

This past Friday... I read a story of 30-year-old friends who had a reunion and were discussing where they should go for dinner. Somebody suggested that they meet at the Glowing Embers Restaurant because the waiters and waitresses there are young and beautiful. They all agreed.

Fifteen years later... at 45 years of age... they met for another reunion and discussed again where they should have dinner. Somebody suggested the Glowing Embers... because the food and desserts there are very good. They all agreed.

Another 15 years later... at 60 years of age... they met again and found themselves discussing where to meet. ... Somebody suggested the Glowing Embers because you can eat there in peace and quiet and the restaurant is smoke free. They all agreed.

Another fifteen years later... at the age of 75... the group discussed again where they should meet. Somebody suggested that they should meet at the Glowing Embers because the restaurant is physically accessible and they even have an elevator. They all agreed.

Finally... 15 years later at the age of 90... the same group of friends discussed one more time where they should meet for dinner. Somebody suggested that they should meet at the Glowing Embers because they had never been there before. And they all agreed.

When I first read that story... I laughed. But do you want to know something...? The truth is... that the older I get... the less funny forgetfulness becomes. ... Many of us have watched our loved ones suffer the indignity of severe memory loss in their later years. ... Because my

mother died from Alzheimer's disease just before we moved to Central Oregon... my daughters keep a very watchful eye on me. They frequently ask me if my food tastes like metal... because they were told that is one of the first signs. ... While none of my family members are paranoid about it... I can tell that there is some fear in their watchfulness.

But LISTEN... It really doesn't matter... how old you are... and if Alzheimer's... or any other form of dementia... runs in your family... each and every one of us should be very concerned about our becoming forgetful. There is a far greater danger with forgetfulness than Alzheimer's. In fact... this is the first major point from our passage of Scripture this morning... and we will talk about avoiding it.

Judges 3:7-11

Compromise — a permissive lifestyle — is always the danger that confronts God's people. ... The bright lights and pleasures of this world — money... houses... land... possessions... recognition... honor... fame... position... and power — all these things are attractive to the human eye and flesh. ... And some degree of all these things... is either necessary... or enjoyable throughout life. ... But focusing upon these things... to the extent that we forget God is sin.

As a believer... God is to be our primary focus in life. ... Please evaluate... whether or not you think my next statement is true or not. When we make God our primary focus... all the necessities of life are provided for us. God sees that no need ever goes unmet in any true believer's life. (Now if you can testify to the truth of that... would you simply say "Amen"?)

Whenever we forget this truth... we begin to focus on the wrong things... all the bright lights and pleasures of this world. ... And this is exactly what Israel did... as it is recorded for us over and over again... in the Book of Judges.

The book of Judges includes the stories of 12 judges... who God raised up to deliver Israel from successive crises... and to “judge” Israel. ... Their primary function was military in nature. ... Most judges failed to point people convincingly to the Lord. ... Indeed... in some cases the judges did not even point themselves to the Lord... Several of them were not at all exemplary (e.g., Gideon, Jephthah, Samson).

The recurring pattern unfolds in a downward spiral. ... The first judge... Othniel... who is presented in the verses we just read... was raised up by God... and it is specifically mentioned that he was empowered by God’s Spirit. We are not given much information about Othniel... but we are told that he relied on... and accomplished his great work of deliverance... by God’s Spirit. ... The next several judges become less and less exemplary. The next-to-last major judge... Jephthah... made a foolish vow and offered his own daughter as a “sacrifice” ... and the last judge... Samson... was anything but a paragon of virtue. His life was dominated by his fleshly lusts. ... And our passage today will present two other judges... along with Othniel... neither of which are models for godly living.

But as we turn our attention... now... back to Othniel... I would like to point out that his story has all of the elements that we will see repeated over and over again in all the accounts of the judges. ... It is a kind of template for the entire book. ... Essentially... the pattern that repeats itself in Judges is

this... 1) The children of Israel choose sin... 2) the sin results in enemies enslaving Israel in some sort of unbearable bondage... 3) the bondage results in a pitiful cry to God for mercy... 4) God is moved to mercy and He sends a deliverer... 5) the deliverer throws off the enemy and breaks the bondage that has held them in such misery... 6) there's a period of peace that results... 7) the time of peace eventually leads Israel to complacency about the truths of God... 8) and the complacency leads to sin - and the whole process starts over again. There you have it. It is the outline of the entire book... the same sequence with different names. ... And those are the elements that we see in Othniel's story.

It happened in Israel's history... and it continues to happen repeatedly in our own generation. ... Do I dare even suggest... that this might also be template of our own spiritual pilgrimage? ... Perhaps it is a personal pattern that we ourselves are unfortunately too well-acquainted... repeatedly giving in to a particular sin in our life. We become complacent about Spiritual truth... we sin... we become miserable... we cry out to God... God rescues us... we are content for a while... but eventually we become complacent again... and the cycle continues.

But with this templet from Othniel... we might be able to find some help for breaking the cycle of sin in our own life. Take another look with me at verse 7.

Judges 3:7

Please notice the phrase “evil in the sight of the Lord.” ... In this Post-modern world that we live in... it is widely thought that there is no such thing. ... Evil is whatever you make it to be. There is no standard... there is only evil in one’s own sight... and that is only what you want it to be.

But if we want to break the cycle of continually falling to a sin... we must first recognize that there is such a thing as “evil in the sight of the Lord”... and we must stop trying to replace it with our own sense of what evil is.

There can be quite a difference between what we call evil and what God calls evil. ... And we are not all that objective. ... When we go to each other to ask for definitions of what is evil or what is good... we tend to accommodate ourselves. ... Let me give an example.

We would all probably agree that adultery is “evil in the eyes of the Lord.” But what happens when a brother in Christ confronts such an evil in a church member’s life...? Is it too far-fetched to imagine that the conversation could go something like this...? ... *"You are in adultery." ... "Well, you don't seem to understand that it is a loving, caring relationship. It is not that big of a deal anymore... So many people engage in extra-marital relationships... Ours is very loving and caring... and makes us better people..."*

Those who are in the business world might say... *"I'm not really stealing... The company owes it to me... I am just getting it a little ahead of time..."* ... *It is not a sin in God's eyes for me to cheat on my income taxes... because so much government spending is used for unrighteous causes... like abortion..."* ... With regard to so much evil in the sight of the Lord... we

might say things like... "*They know we are doing it*" ... "*No one seems to be upset*" ... "*This is just the way things are in our society.*"

Take an honest look. Do you ever end up doing evil in God's sight... because it was not in evil your sight...? You justified it... by considering ONLY what is evil in your sight is all that matters...? (LISTEN) We must always define truth from God's perspective... if we are ever going to break the cycle... and genuinely follow the Lord. ... We cannot continue to buy into the post-modern philosophy of this world. ... It will destroy us... and it will destroy our relationship with God. ... By the way... I hope that you will notice that by the time we are finished with this book... the so-called "Post-modern" society that we live in today is not really post-modern... at all! Everyone doing what is right in their own eyes... everyone making up their own reality and truth... was the order of the day... throughout this ancient period of the Judges in Israel's history.

So then... once a choice has been made to follow one's own sense of what is evil... you can see... God is forgotten. Verse 7 says that the Israelites #1) did what was evil by the definite standard that God DOES have... #2) they forgot God... and #3) they worshipped disgusting false gods. ... It was a progression. ... If you and I can correct ourselves in step one or step two... we will never degrade ourselves so badly... as what happens at step three. We have to accept God's standards... and we must not forget God.

Once we chose sin... because it isn't evil in our own eyes... God seems more and more distant. ... Next we find ourselves less interested in hearing His name mentioned. ... We less frequently want to go places where God will be honored. ... Soon we find ourselves distancing ourselves from the

presence of God... forgetting Him... because the wickedness that we've chosen has become more important to us.

Last week... Tyler and I met with a man who dropped by the church and asked if he could talk with the pastor. ... The man... a stranger... absolutely wrecked of alcohol. ... But that was the only indication I had... other than his confession... that he had a problem with drinking. ... He seemed sharp in his thinking... very quick with thoughtful answers to my questions... no slurred speech... his eyes were not blood-shot... and he had no staggering when he walked. ... But BOY! His skin sure permeated the smell of strong liquor. He told me that he was a believer but that he just could not overcome his drinking problem. At one point he asked me if I thought God would help him... because he had fallen off the bandwagon so many times.

I told him about this book that I am preaching through – Judges... and how the Israelites kept going through this awful sin pattern with God... But God responded to them in His mercy every time. ... Then I challenged him with the principle we find in Judges 3:7. ... *“If you are serious about breaking this pattern... then you have to stop forgetting God.”*

Some of you... who are listening to me today... need this same challenge. Break the pattern of your continual falling into sin – stop forgetting God.

Now here is a practical way to do that. All day long... we have thousands upon thousands of private dialogues going on inside our heads. We make judgments... assessments... and decisions... along with a lot of other conscious thoughts. Now... this will take a lot of time... in fact it will be a life-long commitment. ... Hour-by-hour... minute-by-minute... make every

internal dialogue inside your brain... a conversation with the Lord. Do what Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:5 says that he does... take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. ... Imagine every one of your private thoughts – not so private... but as a dialogue with Jesus Himself. Converse with Christ all day... even when you are talking with someone else – evaluate what they are saying – together with Christ. Evaluate what you will say next... or how you will respond – together with Christ.

Many of our thoughts are temptations... many of them are wrong because they are bitter... or they are based in pride... or they are lustful. Bring Christ into those conversations... and see what happens to them. ... And think through any decision you are making as if Jesus was thinking it through with you.

Living your life like this will take a lot of time and effort. Some days you might go for hours... and then suddenly realize you have forgotten God... so you start including Him in your internal dialogues... and you might be consistent with it for a few minutes... or maybe longer. ... After a while you realize that your effort has ceased... so you come back and start including Him again. ... But keeping vigil about this... brings the consistency.

Do you want to break the cycle of sin in your life...? Do not forget the Lord. Make an active effort.

Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

I like the template that Othniel gives us. It provides us with great insight for breaking the pattern of repeated sin in our life.

Chapter three here... provides us with another Judge. Let's look and learn from him... now.

Judges 3:12-30

Now what are going to do with this section of Scripture?

Ever since Rick found out that I would be preaching through the Book of Judges... he has been chiding me about several section that both he and I know are coming up in this book. ... He tells me that he can't wait to see how I will handle passages like this one... and others... like Jephthah who made a foolish vow to God and had to sacrifice his own daughter. (We will get to that narrative... in due time.) ... But passages like these can cause anxiety and questioning.'

Here we are in one of those apparently R-rated sections of the Old Testament and slightly embarrassed by it. ... And of course some folks have a way of dealing with an embarrassing Old Testament. Their solution is that such Old Testament narratives don't mean what they say. For example, Ehud's dagger is the 'sword of the Spirit' (a la Eph. 6), the word of God that is 'sharper than any two-edged sword' (a la Heb. 4). But I doubt if King Eglon got the point that way – in fact he probably wished Ehud's dagger had been 'only' the word of God! ... Or... if we don't allegorize the text... we try to moralize it..., especially by looking for what lessons it may teach us. Result? *Ehud seems to be vengeful and hateful – don't be like him.*

However... this is not some light matter. As Believers... most of us are quite emphatic that *all* Scripture is God-breathed and profitable (2 Tim. 3:16). ... We get very upset if anyone even insinuates that the Bible is not all true... or if someone denies the authority of part of the Bible.

I... for one... believe the Bible is our authority... the whole Bible. ...But I have to admit... that I am tempted sometimes to ignore those sticky parts of the Old Testament... that embarrass our enlightened sensibilities. Oh... if I could only preach Jesus in the Gospel of Mark... or the insights that the Holy Spirit gave to Paul in Galatians... (that one didn't seem to have any rough spots)... but Ehad... here in Judges? ... This guy that God rose up to be His instrument used lies and deception to accomplish the work of the Lord. ... What can we do with this story about him? ... I was tempted to title today's message: "When Lefty Stabbed Hefty."

Let me start by being clear about the theme of this story. ... We find that in verse 15:

Judges 3:15

There it is... like a big E on the optometrist's eye chart. How sad if you cannot read first line... "E!" ... The first line here... is that this is a story about the way God saves his people in their afflictions... (which... by the way... were well-deserved afflictions)... And it says that Yahweh is responsible for this lefty Ehad – 'Yahweh raised up for them a deliverer.'

Did you hear that? ...It doesn't read a "murderer"... or an "assassin"... or a "liar"... or a "deceiver" – but a *deliverer*. ... This is a story of *salvation*! The focus of the story is not '*Why does God get himself all mixed up with a*

character like Ehud?' but 'See how God delights to save his people in their afflictions!' ... I think that God would like very little more than to boom this message into our hearts and minds from this passage - 'See how I delight to save you in all your troubles!'

Aren't some of you who listen to this... in such circumstances at the moment... so that this is precisely the good news you need to hear? That in your troubles – whether a result of your sins or not – you have a compassionate God who actually hears your cries for help and comes to save you in your distress.

And that is the glory of this passage... it tells us that Yahweh deals with the dirty... mixed-up affairs of life... in which His people find themselves. Here we are – some in family situations we have messed up... some in emotional trauma... some in grief and sorrow... or in the clutches of temptation.

The glory of this text is that it tells us that Yahweh is not a white-gloved... standoffish God out somewhere in the remote left field of the universe... Who hesitates to get His strong right arm dirty... in the yuck of our lives. The God of the Bible does not hold back in the wild blue yonder somewhere waiting for you to pour Clorox... and spray Lysol... over the affairs of your life before He will touch it. ... Whether you can comfortably put it together or not... He is the God who delights to deliver His people... even in their messes. ... He is the God who allows weeping to endure for a night but sees that joy comes in the morning.

Psalm 30:5 (ESV)

*For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*

But in all of our joy that we derive from this passage... we need also to observe the tragedy of the story. There is also something sad... that we cannot miss. ... The story is sad in the long run... since 'the sons of Israel again did evil in the eyes of Yahweh when Ehud had died.' (Like I indicated earlier... this becomes the pattern of Judges.)

Ehud... and every one of the Judges in this book... sorry to say... are not totally adequate saviors. ... Yahweh does bring a certain kind of salvation and help through Ehud... and the others... however... nothing Ehud or any other Judge did... could change the hearts of Israel. ... They could only exert some beneficial influence on them... while they lived... They could not release Israel from their bondage to sin... or rip the idols out of their hearts.

Their left-handed savior could not break them free from their greater bondage to sin. Nor would he have been able to do so for you and I.

But there is One with nail-scarred hands Who can and does. ... The only tragedy in our story... will be if... having this Savior... we do not 'cry to Him for help,' for Yahweh has raised up for us a Savior, Jesus, who shall save *his people* from their sins. Recognize what you have committed as sin in His eyes... confess it as sin... agree with Him that it is wrong... ask Him to forgive it... and bring Him into all of your internal dialogues... do not forget the Lord.

Now we have one more judge to close this chapter. He gets only one short verse.

Judges 3:31

The writer slips Shamgar in between Ehud and Deborah in the briefest sort of way. But 'he too saved Israel.' ... Yet his name is hardly a household word among Bible-thumpers. (Well, who would know about you if your life were reduced to one sentence?) ... Shamgar gets passed over regularly and seems doomed to oblivion. ... After all... who has ever heard of a hospital that was named... Saint Shamgar...? (I'd better be careful... because I never thought that I would hear of a hospital named "St. Charles.")

Shamgar has left us with a lot of unanswered questions. Was he an Israelite or not? ... Many Bible scholars tell us that his name seems to be non-Israelite... some say Hurrian. And then... does 'son of Anath' indicate (as it very well might) that Shamgar was a worshipper of the Canaanite goddess Anath...? No proper Jew would ever be named with the designation of Canaanite god. ... There seems to be strong evidence that this deliverer for the Jews was not an Israelite... but that he was a heathen who God raised up to serve His Own purposes.

We can be a bit more sure of his ox-goad. ... Like its later equivalents... such an instrument might be eight feet long... and up to six inches in circumference at the larger end. ... The smaller end was armed with a sharp point for driving the oxen... the other end with a small spade or iron paddle for cleaning out the plow. ... That would make quite a bayonet.

God's instruments of deliverance seem to have an interesting if odd collection of tools. ... Shamgar's ox-goad joins Ehud's dagger... Jael's hammer... which we will see in the next account... Gideon's horns and torches... the woman's millstone... and Samson's jawbone from a donkey.

God's tools... His resources for deliverance have plenty of color... diversity... and interest.

However... the literal bottom line of incident to end chapter 3... is the bottom line: 'He too saved Israel.' ... So what if Shamgar was not an Israelite? ... And so what... if we never know anything about him? ... Do we have enough to see here the very glory of Israel's God?

If Yahweh be the maker of heaven and earth... if He has all resources in His hand... then He most certainly can deliver His people... in the most unexpected... the most unorthodox (by our standard) means. He can use to rescue you and I... disciples of Jesus Christ... or pagans? ... That is... if Yahweh raised up a heathen like Shamgar as a savior for Israel (which I believe He did.)

It is particularly the glory of God to save by instruments unknown or scarcely known to us. As the former blind man exclaimed: '*Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes*' (John 9:30). We don't know anything about Shamgar and yet he saved God's people. There is something marvelous about a God like that, something that compels us to bow down before the One who uses Shamgars and ox-goads.

Do you need to come to Him today...? Are you ready to break a cycle of sin in your life...?