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## Apostasy and Servitude

**Lesson Aim:** A study of the period of Judges, observing that a turning from God brings national calamity; a returning to God brings national blessing.

**L7. Text:** Judges 3:5-15. **Date:** May 1959.

**Topic:** Sin: Deliverance from; Apostasy: Of Israel; Othniel.

Anarchy reigned in Canaan following the death of Joshua. *“In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes,”* Judges 21:25. For the first time in history Israel was without a leader. Joshua had died and the government of the nation had broken into a government of individual tribes which lived more-or-less independently of each other. With the passing years the people turned from their former training. They forgot the Law of God, the instruction of Moses, and the final address of Joshua, all of which advised humble service to their Lord. As a result of their backslidings they suffered oppression by enemy nations about them. During these times of distress God raised up men and a woman, especially endowed with His spirit to deliver the people. These we call the “Judges.”

The basic truth of this lesson (and all the book of *Judges*) is this: Turning from God brings national calamity, while returning to God brings national blessing. This is an unquestioned truth when applied to individuals and to nations. It will be well for us to look at our own nation in view of this fact. We can expect the blessings of God upon us only as we keep His will. Even our love for our nation and loyalty to her does not keep us from admitting the truth that if we turn from God He will surely judge us for it. Let us pray for revival in our own nation.

### EXPOSITION

I. Apostasy Brings Judgment, 3:5-8.

1. Apostasy will come by intimate association with sinners, verses 5-6. At one point Joshua urged Israel to drive out the other inhabitants from the land. His reason was that if the pagans remained in the land they would corrupt the Israelites, Joshua 23. That which he had forewarned has now come to pass. Israel continued to dwell among the heathen and even contracted marriages with them. The inevitable result was the corruption of Israel. It is not possible to mix the pure and the corrupt and make everything pure. A few drops of poison in a glass of pure water will poison the water, not purify the poison. It is this truth which causes Paul to admonish, *“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers,”* II Corinthians 6:14. It is never wise for a believer and an unbeliever to join in intimate contacts of any sort. The close association with evil will gradually make it seem less serious and soon one will be tempted to practice it himself., *“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,”* II Corinthians 6:17.

2. Apostasy comes through a compromise in religion, verse 6. How pitiful to read, *“And they served other gods.”* The inevitable result of their intermarriage was a compromise in religion to recognize the idol gods of Canaan as equals with Jehovah, Deuteronomy 7:3-4. Here is a revelation of the baseness of human nature. They had seen repeated manifestations of the power of Jehovah, their God. Yet, they began to claim Baal as His equal and thus worthy of equal reverence. We may not do well to condemn them, however, until we search our own hearts to see how loyal we are to the truth. The person who allows business or pleasure to take time, money, and talents which are rightfully due God’s work is placing an idol beside Jehovah as surely as did the Israelites. This is direct disobedience to the first commandment, Exodus, 20:3. The present day Christian should be fully conscious of the truth of God and not neglect it nor reject it for any price.

3. Apostasy is sure to result in evil conduct, verse 7. Apostasy resulted in Israel’s forgetting their God. They became so entranced with their newfound gods they could talk of nothing else. It was not now a matter of other gods being beside Jehovah—they were now accepted and He was rejected and forgotten. To forget God is a phrase used often in the Old Testament to denote the faithlessness and ingratitude of the Israelites when they abandoned His worship for that of false gods. To what did they turn? The worship of Baalim was a cult of nature worship which was often associated with grossest immoral rites. The worship of the groves (Ashtaroth) was the worship of a god whose form was expressed in a wooden post or stump or a tree in the place of worship. God forbid that His people would ever be so degraded as to leave the worship of His glorious

majesty for such base paganism. One commentator suggests, “In complaisance of their new relations, they talked of nothing but Baalim and the groves, so that by degrees they lost the remembrance of the true God, and forgot that there was such a Being, and what obligations they lay under to him . . . because He is out of sight, He is out of mind; and here begins all the wickedness that is in the world.”—Henry.

4. Apostasy invites the judgment of a righteous God, verse 8. God brings judgment on the sinful nation through Chushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. There is reason to believe that the name of the king actually is “Chushan, the wicked.” Is it difficult to believe that God would use a heathen king to punish the sins of His people? We will find this recurring again and again throughout *Judges*. This servitude, to which they were reduced, probably means only that they were obligated to pay a heavy tribute to the king, though occasionally they are subjected to brutal treatment by their conquerors. This tribute was enough to drain the reserves of the country and reduce the people to poverty. All this has come about as God’s judgment on sin. Political servitude, social oppression, and physical sufferings are all used to show God cannot tolerate sin among His people. The truth is still applicable today. The nation that sins against God will still be turned into hell with the wicked, Psalm 9:17. Let all nations take warning. God’s judgment upon sin does not always wait until eternity. It is often shown so that men may repent and serve Him acceptably.

## II. Repentance Brings Restoration, 3:9-11.

1. True repentance is revealed by prayer to God, verse 9. The depth of their oppression opened the eyes of Israel that they had forgotten Jehovah. They knew in their hearts that this was the cause of the oppression and that it would be useless to pray to the idol they had worshipped. The suffering had created a sense of guilt. The nature of prayers may be seen from *Judges* 10:10. Thus with penitent confessions and fervent prayers, they laid their case before God. It is to be seriously questioned if repentance is real unless it is accompanied by a seeking after God. In fact, the very word translated “repent” in the Old Testament means “to turn.” Repentance becomes a turning from sin to Jehovah. In this case, it was a turning from the idols and their evils to the true God again. The advantage of godly sorrow and its attendant repentance is revealed by Paul in *II Corinthians* 7:8-10. It was a godly sorrow that they had forsaken Jehovah and thus brought the calamity upon themselves that motivated Israel to prayer. The place of prayer in the experience of the person who lives in communion with God can hardly be

overemphasized. The devout Christian soon learns to pray about everything, Philippians 4:6-7.

2. Repentance brings a deliverer from God, verse 9. Upon seeing the attitude of the people as their hearts turned back to Him and hearing the burden of their fervent prayers, God stirred up (in the sense of “excited, prompted”) Othniel to become the deliverer of Israel. Othniel is here called a “savior” in some versions of the Scriptures, but he is a savior only in that he saves (delivers) Israel from her oppressors. In Judges 1:13 we are informed that Othniel is the younger brother of Caleb. Likely he, with many others, had been faithful to Jehovah all the while and now feels constrained to deliver the people and so turn their hearts to God again. Jewish scholars consider that Othniel was now about fifty-three years of age. Othniel was already an experienced soldier (perhaps even an officer in the army) and God uses his ability to deliver Israel, Joshua 15:16. The details are not given of the battle—only of its result, *“the Lord delivered Chushan-rishathaim into his hand; and his hand prevailed.”* Thank God for those who are willing to devote their talents and training to the accomplishments of Divine purposes.

3. Repentance renews the work of God’s Spirit, verse 10. The idea that the “Spirit of the Lord” comes upon a man is common in the Old Testament. It signifies a sudden and powerful supernatural influence from God which took possession of the individual and endowed him with gifts transcending the ordinary limits of human power. It manifests itself in the valor of the judge, the wisdom of the ruler, the genius of an artist (Exodus 36:1), the outpouring of a poet (II Samuel 23:2) and the ecstasy of a prophet (I Samuel 10:10). In this instance it means Othniel was endowed with a wisdom, fortitude and valour which qualified him to the work to which he was called. Upon the moving of the Spirit, Othniel did more than just fight a battle against Mesopotamians. He also “judged” Israel. This probably means that he set right the wrongs which existed in the nation. He fulfilled the duties of a spiritual and moral guide besides acting as the national leader in time of war. As a judge, Othniel was the chief magistrate who repressed idolatry, administered justice, revived religion, and led the army against the enemy. Such a man is invaluable to his generation.

The principle which here is working in Israel is applicable today. The church which is cold and listless in evangelism and missions simply needs a new experience with the Spirit of God. When the Spirit is allowed control there comes a great revival and empowering of witness, Acts 2. Pray that it shall continually be so in your own congregation and especially in your heart.

4. Repentance brings victory and rest, verses 10-11. As a result of the great work of Othniel, the land had rest for forty years. There was a period of a whole generation when peace prevailed; they were exempt from tribute; and the state was tranquil and flourishing. According to Garstang, this forty-year period will date from 1358 to 1318 B.C. The influence of the judge was sufficient to keep those who knew him in humble dependence upon God. The next generation arose, however, and there is a different story to tell of them.

Many could testify from personal experience that there is an abiding peace in the heart of him who is right with God. It is a peace which abides in fullness, Isaiah 26:3, which is indescribable, I Peter 1:8; it is based upon faith, John 14:1; it is the personal gift of Jesus to His own, John 14:27. The demands it makes are worth obeying for the sake of having perfect fellowship with our wonderful Lord.

### III. Apostasy Renews Judgment, 3:12-15.

1. Evil conduct is always condemned, verse 12. Othniel died and soon his work was forgotten in their zeal to sin. Therefore, the Lord strengthened the hand of Eglon the king of Moab and he overcame Israel. Eglon appears as a man's name only in this chapter, but is the name of a place in Joshua 10:3, 5, 23, 37, etc. Moab is the territory east of the Dead Sea extending eastward to the desert, southwest to Edom and north to the River Arnon. The fact that "*the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel,*" is evidence that it was not Eglon's military prowess but Israel's sinfulness that led God to raise him up over her. The cause of the trouble was "*they had done evil in the sight of the Lord.*" In order to punish sin and to call the people back to repentance and obedience, God raises up an enemy to subdue her. Thus the work of providence is attributed directly to God and is intended to fulfill Divine purposes. It matters not that only forty years before the people had been delivered from an enemy. Now they were guilty of sin again and must be called back to God. God does not overlook sin in any people. Judgment will come again and again as men persist in living in rebellion to the will of God.

2. God uses the ungodly to accomplish His will, verses 12-13. Eglon was likely an idolator. Certainly the confederates with whom he joined in that attack on Israel were idolators. The Ammonites were neighbors and close kinsmen of the Moabites (Genesis 19:36.) and Israel had much trouble with them (see II Chronicles 22:1). The Amalekites were a Bedouin people who roamed the Sinaitic peninsula. They were bitter enemies of Israel

because they attacked Israel when she left Egypt (Deuteronomy 25:17). They appear again in I Samuel 15 and I Chronicles 4:43. Haman (who almost got the Jews killed in the book of Esther) was an Agagite, traditionally a descendant of the Amalekites. These idolatrous, wicked men gathered in an unholy alliance to fight against Israel. How surprised they would have been to know that the God of Israel was overseeing it all and using them to punish the sins of His own.

3. Former revival does not excuse present faults, verse 14. The armies met and Israel was defeated. The enemy possessed “*the city of palm trees*” (i.e. Jericho) and put the nation under tribute again. For eighteen years they served the Moabites. How often their minds must have turned to the stories of their fathers concerning Othniel and the great deliverance under him. How earnestly they must have longed for those “good old days.” Yet, former blessings do not suffice for the present. Nor does former revival excuse the sins of the present. Living for God is an everyday affair. Yesterday’s service does not atone for today’s neglect. To be a Spirit-filled consecrated disciple is an every day business.

4. Judgment ends when love for sin ends, verse 15. Finally the burdens became too great, Israel had more than she could bear. She ceased to sigh for herself and began to cry unto the Lord. The lesson had been learned by this generation. They were willing to forsake sin and serve the Lord. Bishop Hall suggests, “The very purpose of affliction is to make us importunate . . . God sees it best for the penitent to dwell for the time under their sorrows; He sees us sinking all the while, He lets us alone till we be at the bottom; and when once we can say, ‘Out of the depths have I cried unto thee,’ instantly follows, ‘The Lord heard me.’” Our prayers cannot but be effective when our hearts are purged of sinful desires and we look solely to the Lord. “*Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon,*” Isaiah 55:7.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the basic lesson of the book of Judges?
2. Describe the government of Israel during the period of the Judges.
3. What led Israel into apostasy?
4. How did God punish Israel’s apostasy?
5. Describe Israel’s response to her servitude.
6. What was the result of the work of Othniel?
7. Who are the Moabites, Ammonites, and Amalekites?

8. How can we say God uses the ungodly to perform His will?