

The Lion Of God by Jeff Strite

Judges 3:7-3:11

OPEN: "Muhammad Ali" was probably one of the greatest heavyweight boxers in the sport's history. Not only was he a skilled boxer, he was very good at self-promotion, and he'd use clever pieces of short poetry to catch the imagination of his audience. For example, before his fight with Sonny Liston he said he was: "gonna float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. (Liston's) hands can't hit what his eyes can't see."

But he also used that "poetry" to challenge others to do better. He once gave this message to a college audience in NY:

"Stay in College
Get the knowledge
Stay there till you're through.
If they can make penicillin out of moldy bread,
They can sure make something out of you."

This morning we're reading about a man that God "made something out of."

He doesn't seem like much.

Not too many Christians know who he was or what he did.

But he was important to God (his name is in the book) and God thinks it's important YOU know who this hero of the Old Testament was and what he did.

His name is Othniel (meaning "Lion of God") and he saved Israel from their sins.

Now, just a little bit of background.

Years before Othniel was even born his uncle Caleb did something that impressed God. Caleb was just a young man when Israel was held in slavery in the land of Egypt. He was there when Moses came and challenged Pharaoh and said God told Pharaoh to "Let my people go."

Caleb was there when God brought down the 10 plagues upon Egypt to force Pharaoh to ask the people of God to leave.

He was there when God parted the Red Sea to allow Israel to cross on dry ground and caused it those same waters to collapse upon the chariots and army Pharaoh, destroying the might of Egypt.

Caleb where was there when the people of Israel came to the Mountain of God (Mt. Sinai) and he would have seen God come down upon that mountain with thunder and lightning and the terrifying sound of the trumpet of God.

And he was there just a few days later when God brought Israel to the very border of land He had promised to give to His people.

Moses selected 12 men to go in and spy out the lay of the land and help him decide the best strategy for taking Palestine. Two of those spies were Joshua and CALEB (Othniel's uncle). Those two great men were overwhelmed by what they saw. It was literally a land flowing with Milk and Honey. They saw great cities they wouldn't have to build, orchards they

wouldn't have to plant, and wells they wouldn't have to dig. And God said it was all theirs!!!!

They remembered how God brought the plagues on Egypt.
And how He parted of the Red Sea.
And how He showed His fearsome power at Mount Sinai.
And they were convinced if God was giving them this land, nothing could stop them.

But the other 10 spies didn't see it that way.
They saw exactly the same things the other two did. They saw the beauty, the splendor and the wonder of the Promised Land, but these wonders were overshadowed by something else they saw. They saw the giants in the land, and in those giants they saw defeat...disaster... and death. And they were afraid.
And their fear spread through the entire camp and the people became so frightened that they refused to obey God and enter the Promised Land.

So God said "Fine, you don't want to go... you don't have to. You will never enter the land I've promised you. You'll die out here in the desert."

So everyone there died in the desert... except two men.
Two men didn't die in the desert.
Two men were allowed to enter the Promised Land.
The two men who believed God's promise about the Promised Land.
Two men named Joshua and Caleb.

Forty years later Caleb enters the Promised Land at the age of 85.
And he was STILL convinced that if God promised something... God would do it! And so Caleb said to Joshua: "... 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." Joshua 14:12

God promised.
Caleb believed.
And at 85 years old, he cleaned out the giants in that land.

And Othniel was his nephew.

Now, what was so special about Othniel?
Let's read it again: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. 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.
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." Judges 3:7-9

All through the book of Judges it's the same story.
It's like Israel never learned!

1. The people SIN,
2. God PUNISHES them by selling them into the hands of their enemies
3. The people REPENT and plead for God to forgive them
4. God raises up a JUDGE/DELIVERER to save them.
5. And Israel is at peace as long as that Judge lives.

What interesting here, is that Othniel is the FIRST of the judges.
And God CHOSE him to deliver Israel from the results of their sins.

But why choose him?
Why choose Othniel?
What was so special about him?
Well, there are a few reasons I can think of.

1st Othniel was a man who was infected.
He was infected with faith.
He caught his faith from someone else.
Who do you think he was infected by?
That's right – Caleb.
Othniel learned from Caleb how to have a bold faith and how to live a courageous life.

Don't misunderstand me now.
Caleb was a man of faith... but Caleb's faith wasn't in HIMSELF.
It wasn't in his own strength and cleverness or abilities.
Caleb's faith was based in a God who would always be there for him. There was no challenge he wouldn't take on as long as God was by his side.

As David wrote in Psalm 18:2 "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

That's the kind of man or woman that God's looking for.
He's looking for a David.
He's looking for a Caleb.
He's looking for – an Othniel.

Othniel was a man of faith.
And I believe he was a man of faith because he hung around his uncle.
In the first chapter of Judges, we find that Caleb is asking for somebody to step up and take out an important city for him.

"Caleb said, 'I will give my daughter Acsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher.
Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it...' Judges 1:12-13

Othniel doesn't say anything anywhere in the book of Judges.

He's not a man of words. He's a man of action.

Caleb throws down the challenge for someone to take the city, and Othniel just gets up, goes out and takes it.

Why? Because he hung around Caleb.

Caleb does stuff like.

Caleb trusts God and does mighty deeds.

If Caleb can do that... Othniel figures he can do it too.

Paul wrote: "I can do ALL THINGS through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13
KJV

We have the same promise as Christians that Caleb and Othniel had in their day. The same God who backed them up is there to back us up as well.

I CAN DO ALL THINGS through Christ who strengthens me.

But I'm convinced that Othniel became a man of faith because he hung out with a man of faith.

And that's what church is all about. Church is a place where we hang out with other men/women of faith.

There are people who will tell you they can be just as good a Christians without going to church. Have you ever heard someone say that?

That's a lie.

Now, they CAN be Christians without going to Church, but they cannot be "just as good a Christian" that way.

Church is designed to be

- a place where we rub off on each other.
- a place where we strengthen each other.
- a place where we challenge each other to great deeds.

Hebrews 12:24-25 tells us to "...consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another— and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Meeting together as a Church and in Bible Studies and in Sunday School is not just an end in itself. You can have all the "attendance pins" you like, but just being here is not enough. We are to be in church to leapfrog on each other's faith. To build on each other faith and grow stronger together.

ILLUS: I remember teaching a Sunday School where two men challenged each other to see how many people they could invite. They decided to compete to see which of them could invite more people to church over the next month.

That's the kind of thing I'm talking about here.

So, Othniel was chosen to save Israel from their sins because he was infected with faith. And (pause) I believe that Othniel was chosen because he'd been prepared beforehand.

Othniel didn't just sit around staring at the sky all day. He already had an active faith when God chose him. He'd already gotten used to acting on that faith when he took that city for Caleb.

When God wanted a man... Othniel was ready.

ILLUS: Sometime back I an odd thought occurred to me.

I got to thinking about some of the great heroes of Scripture. Men like Abraham, Joseph, David and others. And then it occurred to me that many of the Bible's heroes were only known for ONE thing that they did.

- Noah for example. What's he known for? He built an Ark and he floated on the water for a while. Big deal. But it was a big deal.
- Gideon was known for his defeating the Midianites with 300 men.
- Esther was a beautiful queen who was known only one thing - putting her life on the line to save her people, Israel.
- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – what are they known for? That's right; they spent time in a fiery furnace. But that's all they did of any importance in Scripture. But it was a big deal.
- Then there's Andrew, one of the 12 disciples. All he did was tell his brother Peter to come and see Jesus.
- And of course Ananias is only known for baptizing Paul into Christ. Nothing else is said about him in Scripture. He's not mentioned before or after this church changing conversion.

And you could go on and on and on about other great people of great faith like them in Scripture. Many were "one hit" wonders. They were only known for one thing. But that one thing was something that shaped the course of Biblical history.

But something else I noticed about them. God didn't just pluck them out of thin air. They'd been training for years to be the kind of people they'd become.

ILLUS: A Professor of Sociology at the University of Connecticut wrote a book called "Rescuers: Portraits of Holocaust survivors" interviewed people who had harbored fugitive Jews in their homes despite the danger to they and their families.

What he found was that many of the rescuers had a history of doing good deeds before the war - some visiting people in the hospital, others, collecting books for poor students, still others taking care of stray animals. "They just got into the habit of doing good. If they hadn't perceived that pattern as natural they might have been paralyzed into inaction." They did what came natural.

That's what God is looking for. People who have gotten into the habit of being faithful to Him.

2 Chronicles 16:9 tells us "... the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him...."

God's looking for people of faith and faithfulness so He can strengthen and use them for great things.

And that's why God chose Othniel.

Lastly, I believe Othniel was chosen to do what he did because God had set him up. I know that's an odd thought, but I really think God sets us up once in a while. He puts us in the right place at the right time to do the right thing because He wants to prove something.

Consider these facts about Othniel:

1. He's of the tribe of Judah
2. His name means "Lion of God"
3. He is chosen to be the rescuer of Israel
4. And he rescues God's people from their sins

Does that sound like somebody else we know? (JESUS)

That's right:

- Jesus was born to the tribe of Judah.
- Revelation 5:5 says he is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah".
- And he was sent to rescue us – to save us from our sins.

But I think God even threw in an extra nugget in here for us. The bad guy in this story is named Cushan-Rishathaim. Now aside from the fact that that's an extremely hard name to pronounce, it has a meaning.

Cushan-Rishathaim means "doubly-wicked blackness".

Does that sound like anybody else we know? (SATAN)

That's right! The Lion of God came to defeat the one who is doubly wicked blackness, so that we might be freed from the curse of our sins.

Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us "Since the children have flesh and blood, (Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Isn't that cool?

And it's all tied to Othniel... a simple man who was willing to trust God, serve God and be used by God. And my point is this: God is looking for folks who are willing to trust Him, willing to serve Him, and willing to let Him set them up to do something powerful.

And you don't have to be particularly smart to have God use you.

I'm living proof of that.

CLOSE: Years ago I went to a secular college. My brother said I needed to just to be in their Glee Club and experience the things they could do for me. And since dad was willing to pay the tuition, I went. Of course, while I was there I wanted to take classes I thought would help me in being a better preacher, so took things like sociology, psychology and philosophy.

One of the classes offered in the syllabus was called "Religions of the West". The description

of the class said it would cover Judaism, Christianity and Islam and tell me about their background and cultures.

And I thought – this should be no brainer. This would be a great class to take. It would give me a leg up on my plans to attend Bible College a couple of years later.

But the teacher had no intention of really telling us about the nature of Western Religions. His objective was to attack and undermine the faith of his students. His first class was dedicated to attacking the Old Testament. He said that Moses didn't write the first 5 books of the Old Testament.

Now, bear in mind my total religious education consisted of listening to sermons and going to Sunday School. So I didn't have much to say... but I raised my hand anyway.

I said "That's not what I've always heard." (Which I'm sure impressed the teacher)

He smiled back and said "That may be so, but the majority of scholars agree with me."

Then he proceeded to attack another Bible book, and again I raised my hand and offered a lame challenge, and again he declared that the majority of scholars agreed with him.

Years later I realized how I must have looked to the other students. They hadn't paid to hear me talk. They'd paid to be taught by this professor, and I was doing little more than embarrassing myself. But I was determined not to let the Bible be treated like that.

Now I wasn't real quick, but I began to realize that if this teacher was attacking the Old Testament, he'd do the same to the New Testament when he shifted his attention to Christianity. So I went to the Campus Ministry and asked if they had any resources I could read that would help me do a better job of defending the Bible.

Sure enough, when the professor got started on Christianity, his first words were that Matthew didn't write Matthew, Mark didn't write Mark and so on. But I was ready. I raised my hand and said "According to this scholar and that scholar he was wrong because of this that or the other thing" (I couldn't begin to tell you the arguments I used, but I remember feeling good about myself).

The teacher paused for a moment – I don't think anyone had ever challenged him like that before – then he said "Well, the majority of scholars agree with me."

And we were off and running.

He'd attack Scripture, I'd cite my scholars and he'd respond that the majority of scholars agreed with him.

Then came the test. I answered all the questions, but then I wrote at the bottom of the test: "I need to apologize. This is your class and I've been giving you a hard time. But you've been attacking something that's very important to me.

However, you're going to be teaching on Islam next... and I don't care about what you say about them. I promise I won't bother you any more."

I was done with him. But God wasn't.

He no sooner got started in teaching about Islam than he began to talk about Black Muslims. Black Muslims got him to racial prejudice and racial prejudice got him to WWII. And he said that the reason we dropped the bomb on the Japanese and not the Germans was because the Germans were white and the Japanese weren't.

Now, I love history and I was pretty sure that wasn't right. But I'd made a promise and so I

didn't say anything. The problem is, people tell me that when I get frustrated I sigh. And I must have sighed because he looked at me and said:

"Alright Strite, what's wrong now."

I hadn't said anything!

But there was no getting out of it. I responded "According to everything I've ever heard, we didn't have the bomb when the Germans surrendered."

"We did too," he came back. "We had it in 1942."

Well, what did I know? We'd just come out of the Vietnam War. Nixon was president. The government lied about all kinds of things. Maybe they'd lied about this too. Once again, I was beaten down by a man who knew more about life than I did.

That's when God played His card.

One back and 4 seats to my left, a girl raised her hand. "I'm sorry sir, you're wrong. My father worked on the project and we didn't have the bomb until after Germany surrendered."

Now, notice what God did.

He set me up. He allowed me to make an absolute fool out of myself defending Scripture, all for the purpose of allowing that girl to expose that professor's false thinking. In one fell swoop, He discredited everything that professor had said and made everything I had stood for have weight.

My point is – I wasn't all that impressive, and I wasn't all that smart, but God used me anyway. And that's the story of Othniel. A man who God made something out of. A man who God chose to be His man at the right place, at the right time, for the right reason.

And that is what God is looking for you in you and me.

He's looking for someone He can use.

He's looking for you.

But first you must belong to Him