

The Rightness of Lefthandedness

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[0:00] Just while you remain standing, I'll pray. Lord, we pray that you would open our eyes, that we might behold wondrous things from your word, that you'd soften our hearts, that we might receive it, that you'd transform our wills, that we might be doers of it, and that you'd loosen our tongues, that we might proclaim your word.

And we ask this for the glory of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen. Please sit down. So, Yohonatan sat around the fire with the other lads.

The youngest kids had now drifted off to sleep, and the village storyteller was just getting started. Anyway, the dying embers were stirred up a little bit, more wood was added, and then he began.

And as soon as he did, Yohonatan knew that they were in for a treat. He loved this story. He could almost tell it himself. And as he remembered, he felt the laughter beginning to well up within him.

First, the context would be set. It was the day of the judges. Yet again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Yet again, the Lord gave them into the hands of their enemies.

[1:15] And the descendants of incest were never meant to enter the congregation of God's people. But now, those Moabites, well, they sided with those other scum nations, the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and together they came.

Jericho, the city of Palms, had been Israel's first great victory in the land under Joshua. Now, a generation later, the Moabites and the Ammonites and the Amalekites took Jericho, that city of Palms.

For 18 years, the Israelites were subject to Eglon, king of Moab. Under oppression, they cried out to the Lord. There was no repentance by them.

They just cried. They simply cried out to the Lord as they'd done in Egypt. And the Lord heard them. And he gave them a deliverer, Ehud. Ehud, the left-handed son of Gerah, the Benjaminite.

Already, there were giggles around the fire at the word plays that had begun. You see, first, Eglon's name sounds like the word for a calf or a heifer.

[2:20] It is linked to the word round. Second, Ehud's name sounds like the Hebrew word for one. Third, Benjaminite means son of the right hand.

So here is Ehud. Ehud, the one man. Ehud, the loner. Ehud, the left-handed loner of Gerah, the son of the right hand. Loaded up with tribute, off he goes.

And he goes off to see Eglon, king of Moab. And Jehonatan and his friends began to squirm with delight at this, you see. The fun bit was coming. They knew. They had heard it before.

They knew what was going on. Ehud had made, you see, this double-edged sword about a foot in length. It had no hilt. It could therefore be strapped to his thigh.

And because he was left-handed, he might not be frisked properly by the palace guards because it had no hilt. It could lie flat against his thigh under his clothing.

[3 : 23] And so he gets into the court without being found out. And he presents Israelite tribute. And now the storyteller has planted yet another anticipatory note, you see, because Eglon the calf, the heifer, was a very fat one.

And the storyteller emphasized it. You see, this man Eglon had taken advantage of Israel. He had grown fat by his plunder of them. And he was fat.

I mean, very fat. Even round, you might say, like his name. He possessed all the right characteristics suited for a sacrifice.

A fat, round, slow-moving, tender, sacrificial, fatted calf. And then the tension and the anticipation dissipates a little bit because there's this brief interlude.

While Ehud and his attendants set off in the direction of home. Nothing's happened. Then they passed some images. Some statues. Idols.

[4 : 27] Canaanite idols. Symbols of the religious sin of Israel. Symbols of the cost of having pagan rulers. And then, and at them, Ehud turns.

And he heads back to the court of the fat man. And he's ushered in. And he announces why he has returned. Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you.

Again, the wordplay. The Hebrew could mean this. Your Majesty, I have a secret thing for you. Well, it's tempting. And His Majesty falls for it. Secret it is.

And so the attendants are sent out. And Yohonatan and his friends, of course, they know the secret. They've heard this story lots of times before. For them, it is no secret. And Ehud says it again. Your Majesty, I have a message or thing for you.

Now, at this stage, you've got to remember they are in the king's inner room. It apparently has some sort of toilet in it. Perhaps the king's even sitting on it. The king is in his inner room, which has this toilet in it, perhaps sitting on it.

[5 : 32] And the fat heifer rises. His round paunch invades the room. And the lonely lefty takes his short sword and plunges it into the king's belly.

And his hand follows it. And the fat closes over both. And excrement blossoms from his bowels. God's message of judgment is clear.

And it's two-edged like the sword. This fat heifer has received in the place where he had benefited most the judgment of God. And then the situation becomes even more comedic because Ehud disappears.

And he closes the door from the inside, apparently. And he slips out, apparently, through the toilet itself. Now, then his servants come. They apparently can smell things. The excrement.

And they presume he's on the toilet. Finally, though, embarrassment gets to them. And they unlock the door. And there he is, dead. Meanwhile, Ehud escapes.

[6 : 34] He passes those symbols of idolatry again. And those symbols of Eglon's rule. But this time he presses on. And he makes a rally call.

And victory ensues. And Moab is made subject, as it should be. And the land has peace for an unprecedented 80 years. Two generations. Friends, I've retold the story for you in a way where I seek to capture the nuances of the biblical text in the original language, which our English doesn't quite reveal as well as it might.

At times, I've interpreted the Hebrew text a little differently from our NIV translation. However, I do hope that you've heard the rawness that is here in the text. Perhaps unlike no other passage in the Bible, this text flows with not-so-delicate language.

The heading that I've given to this section tries to capture it, if you've looked in your outlines. It is a story of daggers, dunnies, death, and double entendre. Now, at this point, you may be finding this language a little bit jarring from the pulpit.

However, if you do, then I need to tell you that you are jarring against Scripture as God gives it. It is meant to be like this. You see, rather than shutting down Scripture because it doesn't fit our sensibilities, we should listen to it as it comes to us and try to make sense of it.

[7 : 58] That's what I want to do in the rest of our time. So let me just summarise what is going on here and do some explaining of the story, because it is beautiful in many ways. You see, remember the context.

We are in the period of the judges. Last week, we combined the patterns that we saw in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 and put them together in a diagram, which is there in the outlines in front of you. We came up with what I called a modified cycle of human and divine action.

Do you remember that pattern? Have a look at it again. You might check it out. And you saw, you see the typical cycle goes like this. It generally starts with some sort of downward human intervention.

Israel does evil in the eyes of the Lord. And they become even more corrupt. And the Lord's anger is aroused at Israel's sin.

And so he gives them into the hands of a foreign aggressor. Then Israel typically cries out to the Lord. And the Lord then relents and sends them a deliverer.

[8 : 57] Often that deliverer is filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And the Lord turns the tide of oppression and, as he does this, gives the foreign aggressor into the hands of the judge, the deliverer.

And then the land typically has rest for a number of years. Let's check out this cycle in relation to this judge. We start as usual. Verse 12, have a look at it.

It says that the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He gives them into the hands of a foreign aggressor, this time in the shape of Eglon, the round king of Moab. Now look at verse 15.

It tells us that the Israelites cry out to the Lord and the Lord intervenes. There's no sign of repentance here. They do, however, cry out. And God intervenes by giving them a deliverer in the shape of the loner Ehud, the left-handed man of the sons of the right-handed tribe.

Actually, there were lots of Benjaminites who were left-handed. You see later in Judges that there's a whole horde of them who are great warriors. Anyway, there's no reference to the spirit here. There is a reference, however, to the Lord raising up Ehud in verse 15.

[10 : 09] And there is a reference to the Lord giving Moab, the enemy of Israel, into the hands of Israel. And you can see it in the words of verse 28. There is a reference to the land having peace for a good, long 80 years at the hand of this deliverer.

So that's the first thing. You see, the pattern that we saw in chapters 2 and 3 is generally followed here. There are some missing elements, such as no reference to the spirit. And Ehud is, of course, not an exemplary person from the tribe of Judah, a right-handed man.

He's not like Othniel, who we just saw in the first part of this chapter. And he is something of a scoundrel, let me tell you. And he does go about doing business with deception and secrecy.

So laugh as we may, he's not an exemplary man. He is treacherous and he is somewhat brutal. And we do have questions about the manner in which the Lord's salvation is enacted by this particular deliverer.

In other words, we do get to the, what we've got here is, we're into the second judge and we're already seeing a deterioration in both the cycle and the quality of the judge.

[11:17] We do get some dirtiness entering the process. Nevertheless, what we see with this story is God is at work through it. He is superintending the process. It is God's action.

His hand is in it. And Ehud, the narrator makes that clear in verse 15. It's the Lord who's at work here. And Ehud confirms it in verse 28.

Now, can you see what I'm saying? No matter how messy this is, how untoward, how brutal, God is behind this process. He's behind what happens here in this chapter.

By the way, take a look at the last verse of the chapter. Look at verse 31. It talks about the next judge. Now, it's only a very brief reference, but let me tell you, it is very telling.

You see, after all, Ehud may be a less than exemplary figure. However, let me tell you something about him. He is an Israelite. He is of the sons of Benjamin.

[12:17] Not so is Shamgar. He is a foreigner. And yet, he too saved Israel. Can you see what God's saying here? You see, he's saying he's still at work.

However, his work is being done by less than ideal figures. Nevertheless, it is still his work. He is saving Israel through these less than ideal figures. Now, in order to confirm this reading, I want to show you some references to hands that run through the chapter.

Have your Bibles open and look at them with me. Not all of them are exactly evident in the English versions of our Bible, but they would be heard by a Hebrew reader. So, let me show them to you. First, there's the reference to Benjamin, the son of the right hand.

That's what his name means. Second, there is a reference to Ehud's left-handedness. By the way, I love the way that Israel talks about left-handers.

Sorry for those of you who are left-handers. But Israel talks about left-handers as being impeded of the right hand. Literally, that's what it means.

[13:26] Third, there's a reference to the tribute being sent in verse 15. Literally, the Israelites send it by the hand. The left hand, let me tell you, of Ehud.

Then there's verse 24. There's verse 21. Ehud uses his left hand to draw out the short sword and plunge it into the body of Eglon.

Fifth, there's verse 28. The Lord gives Moab into what? The hands of Israel. It's not there in the NIV, but it is in the NRSV. Can you hear the theological reflection?

Can you hear what's going on here? God's hand is at work here. At the beginning of the chapter, it is God who gives Israel into the hands of the foreign oppressor. However, at the same time, he's acting in grace by using the impeded hand of the somewhat morally impeded man.

And through his impeded hand, through his left hand, Eglon is sacrificed. Through this man of impeded hand, Moab is given into the hands of Israel.

[14:31] It's the rightness of left handedness, if you like. And Moab is subdued under the hand of Israel. Friends, let's try and tie this together.

See what it all means. What is the point of this narrative, do you think? What is the point of the manner in which this narrative is told? Let me suggest it to you in this way.

The point is that, as I've emphasized, God is at work here. And he may use what we think are unsuitable people to accomplish his purposes. Let me tell you, that is not at all unusual for God.

Not at all. After all, he does use a murderer such as Moses to accomplish his great purpose in his world. He uses a Babylonian king such as Nebuchadnezzar to punish his people.

He uses a median king, Cyrus, to be his servant to bring his people back from exile. He even conscripts Pilate into his purpose that he accomplishes in his son.

[15:32] Now, let me tell you, he may even use me in my frailty and my sin, just as he might use you in your frailty and sin. Friends, can you hear what is being said here?

God is not constricted in his sovereignty. He's not constricted in whom he uses to accomplish his purposes. And I reckon that is an enormous and great comfort.

After all, we will never cease being frail this side of heaven, will we? Never cease being frail this side of heaven. Fortunately, though, God is sovereign.

He will never cease being sovereign, either this or on the other side of heaven. And his purposes will always be accomplished, even despite the frailty of the people that he has to work with, such as you and me.

And what a relief that is. What a relief that it is his hand which will dominate and determine human history and not mine and not yours. But there's far more to say here.

[16:40] Friends, let me tell you, these are still the very early days of the period of the judges. And let me tell you, in these early days, there is room for laughter. Israel laughed every time this story was told.

Oh, it may be a little coarse. And the agents of this activity are a little coarse. However, as the book of judges moves on, let me tell you now, our laughter is going to turn to tears.

You see, the judges don't get any better as we progress through judges. In fact, they get a lot worse. And Israel's slide away from God and toward Canaanite culture escalates.

Mayhem rules by the time you get to the end of the book of judges. And Israel becomes indistinguishable almost from those around about her. She becomes a place where people do not do right in the eyes of the Lord.

Instead, they do what is right in their own eyes. That is, they sin with an upper hand. You see, here in the book of judges, we find that God can, and in this chapter, God can use odd people and rough characters.

[17:49] There may be a touch of humour in the story and the telling of God's rescue. But human depravity in the book of judges will soon take the humour out of things. Human depravity will soon demand something tragic.

You see, to deal with sin, which is the underlying problem in the book of judges, a real saviour will be needed. He will need to be a good man without any of the guile of Ehud.

He will need to suffer for his people. The tragedy of sin will need to be dealt with by a real saviour. And it will necessitate a life filled with tragedy as he bears the sin of humanity.

This saviour will be a hero of a different sort from Ehud. Of a different calibre than this somewhat lovable rogue. The saviour we need will need to be a good man.

A man without guile. Even a man without sin. And he will need to bear the sin of humanity and suffer for them in their place.

[19:00] And there will be no humour on the day that this happens. Even though the enemies of God will be vanquished at that point. There will on that cross only be frailty and pathos and tragedy and death.

Friends, we began with humour. But what we see here can only end with tragedy. However, in and through the tragedy of the death of the Son of God, God's hand will be at work in a far greater way than it was here in many ways.

In every way. And his hand will enable our hearts to change. And our tears will be turned to joy. For there will be a future promised for us that will not end in tragedy like the book of Judges.

The laughter will be laughter of joy and triumph. And all because a perfect judge, filled and driven by God's spirit, died for us.

And in response to him, let me say, hopefully, we will live lives not marked by the flawed character of such as Ehud. Rather, our characters will reflect the integrity of our Lord and our Saviour.

[20 : 23] And our lives will begin to look like his life. Not like Ehud's. So let's pray. Father God, we do thank you for this story.

But Father, as we look ahead, we can see the darkness of it and the sin that lurks under it. And we know that in the rest of the book of Judges, it will blossom and flourish.

And Father, we know that that sin lurks in the heart of all human beings. We know it can only be dealt with by Christ. By your son. By your son.

So Father, we pray that today we might rejoice in his suffering. Thank you that you filled him with your spirit. That you sent him to do your work.

And that he died so that sin might be forgiven. And that our tears at sin might be turned into joy and laughter at forgiveness.

[21 : 33] So Father, we thank you for this. Thank you for Jesus who defeated the great enemies of sin, the death, death and the devil. Thank you that he vanquished them on the cross.

And has brought us into relationship with you. We thank you for these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.

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