

After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.

(Judges 3:31)

Introduction

You may have seen a movie or TV show in which characters are watching something on TV only to have regular programming interrupted for an important news broadcast. I don't know if that actually happens, and I certainly don't ever recall it happening while I've been watching TV, but if you're a sporting fan in South Africa, who has no access to digital satellite TV (DSTV), you can probably relate in some way.

Most international sporting events in South Africa are broadcast only for paying DSTV customers. Particularly important sporting events—like sporting world cups—and sporting events that are played on South African soil—like international tours of foreign nations to South Africa—are often broadcast on regular national television. There is one caveat, however: Regardless of the stage of the game, coverage will be interrupted for an abbreviated news broadcast.

You might, for example, be watching South Africa competing in a semi-final of a Cricket World Cup, and it may be at a crucial stage of the game, but come scheduled time, coverage will be suspended so that an abbreviated news bulletin can be inserted. This is particularly irritating when there are only two or three overs left of an innings, which you know you will miss because the news is deemed by the SABC powers that be to be more important.

Shamgar's story is a little like an interruption in regular programming for an important news bulletin. The story of the Judges is rollicking along quite nicely, when suddenly regular programming is interrupted for a brief insert. Shamgar's narrative consumes but a single verse in the Judges narrative, but it is deemed important enough by the Holy Spirit to insert at this particular moment: "After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel" (Judges 3:31).

Shamgar is not exactly a household name among 21st-century Christians. If regular Christians were polled and asked to name as many of the biblical judges as they could, I suspect that Shamgar's name would slip through the cracks for a good many of them.

Judges, however, is a story of deliverance. The judges whom God provided were primarily deliverers. Shamgar was no different: "He also saved Israel." And though his narrative is brief, there are some important lessons that we can draw from it.

At our church's recent World Outreach Celebration (missions conference), we considered the need to make disciples of Jesus Christ under the theme "Mission Unalterable." God has given to his church the Great Commission, which never changes. At any point in redemptive history, it is the responsibility

of God's people to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in all nations. According to Jesus, it is by obedience to this mission unalterable that the church beats back the forces of darkness and assaults the gates of Hades (Matthew 16:18).

The church that is committed to obedience in the Great Commission is actively on the offensive against the world, the flesh, and the devil. This warfare is one in which the outcome is certain, because the Lord of hosts is on the church's side, and he promises that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the onslaught of the church.

Paul expresses similar confidence in the favourable outcome of the war when he writes to the Corinthians:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

(2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

I don't wish to overly spiritualise the text before us, but I am persuaded that there are some important lessons that we can glean from our text that will give us heart in our onslaught against the gates of Hades.

An Unconventional Stock

The first thing to notice about Shamgar is that he was from unconventional stock. He is called "Shamgar the son of Anath." There are at least three things unconventional about this appellation.

First, Shamgar is not a Hebrew name. His name is Canaanite—possibly Hurrian. It is possible that he was a Gentile, whom God raised up to save Israel.

Second, Anath is a female name, which probably indicates that Anath was his mother. While he is not alone in this regard, it is unconventional for biblical characters to be named as the son of their mother, and far more conventional for them to be named the son of their father.

Third, it is striking that he was "the son of Anath." Interpreters are divided as to what it means that he was "the son of" Anath—and much of the division arises over the uncertainty of the identity of Anath.

One suggestion is that "Anath" designates the place of his family origin and that he was perhaps the most famous resident (the favourite "son") of Beth-Anath. There were two Beth-Anaths in Israel: one in Galilee (Joshua 19:38; Judges 1:33) and another in Judah (Joshua 15:59). The one in Judah was the closer of the two to Philistine territory, so if Anath is a reference to a place rather than a person, it is probable that he lived in the territory allotted to Judah.

A second proposition is that Anath is a reference to the Canaanite goddess of war and sex. In Canaanite mythology, Anath was Baal's sister, who eventually became his wife. She was a bloodthirsty tyrant, and we know from archaeology that there was a class of Canaanite warriors designated "sons of Anath." Shamgar may have been one of these elite warriors, though he does not seem to have been in their ranks by the time we meet him in our text.

A third proposal—and this is my guess—is that we should understand "son of" in the same way that we ordinarily understand "son of" in the Bible: that Anath was his mother.

If this is the case, however, the seeming link with the goddess Anath is intriguing. Given his Gentile name, it seems quite possible that his mother was named for the goddess Anath, and that he was raised in a pagan home rather than in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. And yet God chose this man to deliver his people.

Of course, in all of this discussion, there is a degree of uncertainty. It seems clear that he was not Hebrew (or, at least, not raised in a faithful Jewish home), but we cannot be certain as to his connection to Anath. It is sufficient to say, however, that his was not the ordinary stock from which you might expect Israel's deliverer to arise. But that is a fact that should be a cause of encouragement for many.

Christians sometimes buy into the lie that God only uses people of a certain stock in his work. We sometimes assume this mentality even without realising it.

It is certainly the case in our church—and I suspect that many other churches are the same—that there is a certain "stock" family in the church: a happily married couple with 2.4 children. The danger in churches like ours is that people who don't fit into the stock mould feel that they can't be used by God in the ministry of the church—or that they can only be used by God in a severely restricted way until they find a spouse and have children. Shamgar's story should put the lie to that misconception.

The God of the Bible is a God who uses willing servants from all walks of life. Perhaps you stand out in your church peer group as one of the few singles in an age range in which most are married with children. Perhaps you stand out in your church as one of the few divorcees in a fellowship in which most remain in covenant marriage union. Perhaps you feel left out because God has not given you the children that you so desire, even as he blesses other families in the church in abundance in that regard. Let me encourage you that God does not need you to be married with 2.4 children before he can use you.

Perhaps you look somewhat jealously at friends in the church who were raised in godly homes with two believing parents. Perhaps you wish that you had been raised in Sunday school and youth group like many of your friends in the church. Perhaps you feel that your lack of Christian upbringing is in some way a hindrance to your usefulness in the church. Let me encourage you that, as wonderful as a Christian upbringing is, God does not need you to have had a Christian childhood to use you in his church and in his mission unalterable.

The question before you as you read these words is, are you willing to be used? Are you willing to be used by God as a single person? Are you willing to be used by God as a childless couple? Are you willing to be used by God as a divorced person? Are you willing to be used by God as a single parent? Are you willing to be used by God even though you are the only Christian in your family? If you are willing to be used, God can use you! Othniel (3:7–11) was, in many ways, the model saviour, but God did not only use model saviours to deliver his people: He used willing servants who came from broken backgrounds and who lived broken lives.

An Unconventional Soldier

A second thing to observe about Shamgar is that he was an unconventional soldier, as his weapon of choice—“an oxgoad”—seems to suggest.

An oxgoad was a farming implement, used by farmers or farmhands. It was an instrument about 2.5 metres in length. One end was sharpened as a means to drive reluctant cattle; the other was fashioned into a spade to clean out the plough. To be sure, a victim of an oxgoad attack would often come off second best, but an oxgoad might not be your weapon of choice if you were sending a soldier to battle six hundred armed-to-the-teeth Philistines.

The fact that Shamgar seemingly had an oxgoad handy strongly suggests that he was a farmer or a farm labourer. Othniel was an ideal candidate for a judge. His CV included a successful earlier raid against a Canaanite stronghold. Shamgar’s employment history consisted of ploughing fields and sowing crops. He hardly stood head and shoulders above the rest as a candidate for Israel’s deliverer.

I can recall the 2009 *America’s Got Talent* audition of Kevin Skinner. Thirty-five-year-old Skinner walked onto stage drowning in oversized clothes and wearing his cap backwards. As the crowd applauded politely, one judge was seen shaking his head in disappointment and another audibly chuckled when he said he was going to sing for them. The audience burst into sceptical laughter when Skinner told them that he was employed as a chicken catcher before the judges impatiently asked to just get it over with and see the act. As he played his guitar and sang Garth Brooks’s “If Tomorrow Never Comes” a pin drop could be heard in the audience. The last thing that Skinner seemed to be equipped for was a singing career, but he not only wowed the audience and the judges at his audition but went on to win the competition.

Shamgar was a lot like that. He was not the man you’d expect to save God’s people, but it was perhaps because of that, and not despite that, that God actually used him.

We spent a lot of time recently in 1 and 2 Corinthians, and one of the lessons that we learned in those books was that God does not resort to human wisdom in accomplishing his purposes. Indeed, “God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring

to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

God tends to use unusable servants to accomplish his purposes. He does not always use the most qualified servants in his mission. Humanly, David was the least qualified of Jesse’s sons, and yet he is the one whom God used to save his people. Humanly, Ezra and Nehemiah were far more qualified than Esther to deliver God’s people from total annihilation, yet God chose to use Esther to accomplish his purposes. God has a way of defying our expectations in accomplishing his work.

God doesn’t need your qualifications to accomplish his purposes. God is looking for willing people who will use what they have—“I don’t have an army, but I have an oxgoad!”—to accomplish what he wants to accomplish. An oxgoad in the hand of God is far mightier than a trained army relying on human strength.

When it comes to gospel ministry, in particular, we must remember that the weapons of Christian warfare are not ordinary weapons. As Paul wrote, “though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). God does need our clever, manmade weapons in the spiritual war that we wage. A simple oxgoad is far more effective than a full military arsenal if God is behind it.

The Philistines trained at the best military schools available, brandished the most advanced military weaponry, and regimentally followed the strictest wartime strategy, yet fell before a simple farmhand with nothing more than an oxgoad. Shamgar did not need to resort to worldly means to achieve the victory that God intended for him.

As servants of the living God, we need rely on no more than God has prescribed in the warfare that is before us. To be effective servants of God in his mission unalterable, we need no more training than is afforded for us in the local church. We need arm ourselves with nothing more than the full armour of God, which is available to every Christian according to Ephesians 6. The word of God and prayer are far more effective weapons than the best crafted human arguments and reasons we can imagine as we face godless worldviews and philosophies.

Are you arming yourself with the weapons that God has prescribed? Are you committed to training in the camp that he has provided (the local church)? Are you spending time in his word and in prayer, asking for strength to face the enemy that probably seems overwhelmingly stronger than you are? Most importantly, are you entering into battle trusting that it is not by your own might or your own abilities that you will defeat the enemies, but only by trusting in and submitting to God’s strength to overcome?

Unconventional soldiers are often the most effective soldiers because they have nothing to rely on but what God has provided.

An Unconventional Strategy

A third thing to observe about Shamgar is that he followed an unconventional strategy. He “killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad.”

Before we consider his strategy, let's first think a little about his enemy: the Philistines. The Philistines arrived in Canaan about the same time that Israel did, although they arrived from the opposite direction. Initially, they unsuccessfully tried to enter Egypt, but when the Egyptians repelled them they settled in the western area of Canaan.

The Philistines arrived in Canaan with the most advanced military technology in the world at that point: knowledge of iron smelting. This knowledge gave them a decided edge in military warfare. This is the first time we read of them in Judges, but readers familiar with the Old Testament know that they would become Israel's greatest threat during the days of the judges and the kings. Their mention here suggests that they were just starting to become a noticeable military presence in Canaan at this period.

Shamgar's unconventional strategy against the Philistines was twofold.

First, it is certainly unconventional that his weapon of choice was an oxgoad. We have spoken about this already, but an oxgoad is hardly a weapon of mass destruction. Accepted military strategy would surely include a fuller orbed arsenal than a mere oxgoad. Of course, this may well have been all that he had available. Though these were early days in Philistia's military expansion, we know from 1 Samuel 13:19-23 that they confiscated all Israelite weapons and expelled all blacksmiths from the land so that no new weaponry could be crafted. Nevertheless, even if it was his only option, to attack the Philistines armed with a mere oxgoad was courageously unconventional.

Second, it is unconventional that Shamgar seemingly went solo. The judges customarily gathered an army around them to attack the enemy, but Shamgar seemingly acted alone in attacking these six hundred Philistines. We don't know if he did this in a single raid or over a period of time, but either way it is unconventional strategy for a farmhand to attack trained soldiers without backup.

We do well to remember that God's strategy for waging spiritual warfare is hardly innovative and cutting edge. In every generation, there are those who tell us that we cannot simply rely on what worked in previous generations. We cannot, for example, rely on the word preached and the sacraments administered. We need to be more innovative than that. The local church is a relic of a past era, we are told, and we need to come up with more creative means of equipping God's people for service. But we need to be persuaded that human innovation can never surpass divine provision.

A few years ago, Apple and Google were threatening to remove any apps from their app stores that did not align with their values. It was a very real possibility, for example, that any church with a mobile app, which included a sermon opposing same sex marriage, could be removed from the app stores.

Around the time that that threat was in the news, someone asked John Piper how threatened Christians should feel by such threats of sanction. Piper wisely responded that it was no real cause of concern, for even if every Christian app was removed from the app store, and every Christian website shut down, local churches would continue to preach God's truth, and it is the local church—not social media, radio airwaves, or sermon websites—that God has ordained as his means to reach a lost world with the gospel. Innovations may supplement God's ordained means, but they can never replace them.

An Unconventional Saviour

How could this unconventional soldier, from unconventional stock, with an unconventional strategy, achieve such unconventional success? Only because he was empowered by an unconventional Saviour. Shamgar defeated six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad because he served an unconventional God.

As we come to the end of our consideration of Shamgar the Unconventional, let us be persuaded that his incredible success lay not in his own ingenuity, but in his unwavering trust in the living God. Faith was, indeed, the victory. He might have sung the words of that beautiful CityAlight hymn:

The night is dark but I am not forsaken,
for by my side, the Saviour he will stay;
I labour on in weakness and rejoicing,
for in my need, his power is displayed.
To this I hold: My Shepherd will defend me,
through the deepest valley he will lead;
oh the night has been won,
and I shall overcome:
yet not I, but through Christ in me.

We can learn some valuable lessons about our unconventional God from this text.

First, we learn that God uses all sorts of people in his work. As Barry Webb puts it, “the brief note about Shamgar should make us grateful that no one is too obscure or tainted for God to use.” When our heroes of the faith—in the Bible and otherwise—prove to have feet of clay, it ought not to unduly discourage us; instead, it ought to give us heart that God uses flawed servants to accomplish his task. You don't have to write books or preach conferences in sold-out venues to be used by God. More often than not, it is those who serve quietly in the context of their own churches that God uses most mightily in his work.

Second, we learn that God does not need strong people, but strengthens the weak to accomplish his purposes. I do not mean to deny the fact that God is looking for men and women of godly character, but part of that godly character is recognising your own inadequacies and relying on God's strength to accomplish the work to which he has called you. Hudson Taylor said it well: “God is sufficient for

God's work. God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do his great works by large committees. He trains someone to be quiet enough and little enough, and then uses him."

Third, we learn from Shamgar that, even though we are weak, God's strength is perfected in weakness. E. M. Bounds, a man who understood more than most his need to rely on God's strength, wrote, "God is not looking for new methods, new programs, God is looking for men who will be filled with the Holy Ghost, who will take him at his word and blaze a trail for God." And Matthew Henry added,

It is no matter how weak the weapon is if God direct and strengthen the arm. An ox goad, when God pleases, can do more than Goliath's sword—and sometimes he chooses to work by such [unconventional] means, that the excellency of the power may appear to be of God and not man.

Fourth, Shamgar points us to the truth of God's unconventional means, which are highlighted most clearly in the gospel. If it seems strange to save Israel by a farmer with an oxgoad, how much stranger does it seem to save sinners through a travelling preacher and a Roman cross. The cross of Christ, said Paul, is offensive to some and foolish to others, but it is the instrument that God used to save sinners. It is innate to our humanity to look to all sorts of other means to earn our salvation, but an oxgoad was the only provided means of salvation for Israel, the Roman cross and the empty tomb are the only provided means of salvation for sinners.

As local churches, we survey the land before us and note that God's mission is unalterable. It remains the same. The gates of Hades resist the gospel as much as they ever have. Disciples need to be made as urgently as ever before. And the local church—and Christians within the local church—remain God's tool to wage this warfare.

But we can't do it alone. We cannot wage the war by might, nor by power, but by God's Spirit alone. Let us emerge, therefore, from the brief record of Shamgar's life, committed more than ever to wage God's war, singing together:

To this I hold: My hope is only Jesus!
All the glory evermore to him!
When the race is complete,
still my lips shall repeat:
yet not I, but through Christ in me!

AMEN