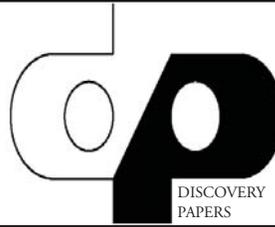


# SHAMGAR'S STICK

**SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING**



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Judges 3:31

5th Message

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When I first wondered how to teach on the three heroes of Judges 3, I imagined doing so in one message. However, I decided that the first hero, Othniel, deserved his own message, because he was the paradigmatic judge, the shining star of Israel. Once I decided to isolate Othniel, I thought I'd give Ehud, the second hero, his own message, because he was such a compelling figure. Then I had to decide what to do with Shamgar, the third hero. The author of Judges only gives him one verse. What do I do with one verse? I thought of using Shamgar as a lead-in to the story of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4, but I quickly dismissed that idea because Judges 4, a long passage, merits its own message. Then I considered skipping Shamgar altogether. Who's going to miss one verse? But Shamgar's one verse stuck out like a discordant note, begging for my attention. His story, I surmised, must stick out for a reason. Shamgar wouldn't let me skip him. So, here we go: a message on one verse.

Many of us feel that our stories deserve, at best, one verse in the book of life. What might God do with a one-verse story? What might he do with your story? Well, first let's see what he does with Shamgar's story.

Othniel was like a knight in shining armor. Ehud, who followed Othniel, was cut from a different cloth: he was more like a secret agent than a knight in shining armor. Already, as the stories of the judges begin, we observe that God delivers Israel by raising up different kinds of leaders who employ different kinds of methods. Shamgar differs from both of his predecessors. He is neither a knight in shining armor nor a secret agent. He is more like ... well, let's consider his story.

Story? It's a story, yes, but it's as short as they come. The narrator tells it with a mere fourteen words in Hebrew. The brevity of Shamgar's story, though, makes him all the more intriguing.

## The Shamgar story

Judges 3:31:

**After Ehud came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an**

## **oxgoad. He too saved Israel.**

Someone came "after" Ehud. God's work doesn't end with the passing of one of his Spirit-empowered leaders. He raises up another—and another and another. Shamgar "came." Came from where? We don't know. Did God raise him up like he raised up Othniel and Ehud? Presumably, but the narrator doesn't say. Shamgar comes out of nowhere.

He doesn't have a Hebrew name. Scholars have different opinions concerning his nationality, but all are agreed: Shamgar was not an Israelite. He was the son of Anath, a description that doesn't give us much help with his identity. Was he the son of a man named Anath; a worshiper of the pagan god, Anath; a resident of Ben-Anath in Galilee? All of the above? We don't know. He's a mystery man.

He's like the unknown gunslinger who rides into town with unclear intentions. Only he doesn't carry a gun, of course. Note also that he doesn't even carry a sword. In fact, he doesn't carry a weapon of any kind.

We know more about what Shamgar did than who he was. He struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad, a long, steel-tipped stick used for guiding livestock. What, couldn't he find a sword or some other weapon? Did he eschew conventional weaponry for a stick? Again, we don't know. This we know: Shamgar transformed a cattle prod into a lethal weapon. He envisioned another use for an oxgoad. Shamgar turned an agricultural implement on the Philistines, with unbelievably deadly results. The killing of that many of Israel's enemies in itself makes him a hero, but doing so not with a weapon but with a long stick makes him an almost mythic figure. He cleans out the town and then rides off into the sunset, so to speak, and, aside from a scene-setting reference in Judges 4, we never hear from him again.

Shamgar was not like Othniel. He was not like Ehud. Yet, the narrator observes, "He too saved Israel." Then again, the Book of Judges has a penchant for unlikely heroes. Othniel, the first judge, is the only one who comes from central casting. The rest of them, from Ehud to Samson, come from outside the box.

## Stories like this

Shamgar is an unlikely hero who uses an unlikely weapon to win an unlikely victory. It's irresistible, isn't it? We love stories like this. Tell us a good story that features a hero who rises from obscurity, defies impossible odds, employs unconventional methods, and takes down the bad guys, and we'll listen. Or show us such a story and we'll watch.

When I was in my twenties, I was invited to a friend's house for an all-night Clint Eastwood film festival that featured nothing but his westerns and the *Dirty Harry* movies. Not surprisingly, considering the genre, the only people in attendance were men. The only people invited were probably men; I don't know. Let's put it this way: we didn't come to watch Clint Eastwood fall in love with Meryl Streep in *The Bridges of Madison County* (although, of course, we couldn't have seen that movie, because it hadn't come out yet). Each of Eastwood's characters in the movies we watched, either a lone gunman or a lone cop, bears a striking resemblance to Shamgar. Something within the men who came that night was drawn to those movies—probably that something that says, “Hey, I'm not just supposed to sit back and let evil have its way in this world; I'm supposed to do something about it.”

Here's my question, though: Are such movies, and video games that now follow similar storylines, inspiring us, especially our men, to take on evil in this world, or are they allowing us to live vicariously through them and enabling us to satisfy our cravings while we lounge on our couches? Something within me wants to be Shamgar, but I have to admit: something within me also wants to just sit back and watch Clint Eastwood take down the bad guys.

Where will the Shamgar story lead us? First, it leads us to the David story.

## The David story

In biblical history, Shamgar prepares the way for David, who also fought the Philistines—most notably, one awesome Philistine. Like Shamgar, David came out of nowhere: he was the last and least of his family. His father paraded his seven brothers before the prophet Samuel, who was seeking to anoint the next king, but didn't even bother to call David in from the fields, where he was tending sheep. David was number eight in the birth order—one more than the sacred seven. Who did Samuel anoint? David, not one of his brothers. It's a good thing, too, because when the Israelites cowered before Goliath,

the awesome Philistine tyrant, David volunteered to go up against him. He eschewed both armor and sword and instead took a shepherd's sling and some stones. Goliath laughed at him, but David told him: “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a god in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give all of you into our hands” (1 Samuel 17:45-47).

David felled the giant with a sling and a stone, a wing and a prayer. For emphasis, the narrator of 1 Samuel notes, “but there was no sword in David's hand” (1 Samuel 17:50 NASB) Instead, there was a sling in his hand. There was no sword in Shamgar's hand, either; there was an oxgoad in his hand. With a stick, Shamgar slew six hundred Philistines. With a sling, David slew the Philistine giant.

The Shamgar story leads us to the David story, and both of their stories lead us to the Christ story.

## The Christ story

Shamgar and David came out of nowhere. Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, so obscure a place that even Nathaniel, a Galilean, could dismiss it. Nathaniel asked, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:47). Shamgar was the son of Anath, whatever that means. Jesus was the son of Joseph—sort of. His lineage was considered a little suspect. Shamgar desperately took on the Philistine army, and David desperately took on the Philistine giant. Jesus desperately took on the demonic army, led by the greatest tyrant of all: Satan and his minions.

How would Jesus do it: with armor, swords, and arrows? There was no sword in either the hand of Shamgar or the hand of David. Neither was there a sword in the hand of Jesus. David fought with a sling and Shamgar with a stick. Jesus fought with two sticks—two pieces of wood that formed a cross. An oxgoad wasn't a weapon, and neither was a cross. Rome, the superpower of Jesus' day, crucified those who dared to challenge their rule. Many of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries wanted him to take up a sword against the Romans and uproot their bloody crosses. Instead, Jesus took up a cross and let the Romans nail him to it. Shamgar transformed an agricultural

implement, and David transformed a shepherd's sling. Jesus transformed a brutal implement of execution into a beautiful instrument of redemption. Shamgar struck down six hundred Philistines, and David struck down the Philistine giant. Jesus struck down the powers of darkness.

The story of Christ is the story for which all stories of heroism are reaching. The other heroes defeat the bad guys; Jesus defeats the baddest guys. Shamgar saved Israel for a moment, and David for a few moments more, but Jesus Christ saves us forever. He's the hero we've been waiting for. His story is the one we need. The other stories go to a deep place, a place that resonates with such stories. The story of Jesus goes to the deepest place, a place that needs this story.

The story of redemption goes through Shamgar and David and dozens of others until it climaxes in Jesus of Nazareth. It features the unlikeliest people and the unlikeliest means: the son of who knows who and a long stick, the least of the sons of Jesse and a shepherd's sling, the slightly suspect son of Joseph and a bloody cross. The story, exquisite in design and cosmic in scope, comes out of nowhere and captures our hearts. Out of nowhere, it seems, Christ comes to us and turns back the forces of darkness so that we might believe the story. Let the story do its work: marvel at it, revel in Christ, and bow before God.

Where do the Shamgar story, the David story, and the Christ story lead us?

## **What do you have?**

Shamgar had an oxgoad. What do you have? In broad terms, you have your life. How does it seem to you? Perhaps you feel that you don't have much to offer. Maybe you feel like David: the last, the least, and the overlooked. Perhaps unbeatable foes are pressing against you. You may even wonder what good thing could come of your life. Offer your life, in all your brokenness, confusion, and ambiguity, to God, and watch him, in time, transform it into an instrument of redemption. Offer your life to God once, twice, a thousand times; offer your life to God every day, up to and including the last day, for Jesus on his last day said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

When John Talbert, a pastor at Westgate Church in San Jose, spoke at our church's men's retreat several years ago, he said that after spending his years trying to be exceptional, he had finally reached the conclusion, at the age of forty, that he was "just average." He said he felt

God telling him something like, "Average? Oh, I can use you." On the one hand, trying to be exceptional thwarted God's work in his life. On the other hand, confessing that he was average opened the door for God's work. John was instrumental in starting Beautiful Day, a ministry of compassion to local communities that spread well beyond the doors of his church.

Bruce Maez, a member of our church, shared during our worship service a few weeks ago that he had reached a point in his life several years ago where he was wondering how he might kill himself. "If I could have figured out a way to do it, I would have done it," he said. Instead, he offered his life to Christ, even though he didn't think it amounted to anything. "I gave him my life, and he gave me a life," Bruce said. Now Bruce disciples men in our recovery ministry and serves as the head resident at Our Brother's Home, a halfway house for recovering addicts.

Twenty years ago, Carol Lind despaired of life. What did she have to give God? Not much, she thought. But look what's happened since. She became a pastor of this church, serving in a variety of ministries. Most significantly, I think, she impresses all who come in contact with her, simply by the way she trusts God, with a vision of what the life of faith can be. And now, in answer to twenty years of prayers, God has brought a godly man into her life.

Your life is like an oxgoad. Offer it to God, and he'll give you a life and a ministry, seemingly out of nowhere.

## **What else do you have?**

What specifically do you have in your life that might not seem like much but might be useful for the sake of redemption? You have time, money, spiritual gifts, talents, ideas, a vocation, a voice, arms and legs, a dwelling ... the list goes on.

Consider your dwelling: your house, your apartment, your dormitory, your cubby hole. It's a place to live, right? Of course, but could it also be a place of redemption? Could you pray that God would use it for his kingdom? Could you ask God to make your dwelling a safe harbor in a stormy world? Could you transform it into a sanctuary? Could you invite people into it? Could you bless them with a meal in it?

Nowhere is hospitality mentioned in the scriptures as a spiritual gift. That doesn't mean that some believers aren't particularly gifted in ways that make them especially hospitable. There's no reason to suppose that all of the

spiritual gifts are mentioned in the New Testament or that a certain collection of some of the gifts that are mentioned gather to make someone particularly gifted with hospitality.<sup>1</sup> In any case, although hospitality isn't included in the lists of gifts in the New Testament, it is included as a command in multiple locations:

- “Practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13).
- “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).
- “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Peter 4:9).
- “We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth” (3 John 1:8).

Some of us may be gifted with hospitality, but all of us are commanded to be hospitable.

I was single for many years, until the age of forty-two. I can't begin to count the number of brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom I barely knew, who invited me into their homes and nourished me with their hospitality.

I have some friends, Ken and Lauri, who to this day live in an old farmhouse in Oregon. When I was single, I would visit them once a year or so, often times for the Thanksgiving holiday. When I shared Thanksgiving with Ken and Lauri and their children in that old farmhouse, I felt as if I were being transported to some long-ago time. They had issued me a standing invitation to stay with them any time, but I could tell they took special delight in my Thanksgiving visits.

In the fall of 1999, I met a wonderful woman, but as we began talking about marriage, my fears surfaced. Strange how that was: my fears of marriage didn't surface until I met the woman who was right for me and didn't run from me. I suppose I was afraid of marriage for many years and just didn't know it. Anyway, I called Ken and Lauri and took them up on their standing invitation and flew to Oregon for the Thanksgiving holiday. I enjoyed a long and restful weekend with their family. When I returned home, I felt convinced that I should continue moving toward the woman I was dating. Two months later, I proposed.

Six months after that, Karen and I were married. That old farmhouse wasn't just a place to live. To me, it was sanctuary. My friends had made it thus.

Ken and Lauri and many others who had transformed their homes into sanctuaries prepared me for marriage and fatherhood. They taught me, without even trying to do so, to open the doors of my home and to share my children with others. Today, I count it a special blessing whenever anyone comes under the roof of our home.

## Like Shamgar's stick

Offer your life, such as it is, to God, and watch him transform it into an instrument of redemption, and dream about what you have in your life that could be used as an instrument of redemption. What do you do with a life story that, from your perspective, only deserves one verse in the book of life? You offer it to God and watch him transform it. Look what he does with a stick, with a sling, with two sticks. Look what he does with a cross. Get off the couch and into the action.

What do you do with one obscure verse from the Old Testament? You might make sermon of it. In the end, I concluded that Judges 3:31 was like Shamgar's stick: an oxgoad for God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller treatment on spiritual gifts, see my commentary on Romans 12:3-13: <http://www.pbc.org/messages/22872>.