

The Slope Gets Slippery
(Judges 3:7-31 29 Sep 2024)



What do Donald Trump, the Uniting Church and Samson have in common?

There may be many links – but one answer is that they all ended up heading a people years after those same people had very good leaders.

Donald was President of the United States – where once men like Washington and Lincoln were President.

The Uniting Church was an amalgamation of what was once very good churches – the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches.

Yet I can assure you that the John's – Knox, Wesley and Edwards – would never recognise this strange descendant of the churches they helped shape – the Uniting Church.

And Samson – well he was a judge over Israel – following only a few generations after men like Moses and Joshua.

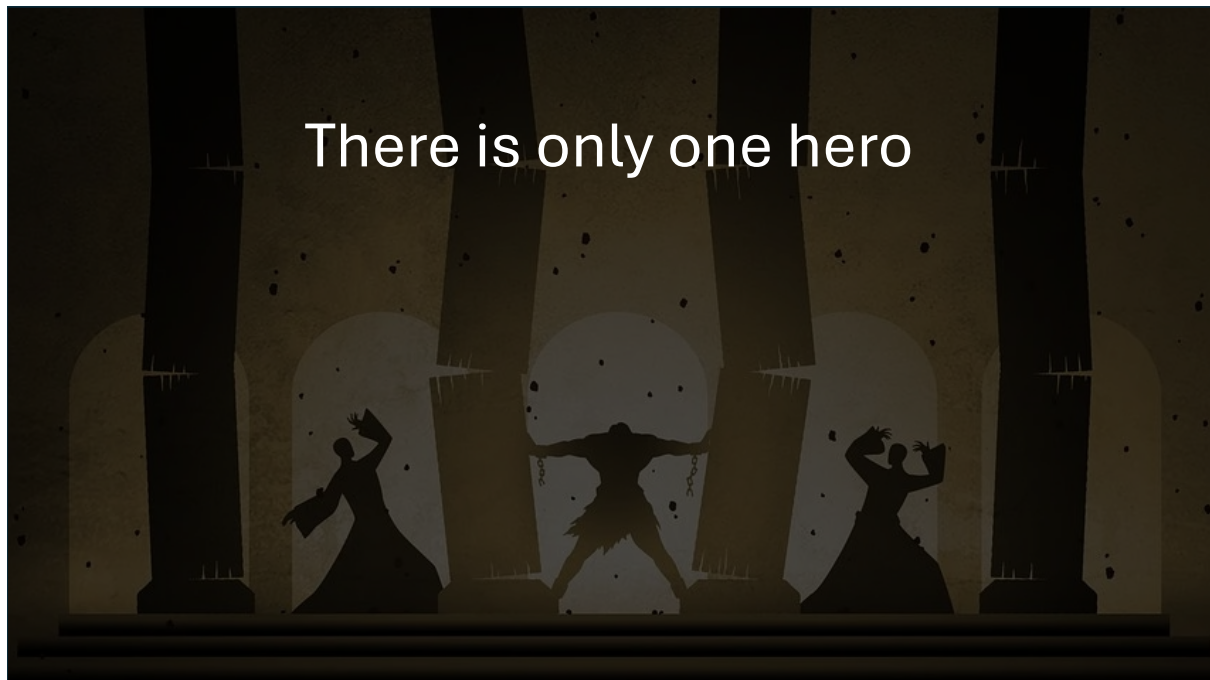
Having a good leader is no guarantee that the next leader will be good – let alone the generations after.

And then we often find ourselves longing for the good ol' times.

Where is the next Lincoln or Edwards or Moses?

We think – if we just get a better leader – if we find that one hero – things will be OK.

But, our passage tonight in the book of Judges is clear:



There is only one hero.

And it is not Moses or Lincoln or Spurgeon.

Every human hero – even great ones are flawed.

The best of leaders – Lincoln, Edwards, Moses – did much good – but they could never end evil and corruption.

Or as Shakespeare put it:

The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones.

Even small flaws – the compromises, the complacency – soon washes away a lifetime of good.

And then evil finds a way to rise.

History tells us that good leaders are often followed by less good and ultimately poor leaders.

And it happens very quickly.

From Joshua to Samson was just over 300 years.

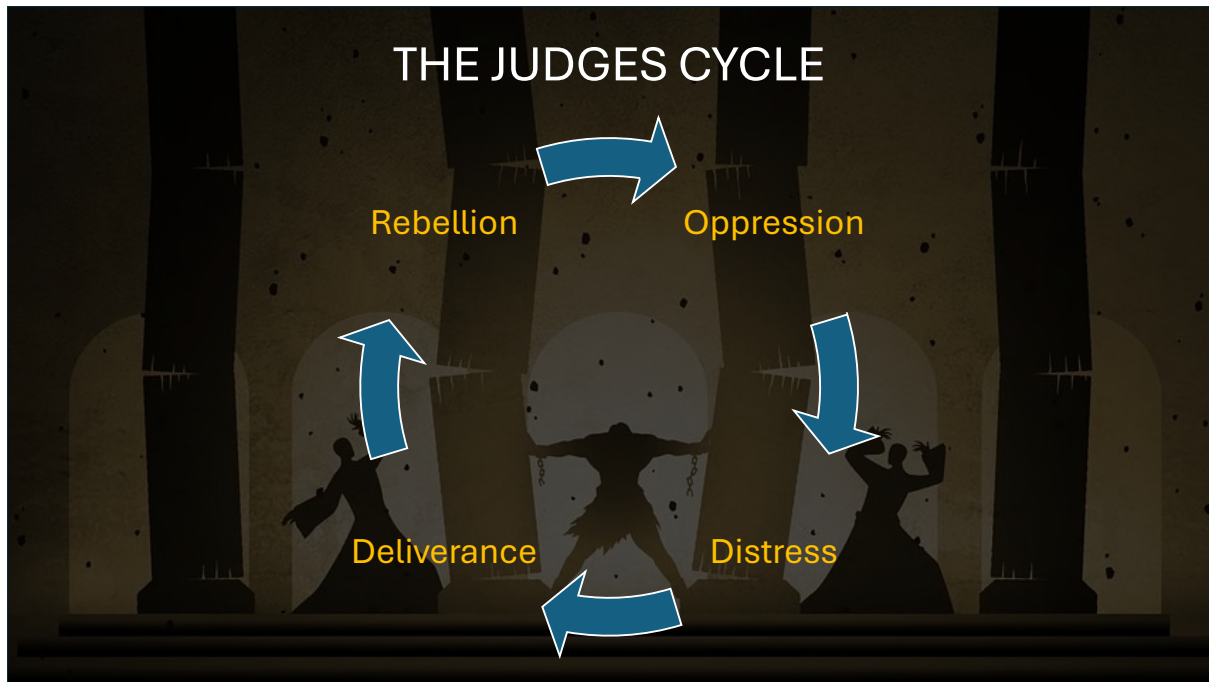
In Romans 1:18 Paul gives the general principle:

For God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

How do you go from godly to depraved? You suppress truth. A little complacency. A touch of the corrupt and the slippery slope gets very slippery very quickly.

Nations, churches, organisations individuals who allow compromise and suppress the truth inevitably spiral down and end up in destruction and anarchy – and remarkably quickly.

Judges is the book where this cycle of decay is most clearly seen.



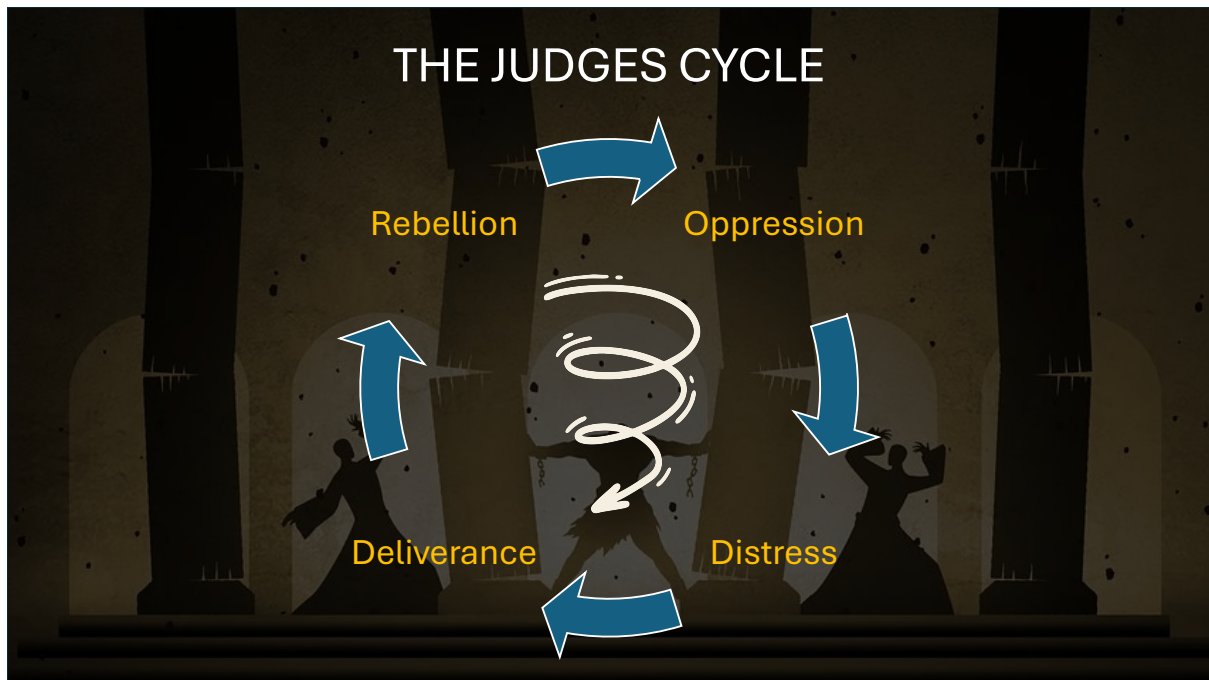
Last week Han told us that chapter 2 of Judges outlines the cycle.

- First – there is **rebellion**. This is where the people forsake God and worship idols.
- Then – there is **oppression**. This is where God – in His just wrath – chastises and disciplines His people by means of foreign oppressors who oppress His people.
- Then – there is **distress**. This is where God's people groan under the weight of enemy oppression.
- Then – there is **deliverance**. This is where God – in His grace – raises a judge to deliver His people.
- And then – we're back to **rebellion** again. This is what we saw in chapter 2 verse 19 – where – after the death of the judge – the people went back to their evil ways.

But Han also pointed out something else. Verse 19 of chapter 2 says:

“Whenever the judge died, the Israelites would act **even more corruptly than their ancestors ...**”

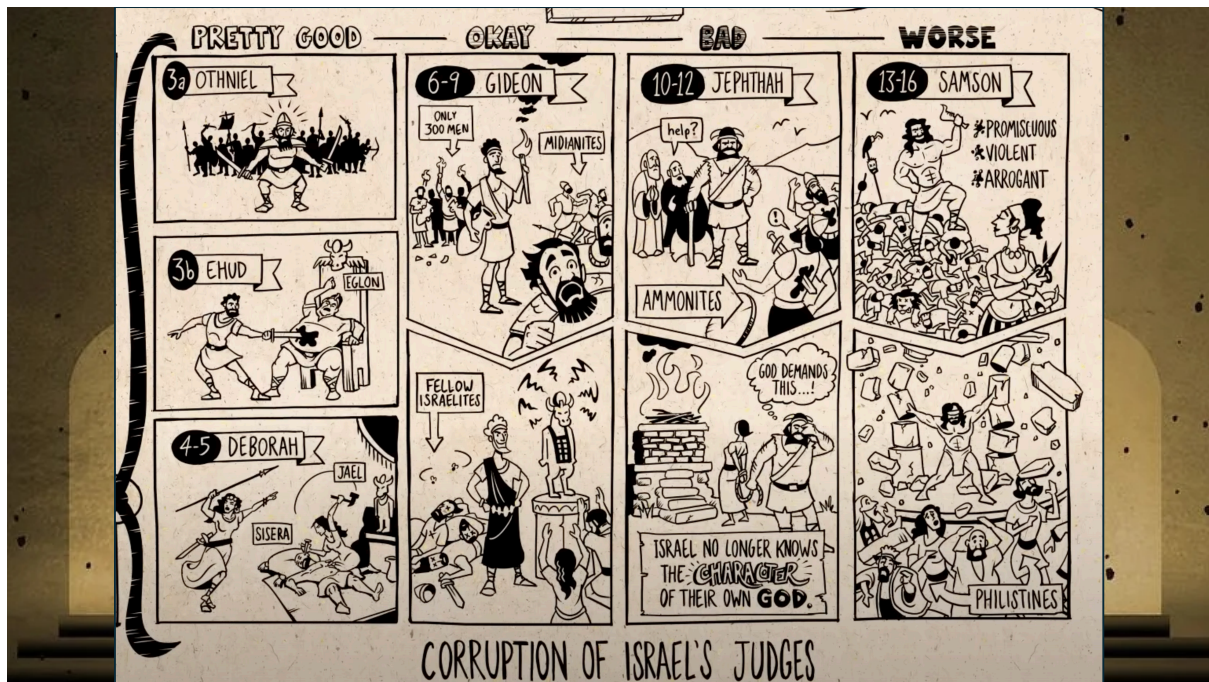
Not – as corruptly – but even more corruptly.



What we have in Judges is not just a repeating cycle.

It repeats – but in an ever downward spiral – a vortex, if you will – in which each successive generation turns to a more corrupt leader and becomes increasingly entrenched in their evil ways – and they in turn become more and more corrupt.

We see this in the sequence of judges.



The Bible Project summarises the downward vortex of judges as going from:

Pretty good to okay to bad to worse – or I would say – **very bad**.

But overall, I think that is a fair summary.

There are a few things to note about these judges.

Even as they became progressively more immoral – their strength – their leadership meant the people loved them and thought they were the answer.

The Jews only wanted deliverance.

They didn't care about their moral life.

Gideon was flawed.

Jephthah was a fool.

Samson was immoral.

But, if they were running for election today – they would likely romp it in.

It is sort of the frog in the kettle.

I think if Samson had been the first judge – not the last judge – Israel would never have followed a man so driven by his lusts.

Look, 50 years ago – a man with the moral failings of Donald Trump would never have had a sniff of the White House – in this election – many will overlook those flaws.

If you do not turn to God – the nation – the church – the people – will become progressively more depraved and corrupt and not even realise it is happening.

But here is the other thing to note.

Eventually the vortex ends in complete anarchy – that is the last few chapters of this book.

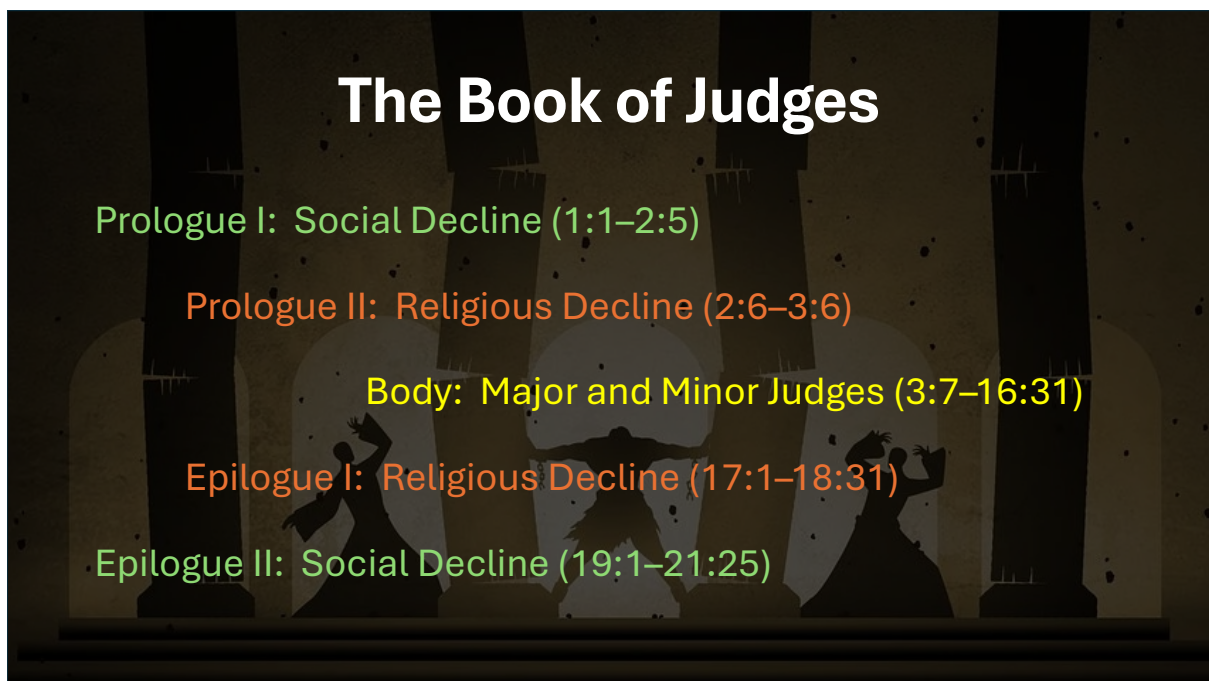
And Israel – who was supposed to be distinct from the nations – and a light to the nations – eventually became even more corrupt than the nations.

That is why we have titled this series:

Judges: Life Without God As King.

But today – the point is that not one of these leaders – good, bad, indifferent – could stop the rot and save Israel.

Someone else is needed.



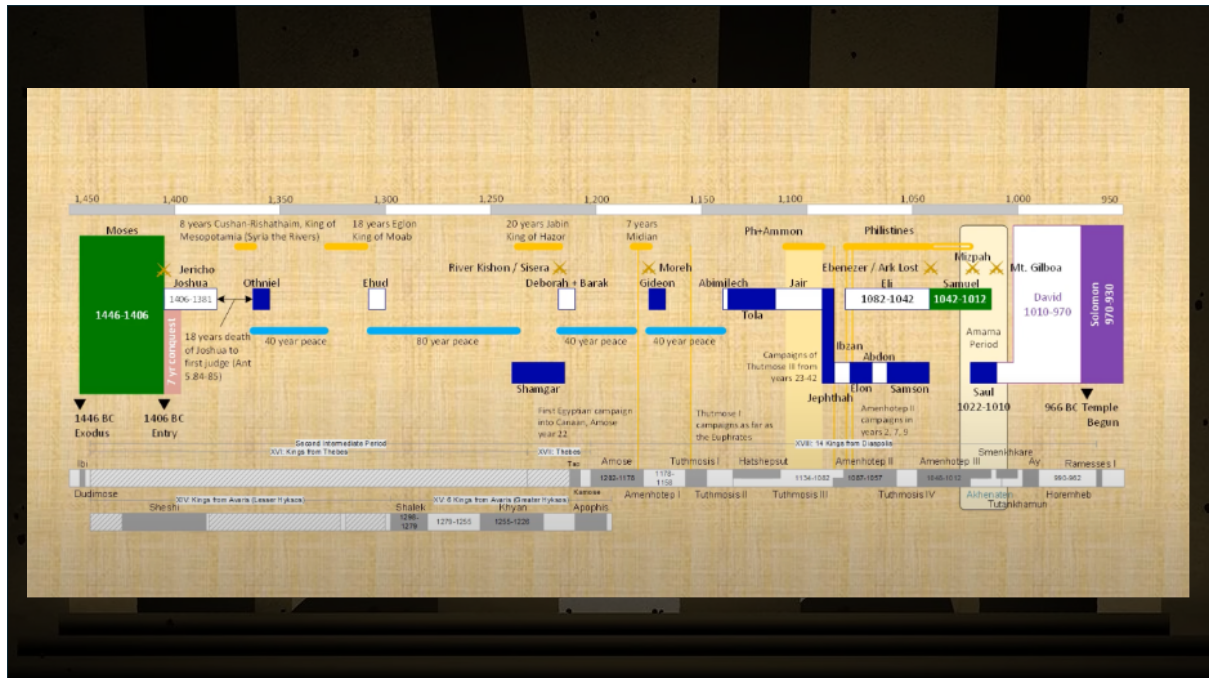
Han told you that the book of Judges is structured like this.

- Prologue I: Social Decline (1:1-2:5)
- Prologue II: Religious Decline (2:6-3:6)
- Body: Major and Minor Judges (3:7-16:31)**
- Epilogue I: Religious Decline (17:1-18:31)
- Epilogue II: Social Decline (19:1-21:25)

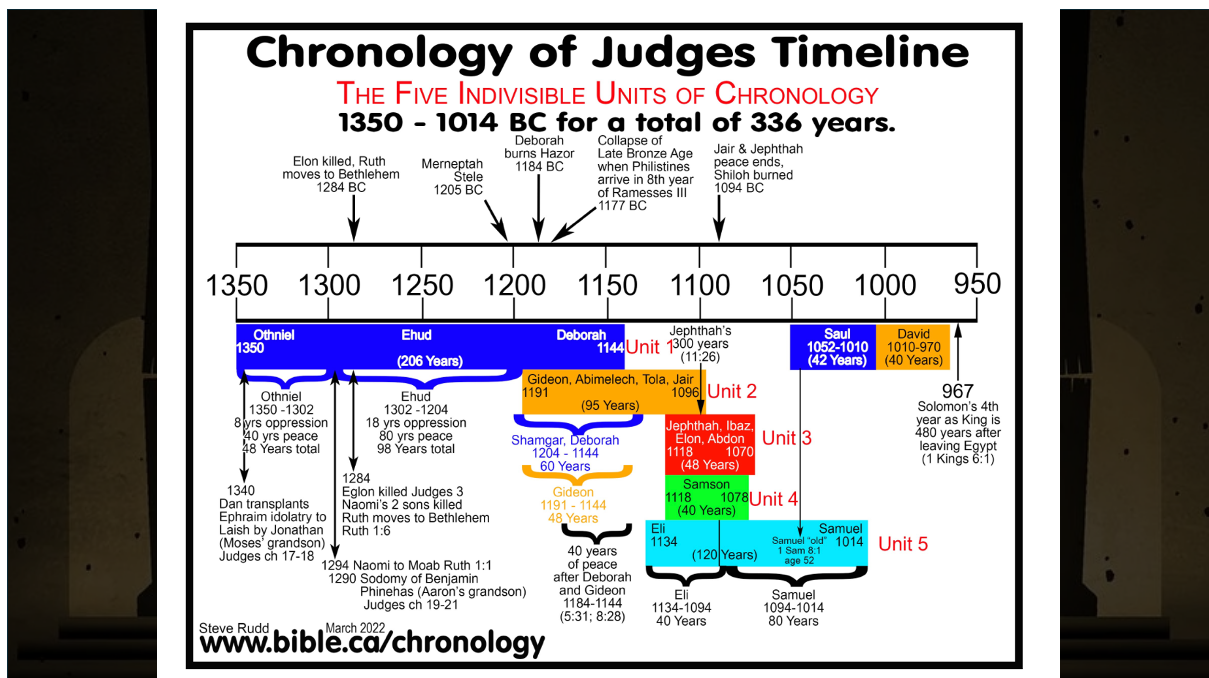
Tonight, we begin **the body** – the large central part of the book – which deals with the major and minor judges of Israel.

I remind you of what Han told us – these judges were not so much kings over all the tribes of Israel – but more tribal leaders over a clan or several tribes.

And we are not to think that one judge died – and then years later another one arose.



This is one well known attempt at chronology. I know it is a hard to see – so here is another one.



Notice the overlaps.

The point is that these judges were not necessarily sequential.

You might think there is one linear progression from one judge to the next.

No. Often these judges were living at the same time – just judging in different parts of Israel.

Different tribes, different enemies, different judges.

There was no united nation to have one king. Israel had become tribal and territorial.



These judges did not necessarily judge all of Israel – but often a tribe or several tribes.

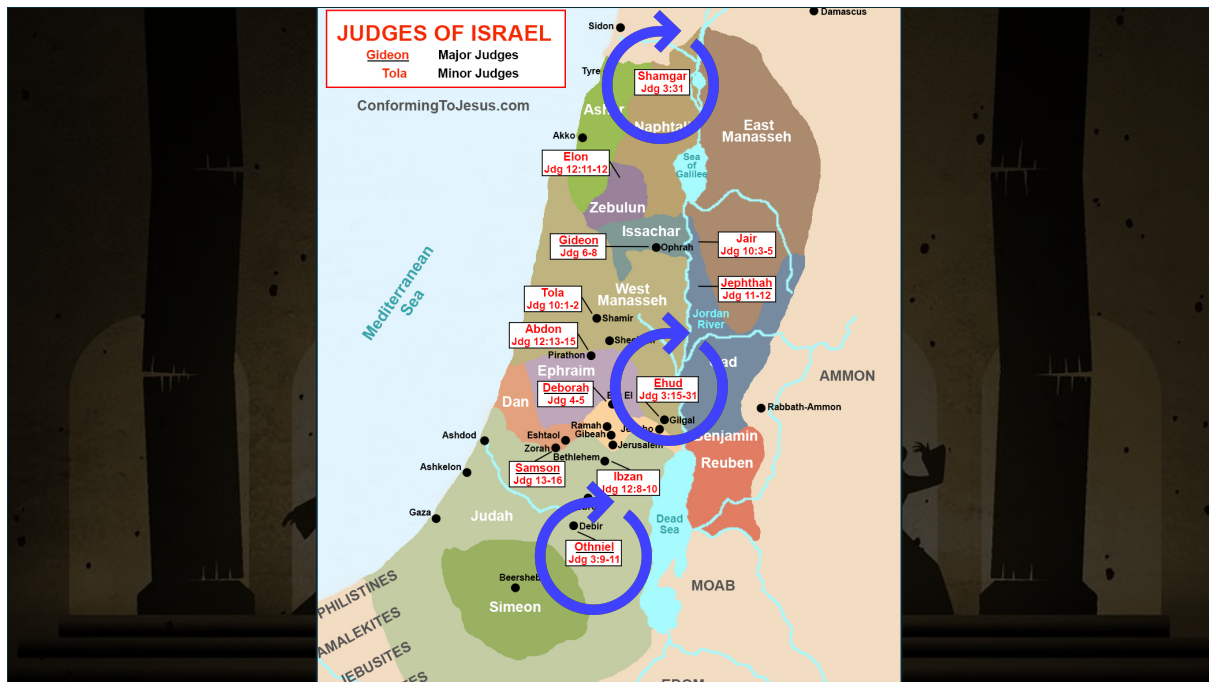
At times there was more than one judge.

At times a judge managed to get much of Israel to rally behind them.

In this book we find that in a short space of time – Israel had twelve judges – those they looked to for salvation.

These judges had different gifts – judged in different places – had varying levels of godliness – but **none** could end the cycle of sin for the nation.

Tonight, we begin with the *first three judges*.



Othniel, Ehud and Shamgar.

Their judgeships did seem to follow one another – but they judged in different parts of Israel and faced different enemies.

There are several things of note about these three men.

First, is that of all the judges of Israel – these men are not marked out as having serious character flaws. Morally they seem the best of the judges.

Certainly, they were not perfect, but unlike later judges – there are no serious flaws mentioned.

Second, despite being the best of the judges – they **never** drove out the pagans. They **never** fully stopped the idolatry and corruption. They did **not** bring lasting peace.

So, after their death – corruption soon flourished again.

Third, these three judges are **so** different.

One comes from a great family and does everything the right way.

One is self-made and uses trickery and deception.

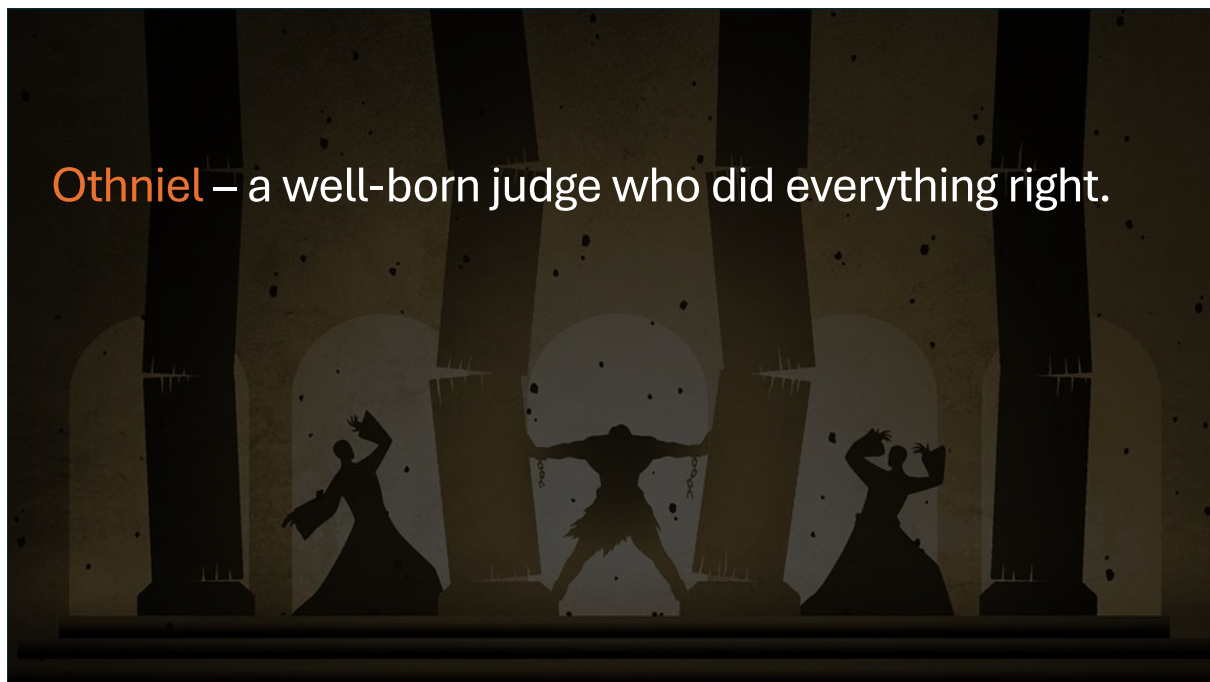
One is barely mentioned leaving us with many questions.

Here is the point – in terms of the judges of Israel – these three were as good as it gets.

But good as it gets is not enough to stop the cycle or even delay it for long.

Let's look at these judges.

The **first deliverer** is:



Othniel – a well-born judge who did everything right.

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Basically, this man is the quintessential hero.

If you were to design a judge – it would be Othniel.

Look with me at Judges 3:7:

The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord's sight; they forgot the Lord their God and worshiped the Baals and the Asherahs.



The cycle begins. **Rebellion.**

This all happened so fast after Israel entered the promised land.

We believe the timeline for this corruption is a mere *ten years* – just ten years after Joshua died.

Let that sink in.

Remember the death of Joshua.

In Joshua 24– Joshua gathered all the tribes. He recounted the faithfulness of God.

Then he pleaded with the people to remain faithful to the Lord.

Verses 15–16:

Which will you worship—the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living? As for me and my family, we will worship the Lord.”

The people replied, “We will certainly not abandon the Lord to worship other gods!

Joshua has his doubts, so he charges them again.

Verses 20–24:

“If you abandon the Lord and worship foreign gods, he will turn against you, harm you, and completely destroy you, after he has been good to you.” “No!” the people answered Joshua. “We will worship the Lord.”

Joshua then told the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you yourselves have chosen to worship the Lord.” “We are witnesses,” they said.

“Then get rid of the foreign gods that are among you and turn your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.”

So the people said to Joshua, “We will worship the Lord our God and obey him.”

The tribes of Israel almost seem irked. How can you question our loyalty? They repeatedly promised to remain faithful. To cast out the pagan nations and their gods.

They said we have seen the hand of the Lord – of course we will stay true to Him.

But, then we come to Judges.

In Judges 2 verse 8 – Joshua dies.

What happened to all the vows and promises to remain faithful and cast out the gods?

Judges 2:10–13:

Another generation rose up who did not know the Lord or the works he had done for Israel. The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord’s sight. They worshiped the Baals and abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed other gods from the surrounding peoples and bowed down to them. They angered the Lord, for they abandoned him and worshiped Baal and the Ashtoreths.

In Joshua 1 – we saw the people fail to drive out the nations.

These pagans and their gods remained among the Israelites – and soon – within a decade – the Jews were worshipping these gods.

How does that happen and happen so quickly?

The gods of the world are incredibly tempting.

Understand this – these religions were sexual, materialistic, syncretistic.

Israel was in the land – did a bit of immorality and indulgence really matter?

Once you relax, once you compromise – the rot spreads so quickly.

Never forget that.

One look leads to many looks.

One failure leads to many failures.

One compromise leads to many compromises.

It happens so fast.

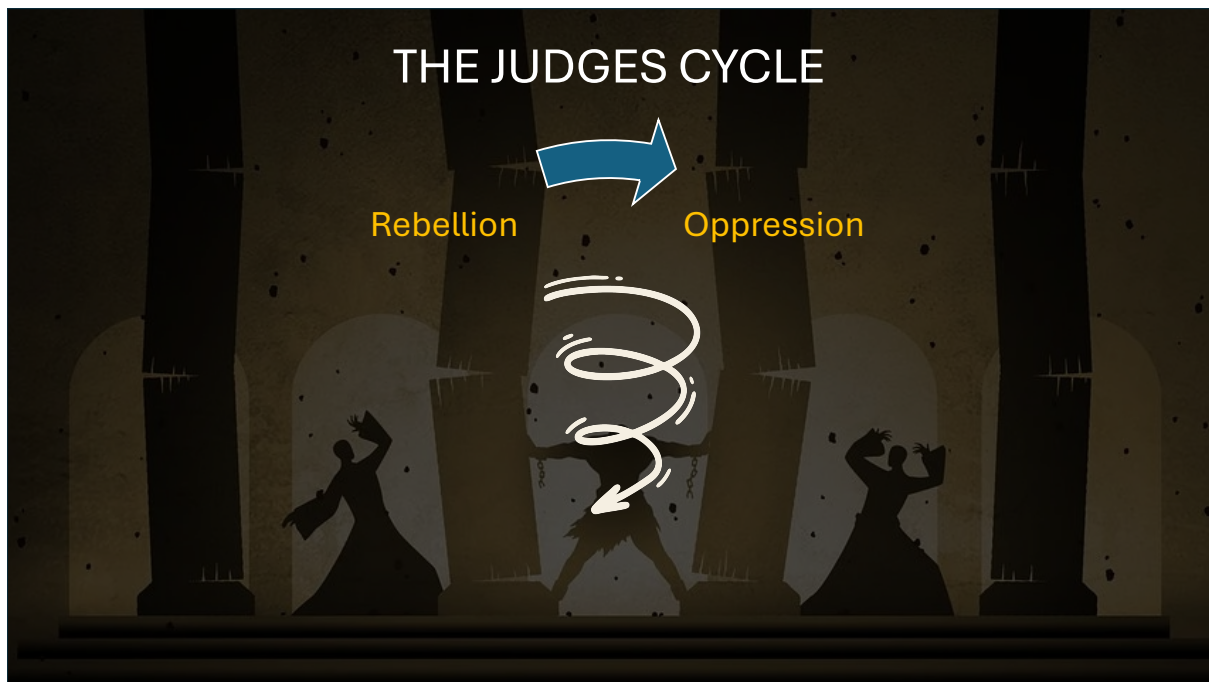
This people delivered from Egypt, protected in the wilderness and brought into the land – this people who promised a revered leader – of course we will **not** forget the Lord – we **will** worship Him – we will **not** compromise – in just a few short years – corruption and idolatry was rampant.

So – Judges 2:14:

The Lord's anger burned against Israel, and he handed them over to marauders who raided them. He sold them to the enemies around them, and they could no longer resist their enemies.

The first enemy the Lord used to chastise Israel? Verse 8 tells us:

The Lord's anger burned against Israel, and he sold them to King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim, and the Israelites served him eight years.



Rebellion led to **oppression**.

They went from conquerors to enslaved.

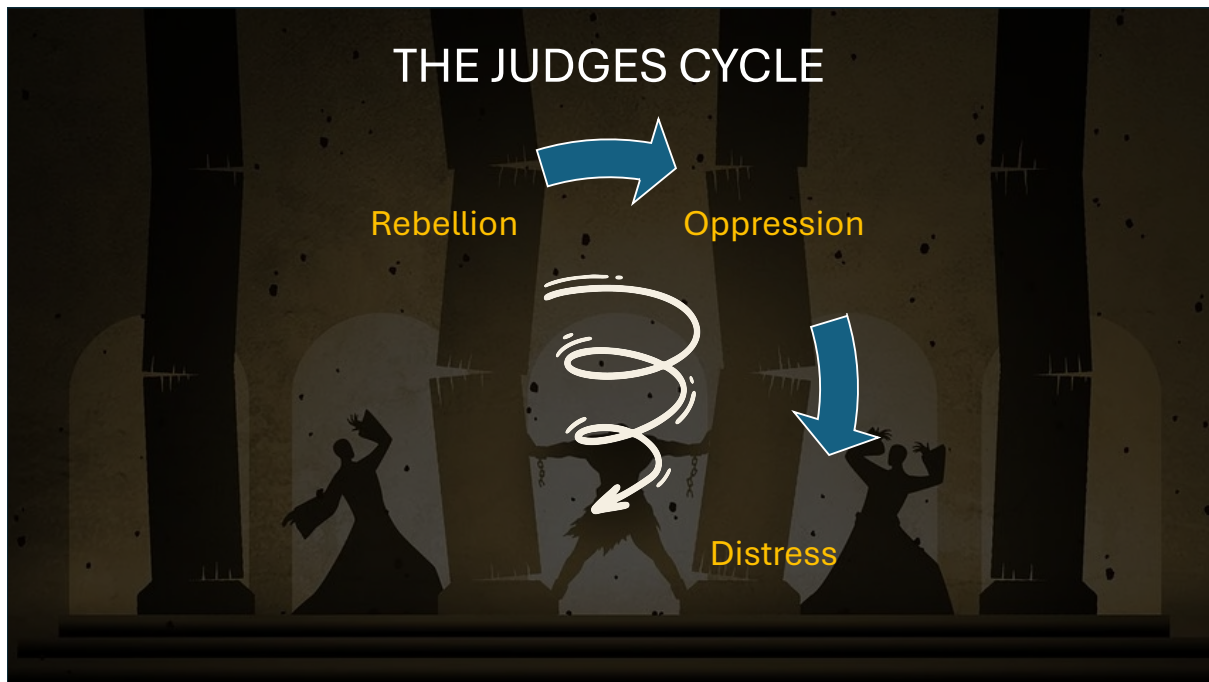
Cushan-rishathaim – literally means – Cushan double wickedness.

Basically – he is really bad.

This guy was evil and loved inflicting distress on Israel.

So, verse 9:

The Israelites cried out to the Lord.



This is us isn't it?

We know we should not sin – but we do and sin leads to consequences.

We are in **distress** – so we call out.

And graciously – undeservingly – God hears and answers.

This tells us so much about God.

He warned them – repeatedly – what would happen.

They were in Egypt for 430 years crying out.

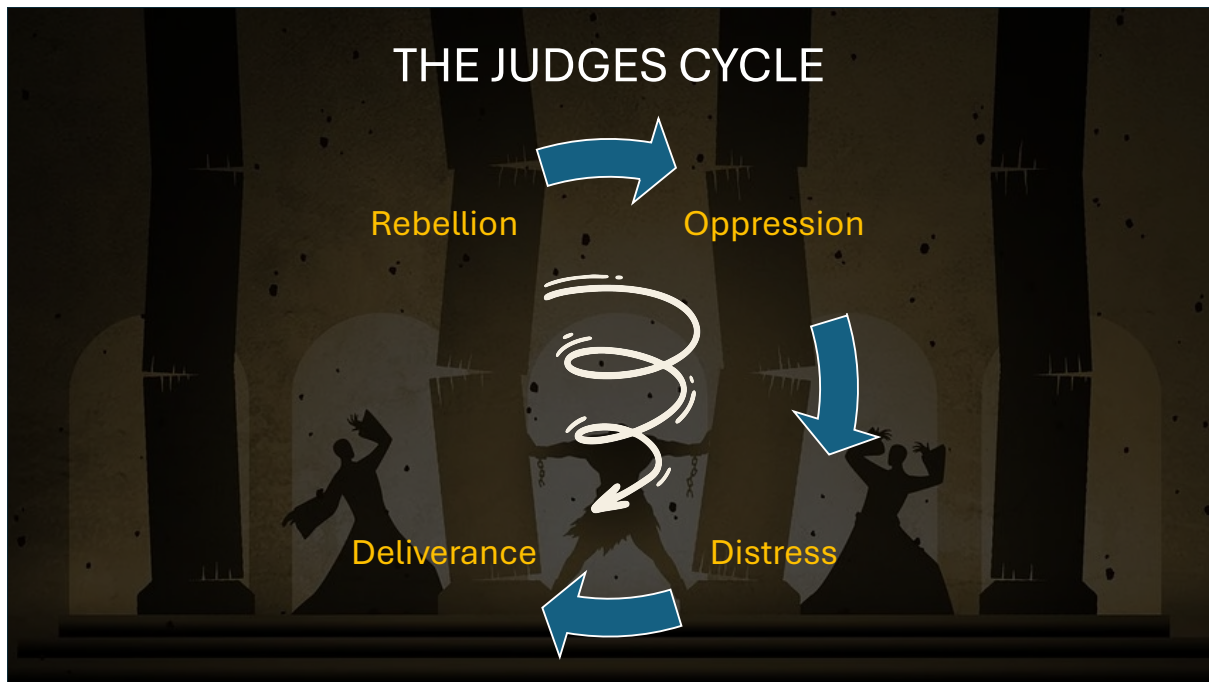
God delivers them – but they forgot so fast.

Me – I think I would let them sweat for a lot longer than eight years.

But God is so gracious in the face of our sin.

Verse 9:

So the Lord raised up Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's youngest brother, as a deliverer to save the Israelites.



God sends **deliverance**.

Othniel, the first judge is your classic hero.

He comes from a noble family. Brave. Wins the girl. Fights the oppressor in battle and triumphs.

He is Prince Valiant.

This is the guy most would want as leader.

We have already met him back in chapter 1.

Israel had entered the Promised Land – the land of giants. Filled with pagans – in particular the Canaanites.

The Israelites began taking the land.

Then in Judges 1:12:

Caleb said, "Whoever attacks and captures Kiriath-sepher, I will give my daughter Achsah to him as a wife."

Caleb is one of the heroes of Israel.

Remember he was one of the twelve spies. The spies came back and said – the land is filled with giants.

But in Numbers 13:30:

Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, "Let's go up now and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!"

Caleb was right.

Unfortunately, the people listened to the other spies not Caleb and Joshua. It led to 40 years in the wilderness.

Then in Joshua 14:6–12 we find Caleb once again leading the charge to remove the pagans from the land.

Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to [Joshua], Here I am today, eighty-five years old. I am still as strong today as I was the day Moses sent me out. My strength for battle and for daily tasks is now as it was then. Now give me this hill country the Lord promised me on that day, because you heard then that the Anakim are there, as well as large fortified cities. Perhaps the Lord will be with me and I will drive them out as the Lord promised.

This guy is amazing.

I am 85 – strong as ever – and with the Lord on my side – I do not fear any giant. Let me lead the charge to route the giants.

We all want to grow up to be Caleb don't we?

In fact, in the midst of our spate of boys born in the church with Old Testament names – a Caleb or two would not go astray.

But in Joshua 1 – Caleb is willing to share the glory – who is going to capture Kiriath-sepher? And as a little incentive you get the hand of my amazing daughter Achsah. We find out a little later she is also quite a woman.

So, who responds to his challenge?

Chapter 1 verse 13:

So **Othniel** son of Kenaz, Caleb's youngest brother, captured it, and Caleb gave his daughter Achsah to him as his wife.

The language is ambiguous as to whether Othniel is Caleb's youngest brother – or whether Kenaz is his youngest brother – making Othniel his nephew.

Because Othniel is a similar age to Caleb's daughter – he is more likely his nephew rather than his brother.

Regardless – the point is that Othniel comes from hero stock. Tribe of Judah. Closely related to the great Caleb.

And he does Caleb-like stuff – driving out giants and defeating enemies.

So maybe we also need a few boys named Othniel in the church.

Judges 3:10:

The Spirit of the Lord came on him, and he judged Israel.

In the Bible the Spirit of the Lord can regenerate and save people – **and** it can come on people and empower them for kingdom tasks.

This is what happened here.

Othniel is empowered by the Spirit to judge Israel – to deliver them.

Othniel went out to battle, and the Lord handed over King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram to him, so that Othniel overpowered him.

Othniel overpowers Cushan double wickedness.

This guy is some hero.

He is everything you want in a judge, a deliverer, a leader.

Verse 11:

Then the land had peace for forty years.

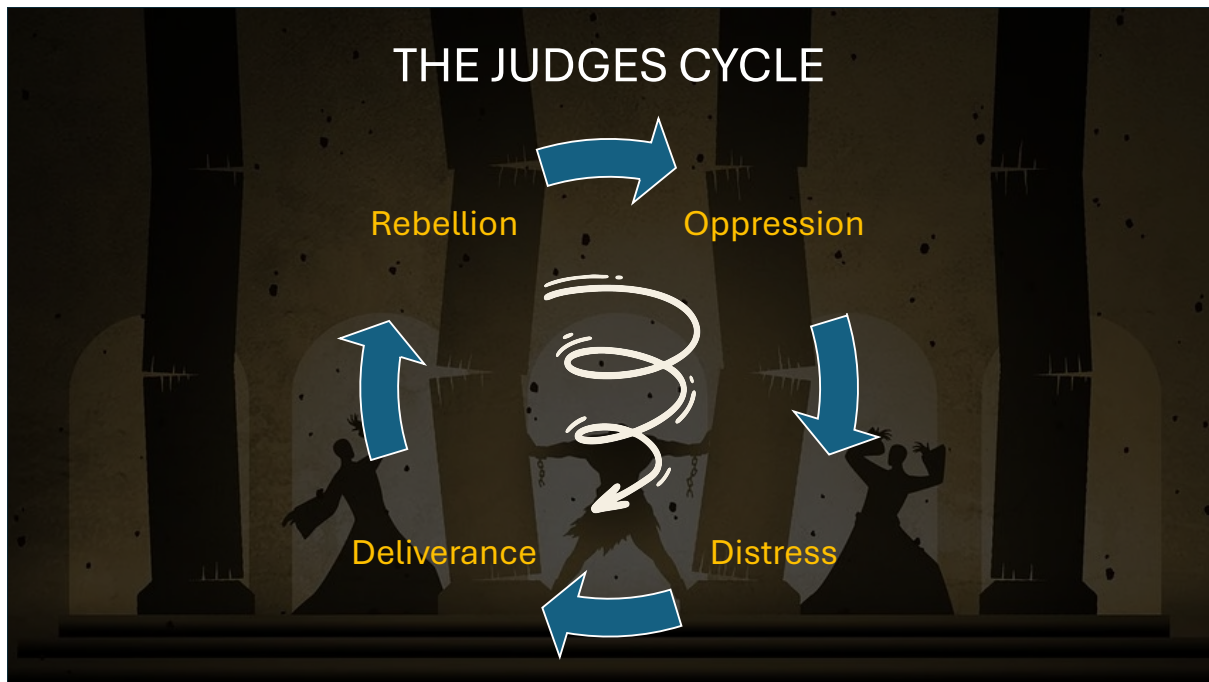
But then this ... and Othniel son of Kenaz died.

Othniel was clearly a great leader. Inspiring.

And while he lived, Israel seemed to follow the Lord and the land was generally at peace.

But – and here is the point – as great as he was – it was not enough. All the good he did – it did not last. Verse 12:

The Israelites again did what was evil in the Lord's sight.



We are back to **rebellion**.

The cycle starts again.

Here is a great classic leader – yet he can't end the vortex.

The godliness and the peace did not last.

If anyone could bring lasting peace – you have to think Othniel could.

He came from the right family and frankly he did his family proud.

In many leadership positions – Political leaders – Pastors – Organizations – the baton is often passed to the children or relatives of former leaders.

The thought is that if the dad led well – then hopefully the son will.

Even in democracies we see this.

In the Philippines – President Marcos and Vice-President Duterte are the children of former Presidents.

In the US – they speak of dynasties – the Kennedys, Clintons, Bushes – and so on.

A study was done in the US and a remarkable number of sons took over pastorates from their fathers.

Unfortunately – it is rare for a child to live up to such lofty expectations.

But ... at times they do.

Othniel had huge shoes to fill – but he seems to have filled them well.

Yet great as he was – he was just a man.

He couldn't get all the pagans and their gods out.

He couldn't change the hearts of the people.

And once he died – the cycle began again.

The vortex of decay moved on.

So, maybe Israel needs a different kind of leader to end the vortex? A less conventional hero.

Verses 12-14:

The Lord gave King Eglon of Moab power over Israel, because they had done what was evil in the Lord's sight. After Eglon convinced the Ammonites and the Amalekites to join forces with him, he attacked and defeated Israel and took possession of the City of Palms. The Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years.

A different oppressor – the Moabites – joined now by the Ammonites and Amalekites.

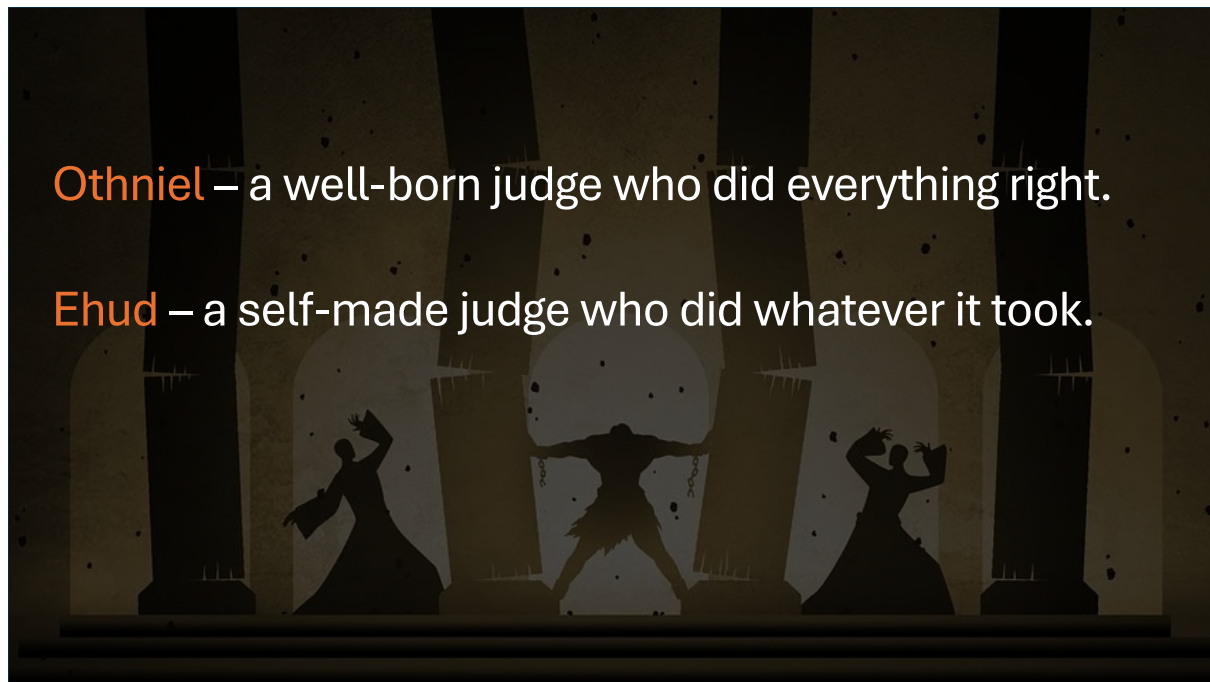
And these enemies took over the City of Palms – Jericho – the first city to fall to Israel.

Then they began to tax the daylight out of Israel for eighteen years.

Verse 15:

Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he raised up Ehud son of Gera, a left-handed Benjaminite, as a deliverer for them.

Here is our **second deliverer**:



Othniel – a well-born judge who did everything right.

Ehud – a self-made judge who did whatever it took.

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Maybe what Israel needs is a non-conventional hero.

Ehud is *very* different to Othniel.

Othniel came from a noble family in Judah and defeated Aram in battle.

Ehud was a Benjaminite and left-handed.

Benjaminites are an interesting group in Scripture. They are not as noble as those from Judah.

And left-handed – that clearly makes him a little suspect. There is a bit of stigma – suspicion with lefties.

Certainly not the picture-perfect hero.

This guy is sneaky – a spy.

Instead of defeating his enemy in noble battle – Ehud did it by deception and subterfuge.

In verses 15-25 we are told the tale.

Now, understand this story is almost a farce.

Eglon, his bodyguards, his servants are all made to seem dull and foolish.

Frankly, this bunch are useless – the implication is that the only way fools – Keystone Cops like this could ever dominate Israel is if God allowed them to.

Ehud is the one chosen to take the tribute to Eglon.

Ehud is a schemer and sees an opportunity. He made himself a double-edged sword eighteen inches long.

He strapped it to his right thigh under his clothes and brought the tribute to King Eglon – who was an extremely fat man.

Lefties would put a dagger on their right thigh. The implication is that the bodyguards of Eglon would not think to look there.

Not the sharpest of bodyguards.

Like the Secret Service failing to protect Trump from a sniper after the sniper was seen and reported – these bodyguards never thought an assassin might be left-handed.

They are useless.

When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he dismissed the people who had carried it. At the carved images near Gilgal he returned and said, “King Eglon, I have a secret message for you.” The king said, “Silence!” and all his attendants left him.

So, this emissary from the people you hate wants to speak with you in private and you send the bodyguards and attendants away?

This Eglon is not only fat – he is a gullible fool.

Sure, Zelensky sends someone to meet with Putin and asks for a private audience alone – why not?

Really – this fool Eglon is the guy who has Israel under his thumb?

Then Ehud approached him while he was sitting alone in his upstairs room where it was cool. Ehud said, “I have a message from God for you.”

This is a Moses with a message to Pharaoh kind of moment – let my people go.

What is the message? Eighteen inches of dagger.

The king stood up from his throne. Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and plunged it into Eglon’s belly.

You shall not oppress God’s people.

Didn’t see that coming did you Eglon? – but you really should have.

Even the handle went in after the blade, and Eglon’s fat closed in over it, so that Ehud did not withdraw the sword from his belly. And the waste came out.

This is meant to seem ridiculous – laughable.

If you wrote this in a Hollywood script they would reject it.

Ehud escaped by way of the porch, closing and locking the doors of the upstairs room behind him. Ehud was gone when Eglon's servants came in.

The hero is gone.

They looked and found the doors of the upstairs room locked and thought he was relieving himself in the cool room. The servants waited until they became embarrassed and saw that he had still not opened the doors of the upstairs room.

How did these guys ever overcome the people of God?

Time is ticking – the servants are worried about what is going on. Everyone is saying – you go in – no you go in. It is a farce.

No one wants to go in because they think fat ol' Eglon is having a little bowel trouble and if they interrupt him and embarrass him – it might cost them their life.

Finally, someone says enough.

So, they took the key and opened the doors—and there was their lord lying dead on the floor!

Well back to our hero.

Ehud escaped while the servants waited. He passed the Jordan near the carved images and reached Seirah. After he arrived, he sounded the trumpet throughout the hill country of Ephraim. The Israelites came down with him from the hill country, and he became their leader.

Ehud must have been an impressive guy. To have a Benjaminite rally the Ephraimites and become their leader is impressive.

He told them, "Follow me, because the Lord has handed over your enemies, the Moabites, to you." So they followed him, captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross over. At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all stout and able-bodied men. Not one of them escaped. Moab became subject to Israel that day, and the land had peace for eighty years.

Ehud is so different to Othniel. He is a self-made man.

His rise to power is not because he had the right relatives – but because he took it on himself to scheme and kill the King of Moab – and managed to rally tribes other than his own to the cause.

He is certainly not the classical hero. Left-handed, from Benjamin, acting by subterfuge.

He is more James Bond – unconventional – doing whatever it takes.

And he did it great.

Killed Eglon.

Rallied Israel. Enslaved Moab. Brought peace.

Very impressive.

But his legacy was limited – only eighty years of peace.

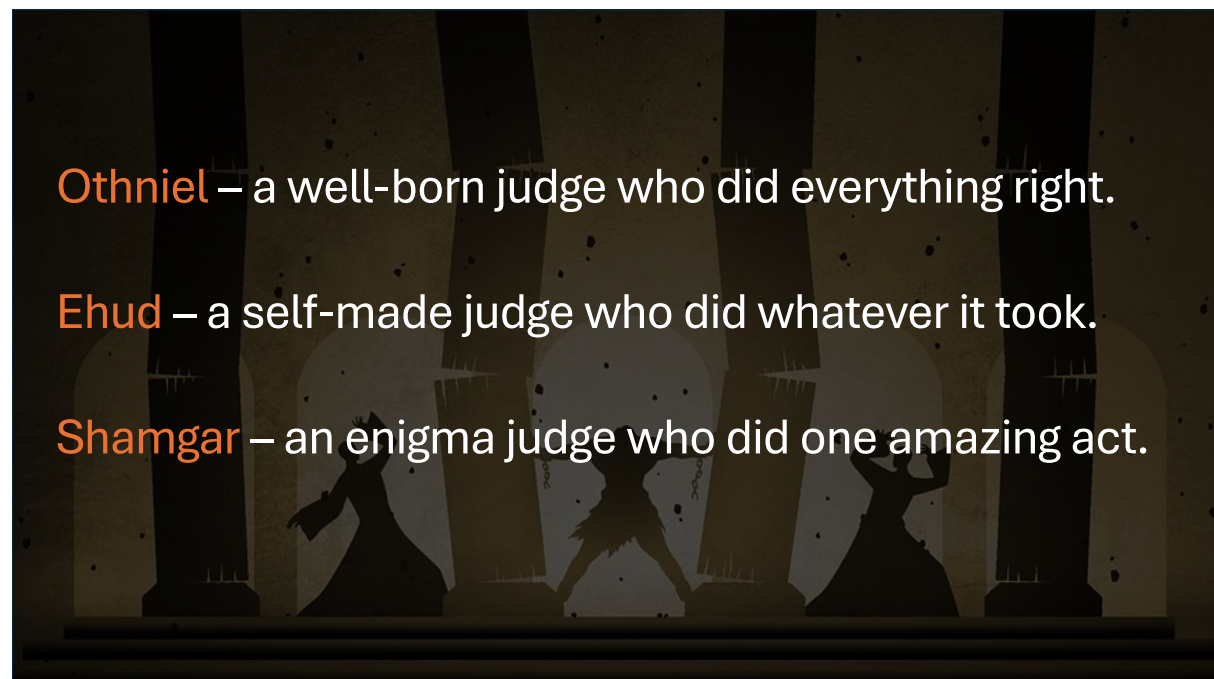
But again, it didn't last. Impressive as he was, he was not the one to bring lasting peace to the land.

Which leads us to the **third judge**.

Classical judge – no.

Unconventional judge – no.

Maybe we need someone completely different.



Othniel – a well-born judge who did everything right.

Ehud – a self-made judge who did whatever it took.

Shamgar – an enigma judge who did one amazing act.

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Here is all we know of him. Judges 3:31:

After Ehud, Shamgar son of Anath became judge. He also delivered Israel, striking down six hundred Philistines with a cattle prod.

One verse – and it leaves us with so many questions.

In contrast to Othniel and Ehud – we don't get the whole cycle. We just assume Israel sinned – the Philistines oppressed – Israel called out – and God sent Shamgar.

But it is just an assumption.

We don't get – and Israel lived in peace for a time.

In fact, we aren't even sure if Shamgar was Israelite – his name is Hittite.

All we get is one short verse.

All we know for sure is that he was a deliverer. And he delivered by one amazing act – striking down six hundred Philistines with a cattle prod.

A cattle prod or ox-goad was a weapon around eight feet long and up to six inches in circumference at the larger end.

Did Shamgar have help or is he empowered by the Spirit to defeat these six hundred the way Samson was empowered to defeat 1000 with the jawbone of an ass?

Most likely this is the Spirit empowering him for one great act – but it is an assumption. We have so many questions about this judge and few answers.

Even more – if you look at verse 1 of chapter 4 we read:

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord **after Ehud** had died.

We go from Ehud to Deborah and Barak.

Shamgar just disappears.

He is such a minor judge he falls out of the chronology.

He is no Prince Valiant, no James Bond – more a Conan the Barbarian – then gone.

He is a man of mystery – appears – does an amazing act and disappears.

He doesn't seem to be on the scene for long – he becomes little more than a footnote.

He is yet a different hero – but the result is the same – after a brief reprieve Israel descends into sin.

Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar. These three guys are the good judges.

No huge moral issues – no terrible decisions.

They are so different. Classical, spy-like – one great act guy.

Heroes – yes – deliverers – yes – **Saviours – no.**

And that is the point. Israel needs a different kind of Judge – a different kind of Saviour.

But not a human hero.

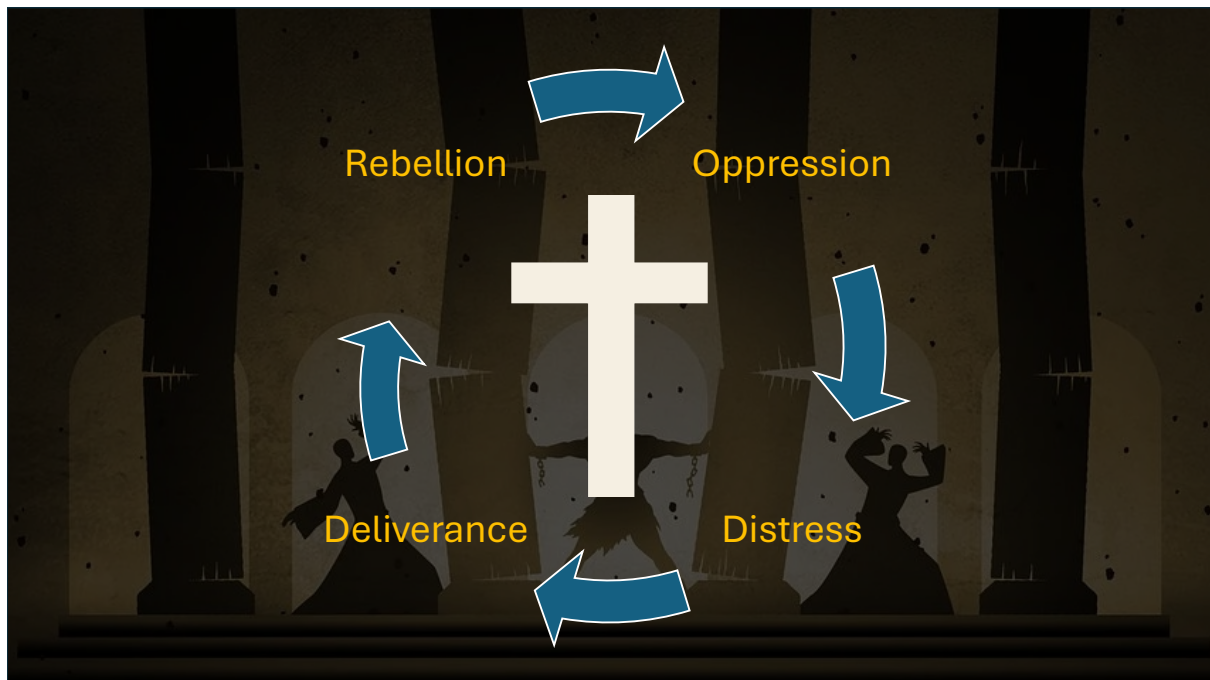
Israel and all of us need a better and ultimate Judge. A better and ultimate Saviour. One who will deliver His people from all enemies – including sin and death – not just temporarily – but permanently.

Judges tells us we need a better Saviour.

Samuel tells us we need a better King.

The New Testament says – we have One.

We have One who can and does end the vortex of sin – forever.



One of the great tragedies is that even Christians often continue to put their hope in a better human deliverer.

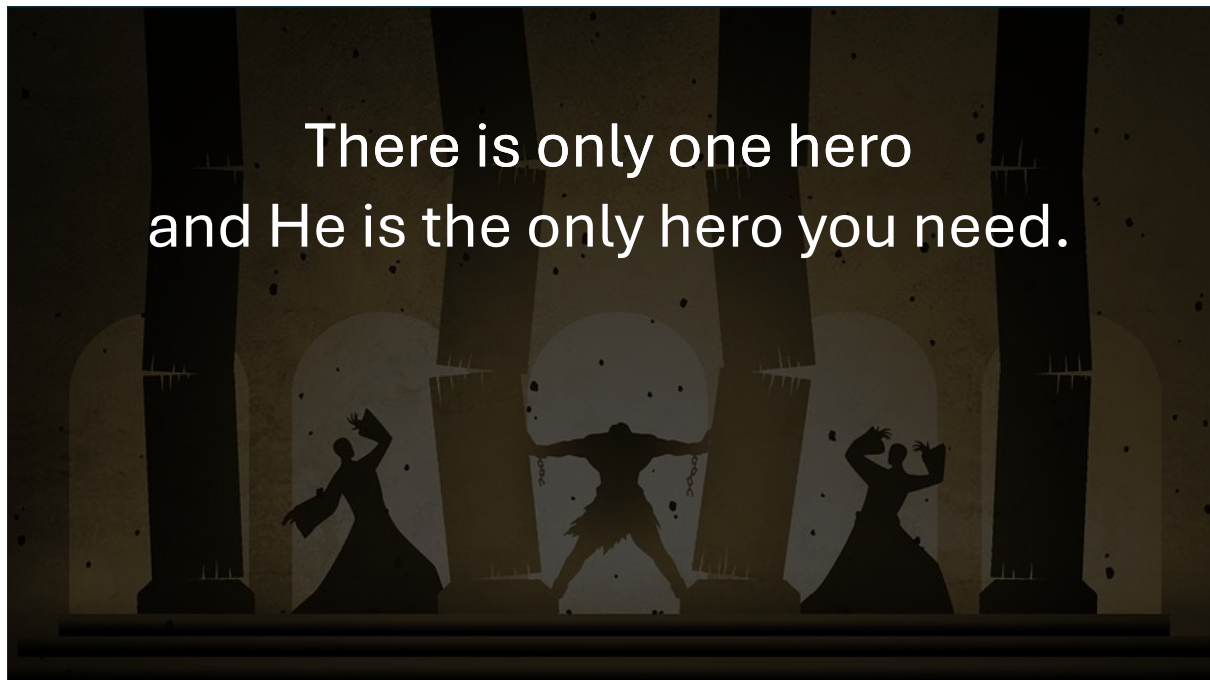
A better Prime Minister or President.

A better Pastor.

Why doesn't God send someone better than Donald or Kamala? Better than Albo or Dutton?

Surely Brisbane deserves better pastors?

But our passage this evening is clear.



There is only one hero

... and He is the only hero you need.

Chances are an Othniel or an Ehud or a Shamgar are the kind of hero – the Saviour many hope for – even today.

Jesus is not that kind of hero – not that kind of Saviour.

He defeats His enemies in the battle of the cross.

He comes in weakness not in might.

He comes to serve not be served.

He is killed not the one who kills.

But this is the deliverer we need.

We need no other.

We just need to bow the knee – accept that His death ends the cycle – make Him Lord or our life and life for Him.

There is only one hero – Jesus – and He is the only hero we need.

Trust Him and live.

He ends the cycle forever.