turn leads to taking on the religious notions of the world. This is the rule; occasions when the influence is in the opposite direction are the exception.

Daniel I. Block, NAC

Israel's history played out according to the rule. Because God is faithful, he will act to save Israel. He raises up an unlikely deliverer in Othniel, though Othniel is presented as an ideal Israelite. He empowers him with his Holy Spirit and Othniel brings justice to Israel. None of us would ever think this was justice, however. Justice is being conquered and oppressed by Cushan-double-wickedness. Justice is paying a heavy tax to a foreign king.

Justice is getting what they deserved for their evil and rebellious ways. Again, however, we are not God. God says justice is rescuing Israel from their oppressor, so he raises up a deliverer.

One thing we must not forget is the judges were more than military leaders. They were certainly military leaders. God raised them up to throw off the yoke of oppression. The judges also had a prophetic role:

Jdgs 2:17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. ~~They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so.~~

Judges 2:17

This indicates a prophetic role for the judges. They spoke to Israel on behalf of the Lord. They certainly served as military leaders, but they were also prophets. Peter says of the prophets, “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”. Here we see that the Holy Spirit came upon Othniel, and while he rescued Israel from their oppressor, they did not listen to him. Othniel, the faithful Israelite, spoke to the people as he was empowered by the Spirit of God to do so. He brought deliverance to them and we see the result in verse 11:

Jdgs 3:11 So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

Judges 3:11

While Othniel was alive, he continually delivered Israel. That is, he was the reason they did not bow down to idols, even though the people did not listen to him. That is, their hearts were not changed by his words. Their desires were not changed. Because Othniel was filled with the Holy Spirit, they could not challenge him, but “Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.” When freed of his Spirit-empowered judgeship, what happens *immediately*? What happens in the very next verse?

Jdgs 3:12 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.~~

Judges 3:12

In his great mercy God raised up a deliverer for Israel and this deliverer not only delivered them from Cushan-double-wickedness, he sought to free them from their slavery to sin. The pattern we see throughout the book is that during a judge’s lifetime there is a measure of success in this, but then the judge dies. Each judge dies. The Holy Spirit comes upon them to both give them military victory and to empower them to speak truth to Israel prophetically, but each one of them dies. What Israel needs is a Deliverer who won’t die.

The Tribe of Judah

After the time of the judges Israel's first king was Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin. He was what the people wanted. For one thing he was tall, which seemed very kingly. He was not kingly, however. In 1 Samuel 10, immediately after Saul was anointed king, he was given a specific task, with the promise that the Spirit of God would be upon him and was given signs to demonstrate God was with him. Saul did not do what he was given to do. His very first act as king was disobedience.

David would later be anointed king of Israel. David is described as “a man after God's own heart”. David, however, was not a perfect man. He sinned and sinned greatly, both against the Lord and against Bathsheba. Still, God made a promise to David, further explaining how he would fulfill his promise to Abraham, a promise to bless all the nations of the earth. We read of this covenant in 2 Samuel 7.

^{2 Sam 7:12} When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

2 Samuel 7:12–15

Just as God said in the beginning of this book, Judah shall go up first. This was in fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49, that the scepter shall not depart from Judah. One day the tribe of Judah would have an everlasting kingdom. In fulfillment of God's covenant with David his son Solomon became king. Incredible wealth came to Israel, yet Solomon sinned greatly, marrying foreign women and serving their gods. His son became king after him but the kingdom was torn into two. Thus Solomon and his offspring committed iniquity and were disciplined for it.

Hundreds of years pass. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken into exile and never returned. The southern kingdom of Judah was later taken into exile, yet God restored them—but only partially. By the time we get to the first century Judah had been oppressed by the nations for hundreds of years and did not have a descendant of David seated on the throne.

Then a young woman who was engaged met an angel who told her she would have a son. She expressed surprise at this, wondering how such a thing could happen since she had never been with a man. She was assured the Holy Spirit would bring about her pregnancy miraculously. Her fiancé was a descendant of David, though though he no aspirations to be king. He knew he was not the cause of her pregnancy and tried to get out of the engagement but that same angel assured him of the miracle.

Neither Mary nor Joseph, despite both being descended from David, had any inclinations toward royalty or claiming power. They were poor, as evidenced by the meager sacrifice they offered at the temple for the Son who had been born. They lived in a rural area that was mocked by the rest of their people with a proverb: “Can anything good come from

Nazareth?”. Jesus grew up in this, learning the craft of Joseph. When he was about 30 years old, however, he began to preach and perform miracles.

What surprised many was how this backwoods hick of a Jew who had no formal training could know so much. How could he do such miracles? Where did his knowledge and understanding come from? While he began to draw large crowds, he never drew an army. He was the Deliverer—the True Messiah. He had come to rescue his people but in an unexpected way.

He told the people that simply being born a Jew did not impress God. Tracing their lineage back to Abraham did not cause God to accept them. He could say this because he knew Israel’s first judge could not trace *his* lineage back to Abraham. He knew that God desired faith above all else, for this is what *he himself* desired. The people began to turn against him for this.

The promise to David was one of his offspring would be placed on his throne and would build a house for him—a temple. Further, when his offspring committed iniquity God would “discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of men”. Jesus is that promised Offspring, which creates a problem, for God promised David when this particular offspring committed iniquity, he would use “the rod of men” to discipline him. Specifically, “with the stripes of the sons of men” he would do so. The problem is Jesus, the promised Offspring, did not commit iniquity. However, God remains true to his word, even when no one else will.

^{2 Cor 5:21} For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21

Though Jesus was holy and utterly without sin, God placed the sins of his people on him so that when Jesus died on the cross the sins of his people died there with him. God’s judgment of their sin was poured out on the cross. As the prophet said, by his *stripes* we are healed.

Application

Salvation comes from an unlikely Messiah, from one who was born in this world with little fanfare. Rather than announce his birth to kings and royalty, God chose to announce it to shepherds. Rather than a royal crib, he was placed in a manger—a feeding trough. His mother was poor. Her soon-to-be husband was a nobody. Like Othniel, he was not a native Israelite, for he said, “Before Abraham was, I am”. Rather, God *became* an Israelite, that he might do for his people what they would not and could not do.

During his very public ministry of preaching and performing miracles, the crowds would sometimes turn against him and he accumulated almost nothing for himself. Then, when facing the greatest enemy Israel’s Deliverer could face, he was killed. He was shamefully beaten and spit upon, nailed naked to a cross and died later that same day. What Israel needs, however, what the entire world needs is a Deliverer who lives forever.

Church, the good news is that while Jesus died, on the third day he walked out of his tomb. Through this he proved his words are true. He proved he has the power to save. He

demonstrated once for all that he is who he says he is and all who trust in him will be saved. By rising from the dead he conquered the greatest enemy we face: death.

Because he has conquered our greatest enemy, we are assured he can handle any other lesser enemy that comes against us. Through it all, come what may, whatever trials and difficulties we face, we have this assurance: our Deliver, our Unlikely Messiah has come and has done what he needed to do to rescue us. We can face tomorrow and whatever tomorrow brings because God raised up the Messiah from the tribe of Judah, the very one who goes before us into battle. As God said all those years ago, Judah shall go up first. We follow the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

This is why the election on Tuesday is not the most important election ever. The most important election happened before the foundation of the world when God determined to save his people. Yes, our nation is making an important choice. Barring something truly extraordinary happening, one of two people will be our next president. This has implications for tax policy and border policy and wars and rumors of wars.

What this nation needs, however, what your friends and loved ones and your coworkers and those random encounters we all have from time to time, what they need most of all is not your hot take on the election or your understanding of tax policy or your views on abortion or your perspective on either Ms. Harris or Mr. Trump. What this world needs is a Deliverer who can actually deliver us! This world needs a Faithful Man to deliver an unfaithful people, and we have him in Jesus Christ.

Whatever happens on Tuesday—or on Wednesday—Jesus is still Lord. He is still the Messiah. He is still the one we must point people to, for they need the very same Savior you and I need. Regardless of what happens, God is still God and Jesus still walked out of his tomb. Whether democracy in America begins to truly thrive, or it dies, or more likely, continues on in much the same way, our hope is not in an elected leader who will, eventually, die. Our hope is in the one who died, and then rose from the grave.

Church, let's live as though this is true. Let's get up and go to work on Wednesday morning, whether we know who our next president will be or not, let's go to work believing our confession. Let us live in light of our confession. Let us demonstrate the truth of our confession. Jesus is Lord. He is building his temple—the dwelling place of God. Let's live this truth and let's love our neighbors with the truth they need as desperately as we need it.