



“A Half-Hearted Plea”

Judges 3:7-11

Idea: Freedom comes not from a half-hearted plea for deliverance. It comes when an individual dies to himself and finds life in Jesus Christ.

Intro: There’s not much that is more disappointing to me than a half of something. Think about it. Who wants a half glass of sweet tea? Who wants half of a Snickers bar? Who wants half of a scoop of ice cream? Who wants half of a paycheck? Who wants to set on half of a seat? One of the reasons I don’t like to share a meal with Kara is because I want all of it, not half of it. A half of anything just doesn’t make sense. We want it all, and we should want it all.

Personally, there’s little that is more aggravating to me than half-hearted commitment. My personality makeup is such that if I decide to do something, then I’m all in. I’m going to be totally committed to the end. Sometimes I am loyal to a fault, but the reality is, half-heartedness is a foreign concept to me.

Illust: Having grown up in Arkansas and being an alumni of the University of Arkansas, I am a lifelong Razorback fan. That means I am often let down. I have only experienced the elation of one national championship, which came from the 1994 basketball team. In football the Hogs haven't even won an SEC championship. On the flipside, my Alabama buddies have won 4 national championships in the last 7 years. So there's been an ongoing temptation to drop the Hogs for the Tide. But I just can't do it. That's my team. That's my school. I'm committed through the good times and the bad times.

I don't understand how a person can commit to something and not follow through on it. The truth is many people only stick with something while its easy and fun. The moment it becomes difficult or dull, they quit.

“I sense an attitude in students and even in older Christians...to commit themselves to anything as long as they feel good about it and are having a *beautiful* experience. Such an approach to life seems as dependable as a roof shored up by a wet noodle.”
– Katie Funk Wiebe

Half-heartedness is deplorable to Jesus. He rebuked the church in Laodicea (Revelation 3) because they were lukewarm in their faith. He wished they were either cold or hot but never lukewarm. In our passage today, we will see a half-hearted, lukewarm plea from Israel. They wanted God's deliverance, but they didn't really want God.

Read Judges 3:7-11.

Inquiry: The history of the Judges is one of apostasy as Israel consistently walked away from God. It is also a story of redemption in the face of rebellion. During this period there was a recurring cycle of four phases: apostasy, servitude, supplication, and deliverance. The Lord raised up judges or deliverers who rescued the Israelites from their oppressors.

Today, we are looking at Othniel, the first judge. Keep in mind that the order in which the narratives are arranged is not necessarily chronological but rather rhetorical and logical, reflecting the downward spiraling of the Israelite condition during this period.

Who is Othniel? His name means God is powerful. We first learn of him in Joshua 15 and Judges 1 where his conquest of Kiriath-sepher and subsequent marriage to Achsah is depicted. He was the nephew of Caleb. Chronologically, Othniel represents the generation that replaced those Israelites who had first entered the land of Canaan. He was a contemporary of Joshua. Ethnically, he was of the tribe of Judah. By beginning with him the narrative reflects the early primacy of Judah, repeating the pattern in chapter 1 and 20:18. The order compensates for Judah's absence elsewhere in the book. Personally, Othniel is a genuinely noble figure, having demonstrated his faith and military skills in the conquest of Kiriath-sepher. Theocratically, by beginning here, the author announces that if Yahweh can deliver Israel from this emperor he can rescue them from any foe. After all, in the end the real hero is not Othniel but God.

Who is Cushan-rishathaim? His name formally reads Cushan of Double Wickedness, which probably functions as a mocking pseudonym. He is listed as the king between the rivers or king of Mesopotamia. Some versions say "Aram Naharaim." It is rendered *Syria* in the LXX. This name is given to the area populated primarily by Arameans, one of the most important ethnic groups in the late second and early first millennia. Their territory extended from northeast of the Sea of Galilee to the Taurus mountains in the north and eastward beyond the Habur tributary of the upper Euphrates River. Therefore, if Cushan is an Aramean, then that means he was the king of a mighty empire.

Typically, the oppression and ensuing deliverance by a judge was isolated to one or two Jewish tribes. However, the deliverance by Othniel a Judahite seems to indicate that most

of Israel was under the control of Cushan. For him to have extended his tentacles as far as Judah in southern Canaan meant he was a world-class emperor, who held Canaan in his grip for at least eight years.

Why was Israel in bondage? Verse 7 tells us that Israel did what was evil. They forgot God and served the Baals and Asheroth. Therefore, God's anger was kindled, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan. Israel's apostasy led to their servitude. After eight brutal years of oppression, they cried out to God for deliverance. The nature of their cry for help is worth being noted. The word, translated *cry* (קָרָא), is a word that expresses the anguish of a person in a distressing situation in need of deliverance. It, however, does not express repentance for sin. So we should not interpret this outcry of Israel as a penitential plea. It was simply a cry of pain and a cry for help.

God heard the cry and had compassion on them. He raised up Othniel, who was already a hero among Israel, to deliver them. Cushan was defeated and the land had rest for forty years or a generation. Significantly, the narrator notes that it is the land, rather than the people, that enjoyed rest (vs. 11).

Verse 12 indicates that, after Othniel's death, Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Their cry for help, while under the crushing hand of Cushan, was a half-hearted plea. This story reveals some truths that we must learn and apply.

1. A life marked by sin and rebellion results in a life marked by oppression and bondage to that sin. (vs. 7)

It seems logical to think that Israel became oppressed and under bondage when Cushan conquered them. The truth, however, is that they had become slaves long before the king of Mesopotamia marched into the land. If that is true, then who oppressed and held them in bondage? The answer is Israel. They were enslaved to their sin. Verse 7 tells us that the people forgot God.

Their forgetfulness wasn't a passive case of amnesia though. The grammatical and contextual links that this verse has with 2:11-3 demand a more intentional and active interpretation. Israel, then, disregarded God in order to serve the Baals and Asheroth. They chose to walk away from their God. Their forsaking of God, who was their liberator both physically and spiritually, enslaved them to sin. Sin always enslaves; it never liberates.

Jesus taught this in John 8. The chapter begins with the religious leaders bringing a woman to Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery. They paraded her before the Lord as one enslaved to sin. Jesus turned the scenario around on them saying, *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."* Jesus pointed out the reality that all are enslaved to sin and called people to Himself saying, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

Some of the people believed on Him; others refused. So Jesus said to them *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* They answered him, *"We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"* Jesus answered them, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin"* (John 8:31-34).

Oppression and bondage don't begin when you experience the consequences of your sin. They don't take place when God punishes your sin. They begin in the heart and mind. They begin in the very choice you make to rebel and sin against God. At that very moment your choice enslaves you.

Appl: What choices have you made that enslave you to sin?

“When you have finished with committing sin, sin is not finished with you. The first cost is high, but it is only the down payment. You keep paying in your conscience, in your body, in the suffering you produce for your family, your friends, and your community. And finally, you will have to pay in hell.”

– Ruth Copeland

2. The consequences of sin are a grace of God to awaken you to the reality of sin. (vs. 8)

Israel’s sin and rebellion, they’re willful rejection of God’s Word, resulted in God’s anger being kindled against them. This judgment, as we learned last week, should not be understood solely as the wrath of God against sin. Rather, we need to see it through the lens of grace. God’s discipline against our sin is His way to awaken us to its reality; thus, it is God’s way to bring us to a place of brokenness, repentance, and faith.

6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” – Heb 12:6

Illust: The Christian man or woman who is caught up in an adulterous affair will eventually have his or her sinful lifestyle brought to the light. Jesus loves the person too much to allow the sin to remain hidden. When the affair is uncovered the fallout will be great. Trust will be broken between spouses, children, friends, and church members. The scandal will be out in the open for everyone to talk about around the water coolers and coffee shops. When the sin is discovered, does that mean God hates the believers involved?...Not at all. His discipline is His grace to awaken the sinner to His sin. It is the Lord’s gracious way to free that individual from his or her sin.

God's judgment through Cushan was His gracious way to bring Israel to a place of brokenness, repentance, and faith.

3. The purpose of God's deliverance is not only to rescue you from the oppressor but also from yourself. (vs. 9-10)

As we have already seen, Israel's greatest enemy was not Cushan and the army from Mesopotamia. Their greater enemy was themselves. When the people cried out to God, He raised up Othniel who delivered them from Cushan and led the nation for 40 years.

You see the Canaanites surrounding Israel were a great temptation to God's people. This is why God instructed Joshua and the people to drive them out. God knew that their idolatry would appeal to the wickedness within Israel's hearts. If the land were free from idols, then Israel would have had a much easier path for faithfulness. They, however, still would battle the idolatry within their own hearts.

This is the point Paul is making in the early chapters of Romans. He makes the case that every person, Jew and Gentile alike, is sinful and rebellious. It is a matter of the heart. No one is righteous. No one seeks after God. All are sinners. All run to worthless things. There is no fear of God before their eyes (Romans 3).

The Spirit of the Lord was upon Othniel. This faithful man of God, like Caleb, not only delivered Israel from oppression; he also judged them. He was a light...a teacher to them for forty years. He was a type of Christ in the OT. His life and ministry was a shadow of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

18 *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has*

sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." – Luke 4:18-19

Israel's greatest enemy resided within their own hearts. Today, God seeks to not only deliver you from the effects of sin. He seeks to deliver you from your sin.

4. True deliverance happens when you desire to be rescued from sin rather than just the effects of sin. (vs. 10-11)

The story of Othniel's deliverance of Israel ends in disappointment. The people's cry for help was not a repentant plea. They did not cry out of a broken and contrite heart over their sin. They cried to God from a heart wanting to get out from under the consequences of their sin. Therefore, though Israel was delivered from the oppression of Cushan, they were never truly delivered. God gave them a gospel witness in Othniel, but verse 11 tells us that the land had rest not the people.

Appl: Today, sin may be ravaging your life. The consequences are great, and you long to be out from under them. If God were to remove them, would you walk in repentance and faithfulness? Remember the consequences and discipline are largely an act of God's grace to point out the greater need of forgiveness and transformation in your life. Being delivered from the consequences of sin does not equate deliverance from sin.

Do you long for a relationship with Jesus Christ that brings freedom? Or do you long for the freedom that comes from Jesus?

Conclusion: Are you a slave to sin today? Has your plea to God been a half-hearted one? How do you become free? Jesus

said that knowing the truth would set you free. What is truth? Who is truth? Jesus is the truth. He is the One who has the power to set you free from sin's bondage. Freedom comes from knowing the Truth. Are you like the religious leaders in John 8, you have a form of spirituality but have never experienced freedom from sin's oppression? Are you like the adulterous woman; you're not overly religious but enslaved to sin? Perhaps, you are in relationship with Jesus. You have experienced His freedom, but sinful choices have allowed sin to enslave you once again. What should you do? All three types of people should look to Jesus. You should know the Truth. Jesus will set you free.

Freedom comes not from a half-hearted plea for deliverance. It comes when an individual dies to himself and finds life in Jesus Christ.