

Lectures on the Book of Judges

Judges 3 — Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar

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In Judges 3. we have the details of this. The first two chapters are general. The nations come before us that were left to prove Israel according to the word of Jehovah. The earliest deliverer is brought before us in verse 9: "When the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah, Jehovah raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them, even Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother." So again we are told that afterwards "the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of Jehovah: and Jehovah strengthened Eglon [not the children of Israel, but their enemy] the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of Jehovah. And he gathered unto him the children of Ammon and Amalek, and went and smote Israel, and possessed the city of palm trees. So the children of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. But when the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah, Jehovah raised them up a deliverer Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man left-handed." Then we have details of the killing of the leader of their enemies, the king of Moab. Then again, in the end of the chapter, we are told of "Shamgar the son of Anath," who delivered Israel from the Philistines. But there is one feature common to all these three deliverers which may be pointed out, and not, I think, without moral profit. There was in every one of them an apparent defect, and they were therefore men that no one but God would have put forward. One was a younger brother; another was a left-handed man; and the third slew the enemy with an ox-goad. Thus in each there was an element against the prospects of their success. There was awkwardness, seemingly, in the weapon employed, or in the left-handed man, or in the younger brother rather than in the eldest, the father's might and the beginning of his strength, as Jacob says. It was not the pride of the family, the first-born, but his junior, that went forth to victory. Not thus does man choose. This feature, however, belongs characteristically to the ways of God in a broken state of things. The instrument that He employs when His people are fallen is not according to the same pattern as when all things are orderly in His sight. In short, when the people of God depart from Him, He marks it, not by withholding a deliverer, but by the kind of deliverance given them. I am persuaded that there is a fitness in His choice of instruments, and that the same men that He employed, say, to found and form the church, are not of the class which suits His thoughts when all things are fallen into confusion. When the church was brought into

being, when the ecclesiastical air was clear and bright, then it was simply a question of God working by the Holy Spirit upon earth in answer to the glory of Christ in heaven; then He raised up witnesses in accordance with the glory of Christ and the reality of His victory as man over Satan, as well as of His love in caring for His body, the church. When on the contrary the Christian profession had quite failed as a witness to Him, there could not but be God's answer to the cries of distress that went up from His saints; but none the less has each instrument a marked weakness in some particular or other. So I cannot but believe it will be found, without exception, in this respect throughout the history of Christendom. Thus, if we look three or four hundred years back, we can judge with considerably more calmness than in forming an estimate of our own day; we are free at least from much which is apt to warp. We see that in those whom God then employed there was no deficiency in a certain sort of power. There was a great energy, with a palpable, large, and speedy result; and we, of all men, ought to be the last to forget whatever form or measure of blessing God has been pleased to shower on souls. Can we not, beloved brethren, afford to recognize it where and whenever it may have been? Ought we not to give ungrudgingly the honour that is due to the work of the Spirit of God by anybody? The more you are blessed, the more free and generous should you be towards others; the more simply and fully you have received the truth, the larger should your heart be in rejoicing at the activities of divine grace. You are called on, by the very richness of God's grace, and by the comfort and certainty of the truth He has given your souls, to acknowledge whatever has been of God either in the past or in the present to His praise. Looking back then, I say, according to the love and humility that can value whatever is from above, we can see no doubt the power that shook nations and gave them an open Bible in such a work as Luther's, or even in Calvin's; yea, in others inferior to these. But are we therefore to consecrate everything they said or did? Or are we to shut our eyes to that which manifestly showed the strange shape of the earthen vessel? Certainly not. Far from complaining of such irregularities, I consider that they were in keeping with the state of things in God's sight, just as we see in Israel's case before us; just as the power of the Spirit which in general lifted above the manifestations of nature — such as we see, for instance, in a Paul, or even in a Peter, or in a John (where it is hard to say what one could blame) — suited the new-born church when the Holy Ghost was just given. It is not meant that there was nothing to judge, and that God did not see it; but still it would be hard for us to see it, judging fairly. Take the blessed apostles. It is in no way meant that they never slipped. Far from it; we know that they did; but what were slips of such as the apostles compared with the comparatively unjudged flesh of a Luther or a Calvin? In such as

these, do we not come down to the left-handed men? or such as won victories with an ox-goad? That is, we see, in a day of utter weakness and declension, rather awkward witnesses, employed by God no doubt to accomplish His purpose, but with the significant mark that they were to the praise of His grace much more than to their own honour.