

# REMEMBERING THE LORD

**SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING**



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Judges 3:7-11  
3rd Message  
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Writer Ken Gire tells of visiting his aunt not long before she died:

She was frail and looked as if she would break if you hugged her. I hugged her, and she didn't. But she didn't recognize me either. She babbled incoherently, repeating a series of syllables.<sup>1</sup>

Gire's aunt was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The two of them had shared a wonderful relationship, but she didn't even know who he was anymore. Gire wanted his aunt to know that he loved her, but she couldn't remember him.

Throughout the story of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites forget the Lord. We, too, forget the Lord; we forget the relationship we've enjoyed with him, forget how much he loves us, and make ourselves easy pickings for the counterfeit gods that surround us. It's almost as if we lose our memories. The Lord himself, though, helps us remember, not least through the stories of Israel's forgetfulness. Judges 3:7-11 is one such story.

As I reflected on the story of Israel in this passage, I realized that it corresponds to my story—especially a particular chapter of my story—in multiple ways. The particular chapter, a two-year period some thirty years ago, is fresh in my mind because it featured prominently when I shared aspects of my story in recent weeks with both the high school and college groups in our church. When I study the Scriptures, I attempt to bring my story to the biblical story. Sometimes, it seems, God brings the biblical story to my story: out of nowhere, I see parallels. Such was the case on this occasion. As we consider Judges 3:7-11, bring your story to it. Or, perhaps God will bring it to you.

As the story of the first judge, or tribal leader, in Israel, the passage is paradigmatic for the entire book of Judges. The story in Judges 3:7-11 establishes a pattern for the stories that follow. The pattern illustrates Israel's need for the Lord—and, by extension, our need for him.

The pattern is similar in each story, but the judges God raises up are not. Othniel, the first judge, is squeaky clean, but the judges that follow him pale by comparison. Some

of them are pretty roguish. In the period of the Judges, God uses all sorts of people to accomplish his purposes.

## Israel's story

Judges 3:7-11:

**<sup>7</sup>The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>The Spirit of the LORD came on 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. <sup>11</sup>So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.**

The Israelites “forgot” the Lord. They don't forget him completely, of course. They still know of the Lord, but his works in their behalf feel more distant and have become less meaningful—so much so that they don't even “know the Lord” anymore (Judges 2:10). Satan is only too happy to fill the void with the Baals and the Asherahs, local gods who seemed more able to meet the needs of the forgetful Israelites and satisfy their passions.

The Lord isn't about to give up his people without a fight, which is why he gives them over to an enemy. If they don't want him as king, then the Lord lets them have another. The name of the king, Cushan-Rishathaim, means “double wickedness,” a sort of nickname given to him by the Israelites. He is so powerful that he is able to come from a faraway land, Aram Naharaim, to rule over the Israelites. This king is especially wicked and especially powerful. The plight of God's people is especially dire. Perhaps, in such a state, they will come to their senses and remember the Lord.

However, when they finally cry out to him, they cry out not for the sake of repentance but for the sake of deliverance. There is no suggestion that they put away the pagan gods. They want the help of the Lord, but they don't want the Lord himself. Those who had forgotten the Lord remember enough to cry out to him, but they fail to remember enough to forsake the other gods. Despite the unrepentant state of his people, the Lord hears their cry. Such is the extent of God's love for his people that he delivers them even though they persist in their rebellion against him.

This story of deliverance is almost too good to be true, especially in light of the sordid stories to come in the Book of Judges. The Lord raises up Othniel, the knight in shining armor who had captured a pagan city and won the hand of the noble Acsah (Judges 1:11-15). Now, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Othniel and wins a smashing victory, and the land enjoys peace. What could be better? Well, nothing got better, anyway. On the contrary, everything gets worse. And worse. And worse. Everything falls apart.

On closer inspection, however, everything was falling apart even during the days of Othniel. The people remembered the Lord enough to cry out to him but not enough to forget the other gods and worship him exclusively. The land enjoyed peace, but nothing is said of the people. The oppressors were vanquished, but the absence of oppressors doesn't necessarily imply the presence of the Lord. The land had peace, yes, for forty years, but only during the lifetime of Othniel. When he died, "Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord ..." (Judges 3:12). Othniel managed to keep things together, but the people depended too much on him and not enough on the Lord. The forty years of Othniel were the best of days, but they couldn't last, because the Israelites were enmeshed with Othniel, forgetful of the Lord, and desirous of other gods.

## Our stories

At some point, some of us, like the Israelites of old, have a powerful encounter with the Lord, but as the years roll by, the memory of his work in our behalf fades. Whatever happened back then was significant at the time, but now it's nothing more than a distant memory with little meaning. We were different people back then. Since then, we've moved on. We've become more mature in our outlooks. God? Was that really him? Or was he something we conjured up to help us process everything that we were experiencing? Some of us, like the Israelites, "forget" the

Lord. Perhaps it can even be said that we know of the Lord but that we don't know the Lord himself anymore, if we ever did.

When we forget the Lord, the local gods are only too happy to fill the void. Money, sex, power, and success, for example, rush in by promising to meet our needs and satisfy our passions.

The Lord doesn't give us up without a fight, however, even if it's a strange sort of fight he puts up. He doesn't beg, he doesn't coerce, and he doesn't vanquish the other gods. Instead, he fights for us by letting us have our way. He lets us walk away from him, and he lets us walk into the arms of the other gods, even if it breaks his heart to do so. If we want the other gods, he'll give us to the other gods. By letting us have our way, the Lord lets the other gods have their way with us. The other gods, like the king who represented them in Judges 3:8-10, are wicked and powerful—sometimes doubly wicked and especially powerful. We hope that the gods will serve us, and by appearances, at least, oftentimes they do. They meet enough of our needs and satisfy enough of our passions to make us crave just a little bit more of their offerings. Famously, John D. Rockefeller, when asked how much money is enough, is reported to have answered, "Just one dollar more." Thus, moment by moment, year by year, the gods hook us and keep us beholden to them. In reality, they don't serve us; we serve them. We don't rule over them; they rule over us.

The rule of the gods is not a benevolent one, however. We were made to worship the true God, and only as we worship him are we renewed in our humanity. In taking us away from the true God, the false gods take away our humanity. They make us prideful or envious or angry or lazy or frantic or greedy or lustful or cowardly. In other words, they make us useless for God's purposes or even turn us against God's purposes. God allows us to experience the consequences of false worship. In some cases, the consequences involve misery. In other cases, the consequences are less recognizable: we might only be able to perceive that we have become someone we do not want to be.

In any event, if we've given ourselves to other gods, then our plight, like that of Israel, is dire. And if our plight is dire, what will we do about it? If the consequences of our choices help us to recognize the nature of our plight, we might just come to our senses and remember the Lord. If so, then the Lord's decision to hand us over to the other gods was as loving as it was harsh.

To their credit, the Israelites remembered the Lord. To their discredit, they remembered him in a partial way. Will we, like Israel, cry out simply for deliverance, reaching out to the Lord with one hand while holding onto the other gods with the other? Or will we cry out not only for deliverance but also for the Lord himself, showing that we want him and not the false gods? Will we forsake the false gods and return to the true God? In other words, the words of Jesus, will we “repent and believe”? (Mark 1:15). Perhaps we will if we understand what it’s like for God to let the other gods have their way with us. Brent Curtis observes:

Have you ever had to literally turn a lover over to a mortal enemy to allow her to find out for herself what his intentions toward her really were? Have you ever had to lie in bed knowing she was believing his lies and was having sex with him every night? Have you ever sat helplessly by in a parking lot, while your enemy and his friends took turns raping your lover even as you sat nearby, unable to win her heart enough so she would trust you to rescue her? Have you ever called this one you had loved for so long, even the day after her rape, and asked her if she was ready to come back to you only to have her say her heart was still captured by your enemy? Have you ever watched your lover’s beauty slowly diminish and fade in a haze of alcohol, drugs, occult practices, and infant sacrifice until she is no longer recognizable in body or soul? Have you ever loved one so much that you even send your only son to talk with her about your love for her, knowing that he will be killed by her? (And in spite of knowing all of this, he was willing to do it because he loved her, too, and believed you were meant for each other.)<sup>2</sup>

Even if we remember the Lord and cry out to him in partial ways, we have hope that he still hears our cry, just as he heard the Israelites’ cry. He may deliver us, even if we persist in our rebellion against him. Yes, he loves us that much. Maybe he’ll get our attention by winning a smashing victory in our behalf. If he rescues us from dire straits, we may then enjoy a period of something we might call peace. What could be better?

A vibrant relationship with the Lord: that’s what would be better. There is such a thing as false peace, for the absence of difficulty and the enjoyment of happy times don’t necessarily imply the presence of the Lord. What is the basis for the peace we experience? The Israelites’ peace was dependent on Othniel, not the Lord. Is the peace we experience based on a person or on the Lord, on events or

on the Lord, on circumstances or on the Lord?

When my wife and I were house hunting a few years ago, we saw plenty of houses that looked as though they were in good shape when we viewed them. But when we later looked at the disclosures, I read about dozens of problems that made me wonder how these houses were even standing. Some of us look like we’re in good shape spiritually, and we may have convinced ourselves that we’re in good shape, but in reality, we’re clinging to a fragile false peace that depends on something other than the Lord. Any minute, the spiritual structure could come crashing down.

Jesus tells us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” He adds, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 14:27, 16:33). The key words in these two verses are “my peace” and “in me.” The peace of Jesus, which we have in Jesus, is a relational peace. Whatever happens to us, Jesus assures us of his presence, his availability, his support. The peace that Othniel gave the land lasted forty years. That’s about the best our knights can do for us: give us forty years of peace. That’s not bad, but it’s not forever. The peace that Christ gives us overflows into, and fills, the new creation.

For the Israelites, everything got worse and fell apart. How about us? Will we remember the Lord, or will we forget him?

## My story

Here’s how my story parallels the story of Israel in Judges 3:7-11:

As a teenager, I had a powerful encounter with the Lord. A friend invited me to a church youth group, I met Jesus there, and I discovered a spiritual community that thrilled me. But when I went to college, I found no such spiritual community, and I drifted from the Lord. By the time I got out of college, I wasn’t sure what I believed anymore. I wasn’t sure any longer how to understand what had happened to me in high school. You might say I “forgot” the Lord. Then, another god filled the void: I wrapped my life around a new relationship. In the context of our relationship, we both sort of rediscovered Christ. What could be better? Whatever peace I enjoyed, though, wasn’t the peace that Jesus gives; it was a peace that was dependent on a new relationship. I didn’t really rediscover Christ; I discovered a woman, and my relationship with Christ

was just along for the ride, caught up in the excitement of something else.

Then one day, it was over. She informed me that she didn't want to be with me anymore, that she didn't want much to do with Jesus anymore, and that she was moving in with a man she had just met. Everything fell apart. I was devastated. The Lord had let me have the other god for a while, and then he let me feel the consequences of my false worship. I had just moved to a new city to start a new job. I was alone; I didn't know anyone. My plight was dire, and I knew it.

Desperate, and not knowing where else to turn, I turned to the Lord. I guess you could say I remembered him. I cried out for deliverance, sure, but I also cried out for him. I recognized that I had neglected him; now, I felt not only that I needed him but also that I wanted him. I wanted his presence, his fellowship, his love. When I cried out, I had the distinct sense that he was hearing me, that he was there with me. I also found a friend, who brought me to his church. Both the friend, who I saw almost every day, and the church helped me pour out my heart and experience God's love for me.

Since then, I have, of course, suffered more setbacks, but I have always felt that Jesus was walking with me through them. Thirty years ago, the Lord visited me, and I found something of the peace that only Jesus can give: his presence, his availability, his support. I had forgotten the Lord. He let me walk away from him and into the arms of another god. For a while, I experienced something like peace, but when everything fell apart, I felt the consequences of my forgetfulness. Then I remembered the Lord. When I cried out to him, he was there.

## Last farewell

Before Ken Gire left his aunt, he went to say goodbye to her for the last time:

I touched her hand and stroked the soft, slack skin on her arm. "I have to leave now," I told her, trying to get her attention over the babbling. And as I reached down to hug her, the babbling stopped. "I love you," I said as I kissed her forehead. Her frail, slack arms reached up to me, trembling with weakness, and she tried the best she could to hug

me and said, "I love you too."

She remembered who I was. Maybe only for a moment, but she remembered....

For you and I have lost our memory, forgotten who we are and who it is that loves us. Yet even in our forgetfulness, God has not forgotten us. He reaches down to embrace us, to kiss us on the forehead and tell us, "I love you." The best we can do is remember for a moment who we are and, even if it's for the briefest of moments, remember who it is that loves us, reach up with palsied arms, respond with our faltering voice, and say, "I love you too."<sup>3</sup>

Beloved, remember the Lord.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ken Gire, *Windows of the Soul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House), 139-40.

<sup>2</sup>Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers), 106.

<sup>3</sup>Gire, 140-42.