

Judges

Lesson 6

As we have said many times in this study, the leaders of the Nation of Israel have abandoned the covenant and commandments of the LORD. Specifically, it has abandoned the explicit instruction to kill all the Canaanites in the Promised Land and tear down all the high places of the pagan religion. From this point on, in all the rest of the Old Testament, whenever you read that the “high places” were still in the land, it refers to the Canaanite “high places” that were never destroyed in obedience to the LORD’s command. For example, about four hundred and sixteen years after this point in the timeline, Jehoshaphat will become king of the Southern Kingdom. In 1st Kings 22:43, the Scriptures says about Jehoshaphat,

*“He walked entirely in the way of his father Asa; he did not turn aside from it, doing what was right in the sight of the LORD. However, the **high places** were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the **high places**.”* (1st Kings 22:43)

These high places were not destroyed by the people of the Nation of Israel. They were not destroyed under the guidance of any of the judges, and that included Samuel. Neither were they destroyed under King Saul, King David, King Solomon, King Rehoboam, King Abijam, King Asa, or King Jehoshaphat. The high places of the Canaanite false worship are still used today and have not been destroyed. In the future, they will gain prominence again in the Holy Land. But they will be destroyed. The LORD will destroy them when He comes to be the King of kings.

With that in mind, we come back to the current problem in the Promised Land. Joshua and the leaders who saw the mighty works of the LORD are dead. The new leaders have forsaken the LORD. Many of the Israelite men have married Canaanite women, and Israelite women have married Canaanite men. The act is in total rebellion against the LORD’s command. False faith in false gods has infiltrated the nation of Israel.

B. The Cycle of Israel’s Downfall

1. Cycle One – Mesopotamian Takeover (3:7-8)

a) Enter Cushan-rishathaim - Mesopotamia King - Eight Years (3:7-8)

The cycle of Israel’s downfall has begun. Cycle One – the Mesopotamian takeover is at hand. The scene is set. The pieces are in place. Enter Cushan-rishathaim – Mesopotamia king who will rule and dominate the tribes of Israel for eight years. Chapter 3, verse 7. *“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. ⁸ 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.”* (3:7-8)

Why did the LORD allow Cushan-rishathaim to take control of the tribes? The writer did not mince words. He said, *“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.”* Israel was guilty of an evil sin. They “forgot the LORD.” They worshiped “Baals and the Asheroth.” Let me remind you. Baal is the supreme Canaanite male god. To them, he is the sun god. Asheroth is the supreme Canaanite female goddess. To them, she is the moon goddess. When the writer uses the plural form for “Baals,” it simply means there were numerous statues of Baal on all the high places of Canaanite worship still standing.

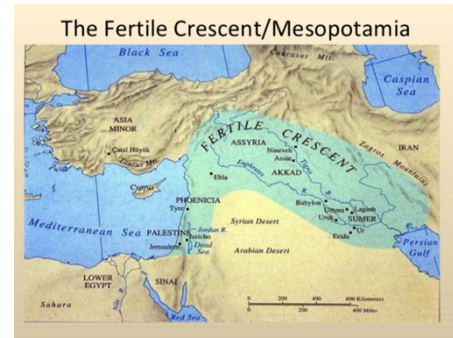
Who was Cushan-rishathaim? The text tells us that he was the “king of Mesopotamia.” Where is Mesopotamia? It is the area of land that falls between the Tigris River and the Euphrates River, the two major rivers that find their headwaters starting with springs and runoff waters near the Black

Sea. The two rivers run almost parallel from near the Black Sea all the way to the Persian Gulf. The land between and around the two rivers is often called the *Fertile Crescent* because the two rivers keep the land extremely well-watered. However, as seen on the map, the green area representing the Fertile Crescent also represents the Mesopotamian area and all the way around the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea to just below the Dead Sea. Notice that Phoenicia is part of the Fertile Crescent/Mesopotamia. Phoenicia includes Lebanon. However, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers was called “Akkad” because of the spoken language. Later, its new name will be “Assyria.” In the last lesson, the writer told us that the oppressors of Israel would come from the Lebanon area, and that is where Cushan-rishathaim reigned at that time.

This point becomes clearer when we translate the Hebrew accurately. Our English word “Mesopotamia” in this verse is mistranslated. The Hebrew is two words, *aram na-ha-ra-yim*. The English should be two words, “Aram Naharaim.” The NIV, New Living, CSB, and many other new versions have it translated correctly. The area called “Aram” in this part of the Old Testament is the same as “Syria, which is not the same as “Assyria.” Later, in the Bible, when Aram became known as Syria, the Bible reflects the newer name. At times, Syria will be in conflict with Assyria. From that, Aram/Syria is clearly the plot of land north of the Promised Land that includes Lebanon. It does not include the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, generally known as Mesopotamia/Assyria. Mesopotamia/Assyria and its rulers have nothing to do with this king or this passage.

We have dealt with the country of Aram, but what about the second word used in the Hebrew, *Naharayim*. Most of the English Versions translate it Mesopotamia or simply Naharayim. However, it is a Hebrew word which means it has a definition attached to the word. It means *two rivers*. This word is why so many scholars of the past thought that Cushan-rishathaim was the king of Mesopotamia/Akkad/Assyria because of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. But Aram is not between those two rivers. Cushan is the king of Aram Naharayim, but where is he located? Historically, the city of Damascus has always been the capital of the Aramean area. It was the capital in the days of Abraham, and it was still the capital in the days of the Judges.

Furthermore, it is still the capital of Syria today. In the map above, you can see the location of Damascus above the Aram title. It would have been the home of Cushan-rishathaim. The Bible is a wonderful collection of the LORD’s information for us today. When we come across things like Aram-Naharayim, Aram of the two rivers, we only need to read on in the Bible for an explanation. In the Judges’ time, everyone knew about Cushan-rishathaim and where he lived because he had captured them and controlled them. But we do not because we are centuries in the future from that time. Yet, the Bible does not disappoint. During the time of Elisha, Naaman, the king of Aram/Syria, whose home was in Damascus, had leprosy. He wanted to be healed by Elisha. Elisha told him to dip himself in the Jordan River for healing. Naaman was repulsed because the two major rivers in his home city of Damascus were cleaner and better than the Jordan River. The names of those rivers are the Abana and Pharpar. They are now called the Barada and the El Awaj, and their waters rush down from the eastern side of the Lebanon mountain range.



Phoenicia/Lebanon Belongs to the Country of Aram

“But Naaman was furious and went away and said, ‘Behold, I thought, ‘He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.’¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage.” (2 Kings 5:11–12)

No doubt, these were the two rivers controlled by Cushan-rishathaim in his hometown in his country of Aram.

Cushan-rishathaim is an interesting name. The Hebrew meaning would be translated *Cushan the double wickedness*. This wicked king reigned in the land that was supposed to be part of the Promised Land but was never taken. Cushan-rishathaim was a Canaanite, and he was slated by the LORD to be dead at this time, but Israel failed to fulfill the LORD’s instruction. Therefore, the LORD allowed Cushan-rishathaim to control Israel for eight years.

b) Enter Othniel - Israel’s Judge - Forty Years (3:9-11)

Enter Othniel – Israel’s judge for forty years. We already know this man. We met him in the book of Joshua. We also met him in the first part of the book of Judges. Verse 9. *“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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.” (3:9-11)*

We do not know how old Othniel was when he conquered Debir, and won Caleb’s daughter for a wife. No doubt he was old enough to lead an army of the tribe of Judah to complete the task. And, no doubt, he could handle Cushan-rishathaim, but he had to wait until the LORD raised him up. Two things had to happen before he would win the war against Cushan-rishathaim.

First, the Scripture says, *“When the sons of Israel cried to the LORD....”* I want you to notice that the LORD saw what was going on in the Promised Land; He allowed the nation to be taken over by Cushan; He waited until the Israelites cried out to Him for help. This was not the same group of Israelites who cried out to the LORD while in Egypt, asking for help from the LORD to free them from bondage. That group of Israelites had been dead for more than fifty-eight years. This was not the group of Israelites who cried to the LORD when the people of Ai gave them a kicking when Achan stole the Canaanite shawl, idol, gold, and silver and hid them in his tent. They had been dead for at least a decade. This was the new group of Israelites who did not see the mighty works of the LORD as He fought for them in the campaign to take the Promised Land. Why did they, all of a sudden, cry to the LORD? They had been worshiping Baal and Asheroth. Did they cry to those false gods to no avail? Did they turn to the LORD in a last-ditch desperation? Or were they genuinely sorry for what they had done, and were they genuinely repentant? We do not know. What we do know is that the LORD heard their cry, and He answered their prayer.

Second, the LORD had to raise *“up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them.”* Not just anyone would be able to do the job. It had to be the one the LORD would call and give the authority to lead the people of Israel in victory. It had to be the one that the *“Spirit of the LORD came upon.”* What does that mean? Simply, it means the Holy Spirit came upon the man. In this case, it was Othniel. In the rest of the book of Judges, we will see the Spirit of the LORD come upon individuals to prepare them, empower them, fill them, and direct them for specific tasks. The LORD sent the Holy Spirit upon Othniel to raise him up for forty years to be the judge of the people of the Nation of Israel. He did not hold the same position as Moses or Joshua, who were the designated leaders of the people. Instead, he was raised up to be the magistrate who would enforce the laws put in place

by the LORD through Moses. Othniel would not make any new laws. Let me repeat. Othniel would enforce the laws already given by the LORD.

Finally, once the people realized their sin, they called upon the LORD for help. The LORD heard their cry, raised up Othniel, and sent the Holy Spirit to guide him. Prepared, Othniel gathered his men and went to war against Cushan-rishathaim. Othniel defeated Cushan.

The principle we can draw from this passage is that the LORD would not help the people of the Nation of Israel until they realized their sin against the LORD, checked their actions, and called upon the LORD for help. Then, the LORD would hear and help. This is really the second significant principle in the book of Judges that we can apply to our lives. Let us remind ourselves of the first significant principle found in this book that we should know.

Have you ever heard the saying *God helps those who help themselves*? People say it is in the Bible. Most online scholars say it is not. It is a motto that emphasizes the importance of self-initiative. It is an expression that is used around the world as a means to inspire people to self-help. In ancient Greece, long after the time of the Book of Judges, the phrase was “the gods help those who help themselves.” Is *God helps those who help themselves* in the Bible? No. Is the principle in the Bible? Yes. It is a principle found directly in the words of the LORD to the people of the Nation of Israel. It is an important principle to know; however, its meaning is not as broad as everyone thinks. Let me explain. In the context of the principle, the LORD will only help those who help themselves remain in the center of His plan for their lives living in obedience to His covenant and commandments. Well, that just took all the fun out of the saying. May we review the context of where the principle of the expression comes from in this book.

Beginning with chapter 2 of the book of Judges, the LORD begins to reprimand the people of the Nation of Israel for not completing the task of destroying all the Canaanites from the Promised Land. He warned the Israelites to “*make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.*” (2:2a) That would include marriages! He then stated, “*But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done?*” (2:2b). Then comes His big decision. “*Therefore I also said, I will not drive them out before you; but they will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.*” (2:3). The LORD’s principle is formed. He will not help the people of the Nation of Israel if they do not help themselves by staying in obedience to His covenant and commandments. Immediately, the people of Israel began to repent because of the LORD’s chastisement. But their repentance was short-lived. The writer tells us that “*the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals,¹² and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger.¹³ So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.*” (2:11-13) This sin of breaking the first two commandments and the covenant made the LORD angry again. The writer says, “*The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.¹⁴ Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.*” (2:14-15) Once again, Israel’s repentance was short-lived. The writer says, “*Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers.*” (2:17) And the LORD responded to them. “*So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, ‘Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers and has not listened to My voice...’*” (2:20). Then the LORD began to test the nation to see if it would repent. “*I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk in it as their fathers did, or not*” (2:21-22).

Here is the takeaway from both principals. First, if you disobey the LORD, He will not help you fight your battles with the world. Second, when you find yourself in disobedience, you must repent and call to the LORD for help, and He will help you.