

Things at Hand: Shamgar, Rahab, Dorcus & David

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

For the next two weeks, we're going to look at things that were used by some Bible characters in their service for God, from the children's chorus:

Shamgar had an oxgoad, David had a sling,
Dorcas had a needle, Rahab had some string,
Samson had a jawbone, Aaron had a rod,
Mary had some ointment, and they all were used of God.

In this talk, I will look at the first four in the order they're stated in the chorus and not in the order given in the title of this talk.

Shamgar's ox goad

We read about Shamgar in the Book of Judges:

"After [Ehud] was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600...Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel" (3:31).

"In the days of Shamgar...the highways were abandoned, and travellers kept to the byways" (5:6).

Shamgar is only mentioned in these two verses of the Bible. He was Israel's third judge. The judges were appointed by God to be leaders, or rulers, of Israel after the days of Joshua. Some four centuries of the judges followed those heady days of Joshua, under whose leadership Israel had conquered Canaan and gained their promised inheritance.

In Judges ch.2, the Spirit of God gives the following assessment of this period Israel's history:

The nation continued to serve the LORD until its elders, who outlived Joshua, died. The next generations didn't have first-hand experience of the LORD's great work in bringing Israel through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. They quickly forgot Him and abandoned Him to serve the gods of the surrounding nations, the Ammonites, the Moabites, etc. This evil idolatry provoked the LORD to anger and He sent these enemy-nations that surrounded Canaan to plunder them. During these invasions, He withdrew His protection from them, and they were defeated time after time in battle. But whenever the LORD saw their terrible distress, He raised up judges, who saved them from those who plundered them. However, after these rescues, they refused to obey their judges, and returned to whoring after the false gods. They soon turned aside from the ways in which their forefath-

ers, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, walked. Whenever they cried out in their great distress, the LORD heard, and He was moved by pity. So He delivered Israel from their enemies for the lifetime of each judge. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and became more and more corrupt and entrenched in their stubborn ways. The LORD became so angry with Israel's arrogant apostasy that He left the remnants of Canaanite nations in the land to prove Israel's faithfulness to the LORD and His Law.

For over four hundred years, these cycles of disobedience to God's covenant, oppression from their enemies, crying to the LORD for deliverance, God raising up a judge to deliver them, followed by a period of peace during the judge's lifetime, were repeated over and over again. The first cycle commenced two generations after Joshua's death. That is, when all of the elders, who had experienced all that the LORD had done for Israel as they conquered Canaan and dispossessed the Canaanites, had also died.

Their first judge was Othniel, whose name appropriately means a force of God. He delivered Israel from the dominance of the king of Mesopotamia for 40 years. Ehud was the next judge. He was victorious against the Moabites and so Israel experienced peace for another 80 years. And so we arrive at Shamgar, who tackled another of Israel's enemies, the Philistines. It could be that Shamgar became a famous warrior towards the end of Ehud's rule for the next two verses after Judges 3:31 introduce the next cycle of Israel's disobedience, which commenced after Ehud's death:

"And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died [so] ...[T]he LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor" (4:1-2).

Let's focus on Israel's spiritual condition at that time. Ehud had killed Eglon, the Moabite king, and freed Israel from his tyranny so that they enjoyed peace and rest for 80 years. But were they really free to enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land? 5:6 would indicate not, for during Shamgar's lifetime and then continuing into Jael's lifetime Israel's highways were deserted - travellers took to the back roads to get around safely. It appears that the proper routes were too dangerous to travel along because of the ambushes by the remnants of the Canaanites, who lived amongst Israel. The people of Israel had come to accept terrorism as part of the price of possessing in the land. But Shamgar thought differently. Singlehandedly he fought off and killed 600 Philistines, not with a weapon of war, but with a weapon of defence. Our title states that the Bible characters mentioned in the chorus used whatever was at hand. In Shamgar's case, this was an oxgoad. Quite unconventional but very effective in a 1:600 situation. It may be that he was at work in the field when the Philistines attacked. His zeal for his inheritance caused him to defend it for himself and his posterity. Or it could have been that he was taking his oxen to market and he was not afraid of ambushers as he saw the potential of using an agricultural implement as an improvised weapon. Either way, the Philistines would have thought that he didn't stand a chance against themselves. The point of the chorus is that, with God's help, he used whatever he could in ensuring that Israel were not overcome by their enemies.

We're not told how long he judged Israel, but we are told he was alone in combatting the Philistines, unlike Ehud, who summonsed Israel's army into battle. So I would conclude that there was a state of spiritual stupor during Shamgar's reign - Israel had lost the desire to fully possess their Promised Land! Under Ehud, they had successfully fought invasions from over their eastern border, the enemy without. Under Shamgar they had succumbed to the enemy within - the occupying garrisons of Philistine soldiers.

Here's the first lesson for us believers today. To us, Moab would represent the ungodly world sys-

tem, which constantly wants to squeeze us into its mould (see Romans 12:2, *The New Testament in Modern English*, J.B. Phillips). Whereas the Philistines are a picture of the flesh, the sinful nature, within each one of us (Romans 7:25), which lusts after everything which appeals to our natural senses (1 John 2:15). These are constant enemies for the people of God to fight against by the power of the Spirit of God. Secondly, there's also that ongoing danger of falling asleep spiritually and regressing to living under the domination of the law of sin and death. (see Romans 8:2, which is a summary of the battle of our old and new natures as described in Romans ch.7).

David's sling

David's historic victory over Goliath has become famous throughout the world. People speak about 'David vs. Goliath' struggles of the weak against the strong in all sorts of walks of life. To believers, the account is one of the most important in the Old Testament. It was crucial in the establishment of the nation of Israel under David's kingship. What happened that day is so well-known that I only need to remind you that the account of it is found in 1 Samuel ch.17.

David had been sent to the Valley of Elah by his father, Jesse, with food supplies for his brothers, who were soldiers in Saul's army. On his arrival he saw the giant and heard his challenge. David realised that Goliath was defying the living God as well as the armies of Israel. David's brothers dismissed his offer to fight Goliath as arrogant presumption, but other soldiers took his offer to represent Israel to king Saul. Saul was relieved to find a volunteer, but he was unconvinced that David, being just a youth, would succeed against such a mature warrior as Goliath. Not to mention the mismatch in stature! After Saul had heard-out David concerning his exploits with wild animals as a shepherd boy, he gave him permission to fight on behalf of Israel with the command: "Go, and the LORD be with you!" However, Saul then fitted David out with his own armour. David knew that it was useless, but he tested it out before discarding it. Taking his staff in his hand and choosing five smooth stones for his shepherd's bag from the valley stream, with his sling in his hand he drew near to the Philistine. Goliath's reaction was one of contempt and he cursed David by his gods. David replied:

"You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand" (1 Samuel 17:45-47).

David wasted no more time. He took a stone out of his bag, slung it, and struck the Philistine in his forehead. The stone sunk into the forehead of the Philistine and he fell on his face to the ground. David ran and took the Philistine's sword, and killed him with it by cutting off his head. When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. And the rest, as we say, is history!

But we now need to draw out some lessons for ourselves today from this well-loved story. First, David had been trained in what we might term the 'School of God' to be ready for this battle; and other subsequent battles against Israel's enemies. Second, our life experiences and our natural abilities are given us by God to equip us for His service. Third, the unconventional weaponry David used reminds us that our battles for God have a spiritual dimension to them. In this Gospel era, we do well to remember Paul's words:

"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" (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Dorcas' needle

Let's first read Acts 9:36-43.

"Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, [or] Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

The main point of Luke's record is the miraculous raising of Dorcas from the dead by the apostle Peter by the power of the Holy Spirit. It was an event designed to convince the Jews of the veracity of the Gospel:

["\[The\] great salvation...was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us \[Jews\] by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" \(Hebrews 2:3-4\).](#)

The chorus comments on the use Dorcas made of her sewing needle, which she used in her practical service for the Lord. She was a disciple, which meant she had committed herself to follow her Master. As such, she had consecrated her natural abilities to Him for Him to sanctify them in His service. Her needle was a simple tool, ready at hand, for her to employ in making clothes. Her service was also ready at hand: the needy poor people in her home town of Joppa, especially her fellow-believers and no doubt the widows amongst both groups. She dedicated her life to the Lord to such an extent that she was wholly devoted to these good and charitable actions so much so that her death adversely affected those she served. She had a tremendous witness even before the miracle of her resurrection, which caused many others in Joppa to believe on Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

The lesson for us today is that, as we have opportunity:

"Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (see Galatians 6:9-10).

Dorcas has inspired many Christian women in their service for the Lord. Whenever I read of her, I'm always reminded of missionary sewing meetings, which were a weekly activity of my local church when I was young. And I knew of many more dotted around Tyneside - some of which are still active today. Many tonnes of garments have been sent to the mission fields from these acts of Christian love.

Dorcas had natural ability, which the Lord took and sanctified for His service. It may be that you, too, could devote your talents to Him for His service? For example, both my wife and our daughters are gifted in caring for younger children - especially in occupying them with suitable activities, reading or telling them stories, etc. Such gifts have proved invaluable in our church children's groups, especially our Toddlers' activities which seem to benefit the parents and carers as much as the children!

Rahab's String

Whenever we hear, or read, about the battle of Jericho, we immediately think of Joshua. Perhaps our minds are conditioned by the chorus 'Joshua won the battle of Jericho', which some of us sang during our childhood. But Hebrews 11:30-31 also highlights the role that Rahab played in it:

"By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies."

In these two verses, faith means trust in God. For Joshua and the people of Israel, their faith manifested itself in their trust in, and obedience to, the instructions Jehovah had given to Joshua as to how they were to defeat this formidable enemy:

"See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valour. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city shall fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him" (Joshua 6:2-5).

They executed these instructions to the letter as the remainder of ch.6 informs us. But what was Rahab's role in this? and what was the significance of the scarlet cord, called 'the string' in the chorus? The answers are found in ch.2, the account of the two young men Joshua sent, from the east bank of the Jordan, to spy out Jericho. Hebrews 11:31 tells us that she acted by faith. She not only welcomed the spies but she also concealed them from the delegation sent to arrest them by the orders of Jericho's king. She made a noble confession to the spies of her faith in the LORD:

"I know that the LORD has given you the land" (Joshua 2:9).

After she'd misled and misdirected their pursuers, she showed them where to hide in the hills and how to get back to Joshua safely. By acting in this way, James 2:25 states that Rahab was justified in **the sight of men** by what she did – even though that showed her to be a traitor to her own people! It was the right way to demonstrate her faith in the one and only living God, whose mighty deeds in delivering Israel from Egypt and sustaining them throughout the wilderness journey were renowned in all nations of the world.

The chorus identifies the cord of scarlet, which she hung from her window. She had this on hand and obeyed the spies' instructions to hang it in the window, through which she lowered them down the outside of the city walls by a rope. I think that this cord demonstrated that her faith was in the LORD to deliver both her and her family. Perhaps it also encouraged the Israelites, when they saw it, that the LORD was giving them Jericho by this seemingly strange battle strategy; and that the report of the two spies was true, unlike that of the 10 spies 40 years earlier! Whatever had been its former use, she dedicated it to be used by the LORD, however strange that may have seemed even to her at the time.

What are the lessons for us today? To quote Matthew Henry

"True faith will show itself in good works, especially towards the people of God. ...

Faith will venture all hazards in the cause of God for his people; a true believer will sooner expose his own person than God's interest and people. ...A true believer is desirous, not only to be in [relationship] with God, but in communion with the people of God, and is willing to cast in his lot with them, and to fare as they fare."

Conclusions

The Bible characters we have considered today all used what was ready at hand in their service for God. Or perhaps it's better stated the other way round by using the final clause of the chorus that "they were all used of God." God used them for His own purposes:

- Shamgar's improvised weaponry gained a significant victory in Israel's deliverance from the Philistines, who were a constant distraction and obstacle to them following the right ways.
- David's sling was a necessary item of equipment for his duties as a shepherd. He was skilled in its use and God had prepared him for his victorious battle with Goliath. It was a weapon of God's choice, not man's.
- Dorcus used an ordinary instrument of an ordinary activity, sewing, to give an extraordinary witness to the power of the Gospel - that of doing good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith (see Galatians 6:9-10).
- Rahab's 'string' was on hand and fitted exactly the specification for its special use by God.

So summing up, I would say that God provided the right equipment for His servants to accomplish His will at exactly the right time. Any of us could be unknown, like Shamgar, or become famous, like David or Dorcus or Rahab, but, in the words of the hymn:

There's a work for Jesus, ready at your hand,
'Tis a task the Master just for you has planned.
Haste to do His bidding, yield Him service true;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

There's a work for Jesus, humble though it be,
'Tis the very service He would ask of thee.
Go where fields are whitened, and the lab'ers few;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

There's a work for Jesus, precious souls to bring,
Tell them of His mercies, tell them of your King.
Faint not, nor grow weary, He will strength renew;
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

Work for Jesus, day by day,
Serve Him ever, falter never; Christ obey.
Yield Him service loyal, true,
There's a work for Jesus none but you can do.

Elsie Duncan Yale (1912)

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