

BRING ON THE GIANTS - JUDGES 3:7-11

JUDGES #2 - OTHNIEL

It has been called the most courageous fielding play in the history of professional baseball. Lefty O'Doul who was the manager of the San Francisco Seals of Pacific Coast League was the one who came up with this innovative promotional stunt. Now you have to remember that this was 1939 - long before these modern days of sophisticated promotion. And it was the July 4th weekend, a time of celebration and high spirits. Lefty thought that it would pack the stadium out if he could convince one of his players to try to catch a ball dropped from the Goodyear Blimp, circling 1,500 feet above the stadium.

When he announced his idea to the team and asked for a volunteer, most just laughed out loud. Catch a ball dropped from a blimp? Who would be crazy enough to do that? But then 1 player raised his hand. It was the catcher, Joe Sprinz. Now I don't know how much can be read into the fact that Joe's nickname was Mule Sprinz. But anyway, catcher Joe Mule Sprinz volunteered to catch the baseball dropped from the Goodyear Blimp.

On July 3, the stadium was packed. And on cue, just as the clock struck the hour, a baseball was dropped from the Goodyear Blimp. Mule would later testify that he saw it all the way. But when it was first dropped it looked about the size of an aspirin. The ball fell downward, gaining speed to about 32 feet per second. Sprinz measured the ball up and prepared himself for the impact. The ball slammed into his catcher's glove with the force of a howitzer shell driving his mitt back into his face. It is amazing that Mule maintained

consciousness. The doctor's final examination revealed lacerations of the mouth and nose, a fractured jaw and 5 teeth cleanly knocked out. But Mule had caught the ball and he was proud as a peacock when he talked with reporters later from his hospital room, barely able to communicate with his jaw wired shut.

The first question that was asked was quite predictable. "Mule, this was probably the most daring, if not the greatest, fielding play in the history of baseball. But why did you choose to do it?" Slowly, but unmistakably, Mule Sprinz answered through clenched teeth, "When Lefty asked for volunteers, all the other players refused and many laughed and even walked out of the meeting. But I said to myself, "God hates a coward". (pause)

When the subject of courage or cowardice is raised, there often seems to be as many definitions as participants in the conversation. What one person considers to be a courageous act, another thinks is foolhardy. Usually, quiet and inconspicuous acts of courage are ignored altogether. And most often, people assume that courage automatically brings greater favor with God. But we are actually surprised when we study this subject in the Bible. For courageous acts come in all sizes, shapes and descriptions throughout the Scriptures. And Jesus often singled out the inconspicuous act of courage for special recognition showing that God is more concerned for the heart attitude than for the outward show. And certainly, courage is not the key to God's grace. God loves everyone, not just heroes. And God delights in using ordinary, even naturally cowardly, people to perform courageous acts. In fact,

God's most natural pattern is to make courageous heroes out of normal, ordinary people.

One of the great rewards of studying the 6 Major Judges of the bible is that we see through them a Biblical concept of courage. For each of these judges were courageous people. They were individuals who stood up during difficult days of injustice and terrorism and anarchy, deciding to swim against the flow. In a world filled with wrong, they chose to do what was right. In a world where every person did what was right in his or her own eyes, they did what was right in the eyes of God, they believed and practiced the truth. And God used these judges to deliver and sustain his people during the most difficult of times.

We saw last week that there was a pattern that the people of God followed during this period of Jewish history that we call the days of the Judges. First, they would compromise their spiritual convictions, following the pagan practices of the nations surrounding them. They would worship false gods and adopt ungodly practices. As a result, their society would be weakened and God would allow a foreign oppressive power to dominate them in a chastening measure. Finally, when the hand of oppression became too severe for them to stand, they would cry out to God for deliverance. They would confess their sins and repent of their wicked ways. Then God would raise up a judge to deliver them and bring a period of peace and prosperity to the land. So this 4-fold cycle of the Judges is a pattern that continues throughout this book - Backsliding, Chastening, Crying out to God, Deliverance. This cycle is

summarized in Judges 2:8-19 - notice it with me. READ Judges 2:8-19.

JDG 2:8 Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

JDG 2:10 After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. ¹² They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger ¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴ In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. ¹⁵ Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

JDG 2:16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ¹⁷ Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. ¹⁸ Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. ¹⁹ But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

We come this evening to the first of these cycles that is given introducing us to the First Major Judge - a man by the name of Othniel.

Because of the spiritual waywardness of the people, God had allowed an

enemy to come down from the north. The land of Aram Naharaim was to the north of the land of Palestine, in the same space that Lebanon would occupy today. The leader of this threatening force was named Cushan-Rishathaim which means doubly-wicked Cushan or Cushan the arch villain. For 8 years the Israelites suffered under the cruel hand of this despot until they finally cried out to God for help. In response to their pleas, God raised up a leader named Othniel.

Let's read about this first Judge and then note some characteristics that make him such a special person. READ Judges 3:7-11:

JDG 3:7 The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. ⁸ The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. ⁹ But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. ¹¹ So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.

Let's look at this first judge mentioned in this book, noting specifically 3 characteristics of Othniel.

1. First, note with me that Othniel was a godly man. Judges 3:10 begins by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him". There is no question that Othniel operated under the power of Almighty God, and Othniel was a willing vessel for God's use.

It would have been so easy for Othniel to be discouraged. Here was a man who had seen the glory days when God's people had trusted in the Lord and had experienced miraculous deliverances. Othniel was probably the younger brother of Caleb. You remember Caleb, don't you? He along with Joshua had brought back the good report about the Promised Land before the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. As a result, Caleb and Joshua were the only men over 20 years of age at that time to be allowed to enter the Promised Land some 40 years later. The Bible tells us that Othniel was the son of Kenos, Caleb's younger brother in verse 9. There is some discussion as to whether this means that Othniel was Caleb's nephew, the son of Kenos who was Caleb's brother, or whether Caleb was the older brother of Othniel himself. Does the phrase "Caleb's younger brother" describe Othniel himself or Kenos? While many lean towards the view that Othniel was Caleb's nephew, the Hebrew tends to support the later view, that Othniel was Caleb's younger brother. But whether Othniel was Caleb's brother or nephew is not the important thing. It is important for us to remember the fact that Othniel had been in a privileged position to see God's hand at work in a miraculous way.

Othniel was at least 21 years younger than Caleb. We know that because Caleb was 40 years old when he was sent as a spy into the Promised Land with Joshua. As a result of the disobedience of the people failing to heed the council of Joshua and Caleb to enter the land, God said that all males 20 years old and older except for Caleb and Joshua would die in the wilderness. So Othniel must have been 19 years old or younger at this time - or at least 21 years

younger than Caleb. Probably he was old enough to have remembered this failure of faith on the behalf of the Israelites.

And certainly Othniel had been old enough to see God's miraculous hand in preserving his people in the wilderness. He had eaten of the Manna, he had seen the water pour forth from the Rock, He had worn the sandals that did not wear out for 40 years. Then Othniel had seen the Jordan River part as the priests carrying the ark stepped into the waters. He had walked across the Jordan River bed on dry ground. Othniel had seen the walls of Jericho fall as the sound of the trumpets was ringing in his ears. Othniel had fought under the commander, Joshua, and had seen the enemy soldiers fall into the tar pits and under the hail stones that God had rained from the sky. Othniel had experienced that unique day in which the sun stood still in the sky. Othniel had experienced all of these miraculous blessings- he had seen God's power revealed in awesome ways.

But now Othniel had lived long enough to see God's people forget all of the glorious deeds that God had done. He had watched as family after family strayed from the paths of righteousness. He had seen the friend that he had grown up with marry a Canaanite wife. He had watched as the neighbor down the street set up foreign gods on an altar to worship. He had grieved as he lived in a nation which strayed from following God. And Othniel had watched with a heavy heart as the nation of Israel with all of her glorious promise had declined into spiritual decadence and finally into slavery to the arch villain Cushan and his ruthless army from the north.

But Othniel had remained faithful to the true and living God. He had maintained his spiritual convictions. And now when it came time for God to work in response to the prayers of his people, Othniel was prepared and the Spirit of God came upon him.

Our country is in desperate need of godly people, individuals who will stand up for the Lord maintaining righteous convictions in their lives in a world that has lost all concept of what is right and wrong. Many have tried for years to remove God from all arenas of public life, and have had great success in doing so. But as David Jackman wrote "A world without God becomes a world without absolutes". And that is what has happened in the world in which we live. A hundred years ago, atheistic philosophers such as Fredrick Nietzsche proclaimed that "God is Dead". And what practically happened out of that arrogant proclamation and its acceptance by many in the world who were trying to free themselves from any moral responsibility has been the erosion of all absolutes. Those who idolize Nietzsche and his innovative philosophies often overlook the fact that he was committed to an insane asylum near the end of his life and died a miserably disoriented man. In Francis Schaeffer's book entitled "How Then Should We Live?", he writes this interesting commentary of Nietzsche's passing: "I am convinced that when Nietzsche came to Switzerland and went insane, it was not because of venereal disease, though he did have this disease. Rather, it was because he understood that insanity was the only philosophic answer if the infinite-personal God does not exist."

What happened to Nietzsche personally can happen to a country that

denies the existence of God. Given over to the bondage of fleshly desires, it becomes consumed by the physical consequences of such a lifestyle. And sooner or later, the realization of life without God sets in and chaos and anarchy are the results.

In the midst of such a world, there is a desperate need for God's people to stand firm as salt and light. God's people cannot cave in to the pressures of society around. God's people must live spirit-controlled lives showing a better way. And these shining lights will not go unnoticed. Oh, there will be derision and disdain and even persecution. But truth, like cream, eventually rises to the top. Othniel was a godly man in an ungodly age; and God is looking for godly people today who are willing to live for Him in an ungodly age.

2. Secondly, notice with me that Othniel was a man who was willing to accept challenges that God set before him.

Now Judges 3 is not the first place where Othniel is mentioned in this book. Turn back to Judges 1 with me to see a previous challenge that Othniel had accepted.

READ JUDGES 1:12,13.

¹² And Caleb said, "I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher." ¹³ Othniel son of Kenos, Caleb's younger brother, took it; so Caleb gave his daughter Acsah to him in marriage.

You remember the great example of courageous Caleb in the Bible don't you? Caleb was one of the 2 spies along with Joshua who stood against the majority advising the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. Caleb was 40 when

this event occurred. And even though Caleb was overruled by the majority, Caleb remained faithful to the Lord during the 40 year wilderness wandering. So when it came time to divide up the promised land for conquest, Caleb requested the mountain country where the giants lived as his inheritance. Those giants who had struck fear into the hearts of the other 10 spies who were now dead, motivating them to discourage the Israelites from entering the land the first time, Caleb wanted as his inheritance. He had waited for 40 years to get at those giants. So now, even though he was 85 years old, he wanted the land of the giants as his inheritance. Joshua 14:12 records the request of Caleb: "Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites (Giants) were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said." What an example of godly courage. An 85 year old man tackling a challenge like this.

Well, Caleb did take the area of Kiriath Arba which today is called Hebron, and he drove out the giants from the area.

But now there were some other fortresses in Caleb's inheritance where some giants lived, and they needed to be conquered as well. So Caleb offered his daughter in marriage to whoever would tackle the challenge. His younger brother, Othniel, stepped forward according to Judges 1:13 and accepted the task. And Othniel took Kiriath Sepher and drove the giants from the land.

It is not happenstance that God chose this man, Othniel, who had already accepted some challenges successfully as the first judge to deliver now the

entire nation of Israel from the oppression of the Aramaens. For those who are faithful in small matters, tackling the smaller challenges that God sets before them in His strength, God gives bigger and bigger challenges to.

*It was to David who was willing to face the giant, Goliath, that God eventually gave the entire Kingdom of Israel with the challenge of facing all the surrounding nations as enemies. And so it is that God usually tests his children in smaller challenges. As they are willing to be faithful in the accomplishment of those, God then brings greater challenges into their lives.

3. But finally, notice with me that Othniel was a person who knew how to persevere in life.

Now we already mentioned the fact that Othniel had to be at least 21 years younger than Caleb. That would put him at just about the right age to marry Caleb's daughter. But it also gives to us some idea of just how old Othniel was when he accepted this challenge given to him by God to be the first Judge of Israel. When we add up the years of the wilderness wanderings, the conquest, the death of the elders and the 8 year oppression by Cushan-Rishathaim, Othniel would have had to be at least 75 years old, probably in his late eighties or early nineties. He was not in what would be considered the prime of life for military service. He was well beyond the age of the draft. But isn't it interesting that when God had a critically important job to do, he chose this man who had years of experience and wisdom from which to draw, and Othniel did not excuse himself by saying let the younger men do it, but he was willing to accept this new challenge in life, even though he was probably in his eighties

at the time.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once wrote these words of wisdom. "Age is opportunity no less than youth itself, though in another dress, And as the evening twilight fades away, the sky is filled with stars, invisible by day."

There are opportunities and challenges that are available at every age that are not available at other times of life. God wants us to accept the challenges which he gives to us in life and make the most of them, no matter what age we are. For the simple fact that our hearts are beating and our lungs are breathing testify to the truth that God's purpose has not yet been fully fulfilled in our lives - He still has a job for us to do.

We can learn much from Othniel. He was a man who had grown old and lived through glorious years. He had witnessed the conquest of the promised land personally. What a thrill that must have been. And now in his later years of life, he had seen many hopes turn to despair as the anticipation of utopia had become the anarchy of a godless society. I'm sure that many of Othniel's colleague were filled with the bitterness of cynicism.

But Othniel remained true to his spiritual convictions in the midst of a relativistic world. He lived a life controlled and lead by the Spirit of God. Othniel was willing to accept the challenges that God set before him in life. And Othniel persevered, he didn't quit. Even in the twilight years of his life, Othniel was leading the armies of Israel in victory over the man whose name was "Arch villain". Othniel made a difference. The Israelites were freed from

oppression because of Othniel. And the Israelites had a generation of peace and prosperity just because one godly man was willing to accept the challenge that God set before him at an age when many had given up on life.

God is looking for Othniel's today. Are you willing to accept the challenges that God sets before you in His strength and power?