

THE CYCLE OF SIN

By Steve Zeisler

Sister Mary Virgilius Reidy is an unlikely hero, but Clarence Thomas acknowledged her as one of the key people whose influence enabled him to overcome poverty and racism and rise from obscurity to his current standing as Supreme Court nominee. Sister Virgilius is a tiny, bespectacled, ordinary-looking woman. Nothing about her suggests greatness of any kind, yet Newsweek magazine wrote this about her and others who served in the school where she taught Clarence Thomas:

The nuns who lived in the black areas of town were not popular. Whites occasionally referred to them as the "nigger sisters." The Ku Klux Klan once sent a hearse to the rectory to intimidate church officials. Much like Myers Anderson, the nuns taught discipline. "They said you could do it," recalls Orien Douglas, a classmate of Clarence's. "Mostly they said, 'You will [do it].'"

Sister Virgilius overcame two forms of evil. She stood against the oppressive and terrible racism that had some of its most awful expression in the south in the days when Clarence Thomas was young. She and the other nuns stood against the power of the Ku Klux Klan, the segregation, and the demeaning nature of that experience. They were different. They lived in the black areas of town and refused to be intimidated. The other evil that Sister Virgilius challenged was the loss of hope that takes place inside people, when they no longer believe that the future holds possibilities for them. Against this the nuns said, "You will succeed. We believe in you, and we insist that you believe in yourself."

These were women who responded to the call of God in their lives. We can assume that they had a higher purpose than just human approval. And desiring to please God and giving their lives into his service, they had a message for those whom they taught: The attacks of racism from without and the attacks of hopelessness and victimization from within were not going to be permitted to destroy them. So this woman was, in Clarence Thomas' mind, a hero.

The role of Sister Virgilius is similar to the role of the heroes we are going to be studying in the book of Judges. Let's look at the third chapter of Judges together. Judges in this period of Israel's history were those God raised up to be deliverers, to give a message and live in a way that stood out against the decay around them, and to bring changes as a result. And as we'll see in the course of studying this book, they came in all sizes and shapes, from different tribes and walks of life; they had different skills and strengths and different flaws. Sister Virgilius would have fit right in with this group. To look at her, to see just the outward things, you'd never imagine the use God could make of her, and yet her life has brought blessing to her nation.

A Repeated Pattern

Chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Judges are primarily introductory, as we've said; they develop themes and give us a feel for the book. But now we meet the first three of the judges themselves. Judges 3:7 begins the story of Othniel:

And the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and the Asheroth. Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. And when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over

Cushan-rishathaim. Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

Now this story has all of the elements that we will see repeated over and over again in the accounts of the judges; it is a kind of template. Essentially, the pattern that repeats itself in the book of Judges is this: The children of Israel choose sin, the sin results in bondage, the bondage results in a cry to God for mercy, God sends a deliverer, the deliverer breaks the bondage that has held them in check, there's a period of peace that results, the time of peace leads to complacency, and the complacency leads to sin; and the whole process starts over again. Those are the elements that we see in Othniel's story.

There is nothing inevitable about sin---our choices always are significant

Let's look carefully at this process, starting in verse 7. It happened in history, as we read about it here, and it continues to happen over and over again. It is a pattern that perhaps we ourselves are unfortunately too well-acquainted with. Verse 7 says, "The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God, and served the Baals and the Asheroth."

First, note the phrase, "evil in the sight of the Lord." There are many among us who wrestle with false guilt. They live with a sense of disapproval or disappointment from people around them, or they were raised in homes that were sternly disapproving. And so they have adopted a rather hunched-shouldered, joyless approach to life. They believe they are failures, but it is not because God disapproves of them. However, false guilt is clearly not what is being described here. These people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; that is, they deliberately chose against what they knew God wanted for them. They engaged in perverse practices that they knew God abhorred. False guilt can be ended with a freeing understanding of the gospel. This stiff-necked sin requires genuine repentance to precede restoration.

Note what results from the choice to do evil---"they forgot the Lord." The same pattern can work in us. Having chosen sin, God seems more and more distant. We find ourselves less interested in hearing his name mentioned. We less frequently want to go places where he will be honored. We find ourselves distancing ourselves from the presence of God, forgetting him because the wickedness that we've chosen has become more important to us.

Finally it says they served the Baals and the Asheroth. Having distanced themselves from God, they ended up serving a demon. Bob Dylan had it right, "You've got to serve somebody. It might be the devil or it might be the Lord, but you've got to serve somebody." Nobody is ever independent, as much as we'd like to believe that we are. So having rejected the Lord God, the Israelites descended into the service of idols, and into the horrible thinking of the Canaanite people around them.

Failed False Gods

It turns out that serving Baal is not a very safe thing to do. They would call on Lord Baal to protect them from enemies and difficulty. They would call upon the Asheroth, a female deity, to be their supply and keep them from insecurity. But the false gods don't provide security, and they don't meet needs. An enemy came marching from Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq, and Baal didn't protect them. The one they had chosen to serve didn't save them in time of war. It says that God sold them into the hands as slaves, of Cushan-rishathaim. That name means the man of double wickedness or double evil. They had chosen to serve Baal, and God in his sovereignty said, "That service is going to become slavery."

That is the process of how sin works in the experience of cultures, of nations, of churches, of families, and of individuals. Wherever it's at work the same pattern takes place. We begin the choice to sin because we think it will bring an advantage to us, some pleasure or delight. But what we find is that there is slavery at the end. There is loss, loneliness, and hurt. There is guilt and bondage; we become much less than we wanted to be. We don't know where to turn. The double wickedness, the infliction of more degradation than we ever anticipated, begins to take place. And there is no going back; you can't undo the process. The children of Israel couldn't say, "Okay, we're done, let's change things." They had become dominated, and they were in the

control of the man of double wickedness.

What they could do, and what we must do in that circumstance, is call out to the Lord for help. That's all we can do. We can't decide we're going to fix ourselves, unbind ourselves, and throw off the yoke of that element in our lives that we don't like. We can't make it better by ourselves. But what we can do is cry for mercy. And the children of Israel called out to the Lord, not because they had a right to his help, but just in the hope that he might be merciful to them. Verse 9: "And when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer." Because he is merciful, he answered their need. He saw their sorrow, realized their loss. And in his loving response to them he sent a deliverer, Othniel.

Othniel had good credentials. He was related to Caleb, the great man of God of an earlier generation, and came by his abilities naturally. He had learned at the feet of a great man, and he was an effective leader. He led them in battle, they threw off the yoke of the oppressor, and then he led them during the next forty-year period. Now, forty years in the scriptures is the length of a generation. So this is a generation of people who had sinned, suffered and cried to the Lord for help, and they learned their lesson. So for a period of forty years they trusted God, and life went well. It turns out that each generation has to make its own decisions, though, for as we see in the next verse, having had peace for a time, complacency and compromise set in, and the cycle would be repeated.

Where Are We?

Before we move on, though, I want to ask you an important question. Where are you in the cycle that we observed in verses 7 through 11? Perhaps you feel strongly the pull of a temptation to act in some way that you know is clearly disobedient to the Lord. If you are at that point in the cycle, turn away, learn the lesson now, refuse the temptation! Or maybe you're at the point in the cycle where you feel like you are in bondage to something, and the man of double wickedness has ownership of your life. If that's the case, then cry out to the Lord; that's the first step toward deliverance. Or maybe you're at the point where life is going pretty well, and there is an intimacy in your relationship with God. If that's the case, then be watchful and recognize that it is possible under those circumstances to grow complacent. Don't give complacency a place in your life.

James 1:13-15 talks about the same cycle. James writes, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." Temptation leads to sin, death, bondage, and control of our lives by "the man of double wickedness."

But whatever point we are at in this cycle, if we thoughtfully consider the significance of these words in our lives, we have an option before us that is of the Lord. I hope seeing this repeated pattern of sin and deliverance in Judges will stimulate us to make choices that are life-giving.

We begin the account of the next of the judges, Ehud, in verse 12. Ehud is a fascinating character whose story is filled with drama and intrigue. The third individual we will meet in this chapter, Shamgar, is mentioned but without any dramatic details at all. Let's read just the introduction, verses 12-15, to Ehud's story:

Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek [we see here three ancient, long-standing, and unfailing enemies of the people of Israel]; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees [Jericho]. And the sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab.

Shamgar's whole story is given in verse 31.

And after him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

Different Deliverers

Before considering the cloak and dagger story of Ehud and Eglon, let me first call attention to how different these deliverers were from each other. Othniel had learned from Caleb and had blood lines that suggested that he would be a good leader. Ehud, we will find, was a cunning, courageous, inspiring man. His left-handedness is highlighted, and that's an interesting note. From ancient times, even until today, left-handers are in such a minority that they are always a bit of a surprise. The word sinister in English comes from a Latin word that means left-handed. Ehud was different and did the unexpected. He was a different kind of leader than Othniel, who had his family to draw on. Ehud drew on his cunning.

The third person is Shamgar. I can imagine Kevin Costner playing the role of Ehud, who was kind of a Robin Hood character. But my mental picture of Shamgar is Hoss Cartwright, if you remember the old Bonanza days. He was probably a big guy. We read that Shamgar used an oxgoad, which was a farmer's tool. He was most likely a peasant. He sharpened it on one end to make it into a spear, and he used his physical prowess and trust in the Lord to defeat 600 Philistines at one time. He didn't go on to lead the people; it doesn't talk about what happened afterward. He just delivered them at the height of one battle, God's man at God's place, doing what was required to defeat the Philistines.

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and each one of us is needed to serve the Lord in our time and place**

Now, these men had very little in common, humanly speaking, but each of them became the servant of the Lord, a deliverer of his people. That ought to suggest something to each of us, different as we are: some with good family backgrounds, some with none, some with impressive minds, others with physical capabilities, and some with difficulty finding anything humanly speaking, that ought to commend us. But the Spirit of God has given all believers gifts, and each one of us is needed to serve the Lord in our time and place.

Now let's go back and read Ehud's story-Kevin Costner with his cloak flying. Verses 16-30:

And Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length; and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak [the term "cloak and dagger" comes from this]. And he presented the tribute [that is, the money that he was sent to deliver as a leader chosen by his people] to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. And it came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. But he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he said, "Keep silence." And all who attended him left him. [Eglon sent his courtiers away]. And Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber [a place on the roof where the breezes would blow; he liked his comfort]. And Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And he [Eglon] arose from his seat. And Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out. [Apparently, in the moment of terror at his death, Eglon's bowels gave way.] Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.

When he had gone out, his servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room." And they waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.

Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. And it came about when he had arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was in front of them. And he said to them, "Pursue them, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands." So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan opposite Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross. And they struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men [another translation I read in a commentary translates this "plump and burly men," so perhaps they were a bit like their master; the first adjective in this phrase can mean either robust or fat]; and no one escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years.

Let me comment on the last note before going back over this story. Eighty years followed the deliverance under Ehud; this time two generations learned the lessons, followed in faith, trusted God, and refused to give way to sin. It's not required that every generation fall into sin and make a mess of their lives, thankfully! There is nothing inevitable about sin-our choices always are significant.

A Fallen Foe

Let's go back and deal with the details given in this account, some of which I must say are fairly indelicate. Ehud, as we've already said, was courageous, and cunning. He arranged for this assassination to take place at great risk to himself. Though we don't need to admire him as an assassin, we can certainly admire him for his courage and his willingness to stand up to the debasement that Eglon had inflicted on his people. He used his left-handedness, his being different, to his advantage (a quick movement of the right hand might have seemed threatening-not so the left). He made his own weapon, we're told. Apparently he was a man who gave thought to the details of the things he did. Later, after the assassination, he turned out to be a good general as well. He rallied his troops, brought them to a place where they could cut off the escape of the Moabites at the ford of the Jordan River, and effectively led them to a military victory.

In contrast, the dim-wittedness and complacency of Eglon were exactly the opposite of the capability of Ehud. Eglon was shown to be a fool in this story. The people who served him were fools. His soldiers were too out of shape to fight; they were ridiculous. Eglon was so self-impressed that he failed to realize the danger he was in as Ehud used the psychology of secrets to gain an audience with him. The manner in which he was killed, the fact that the blade was swallowed in fat, and his soiling himself at this moment of terror all made him an embarrassing and foolish figure in this story.

Those who served him were incompetent. In verse 24, his servants were outside the doors wringing their hands, dithering, not knowing what to do. The word "behold" appears three times in verses 24 and 25; they were surprised by everything. "Behold, the door is locked! Behold, he is not opening the doors! Behold, the king is dead!" They didn't anticipate anything; they had no clue as to what was going on. The reason they stood outside the doors is embarrassing. One commentator writes, "Their assumption was that their bulky monarch was taking his leisurely time over the chamber pot." So they were made to look ridiculous. Then finally we have these ten thousand Moabite warriors who had held Israel under their thumb for eighteen years, and the minute someone put up a fight against them, they turned out to be weaklings. They were slaughtered in a great military victory for Israel.

Now, why is this story written with so many details that all highlight the inadequacy of Israel's enemies? I think an important point is being made. Many of us have been dominated in our lives by fear of something we had no business being afraid of. We have lived lives that were less than they ought to be, bound up by fears, habits, and pressures that we have given way to. We assumed that there was no way out of it. And for many years we have been bringing tribute to "fat King Eglon," thinking there was nothing else we could do.

We must finally get to the point in our lives where we begin to believe in the greatness of God, not the greatness of our enemy. By his Spirit we begin the process of seeing the God who is trustworthy meet our needs and break the yoke we couldn't break ourselves. The minute that begins to happen, we realize that much of what we feared was foolish, that we have lived defeated lives for no good reason. "[Much] greater is he

who is in you than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:4.) "Resist the devil," we're told, "and he will flee from you." (James 4:7.) What we've let ourselves do is believe in the authority of sin in our lives when we never needed to. If we will call upon God, his Spirit will give us the strength to stand against, defeat, and even rout, if you will, those things that once dominated and hurt us.

In summary, let me say again, it's worth looking at the pattern of the judges and asking yourself where you are in the cycle of sin and deliverance. What do you need to be alert to, knowing how things work and what follows next in the cycle? What is a choice that would be healthy and life-giving for you? And secondly, rejoice that our God is very great and his mercy without limit. The memories of the past, the bad habits, the temptations that once seemed so powerful to us, will pale to silly insignificance when compared with him. Freedom lies down this road.

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