

Judges 3:12-30 "A Lefty Makes Things Right"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

If you have a Bible with you, open it to the book of Judges. How many of you have never—well, let's ask it differently. Instead of shaming some of you, I'll let some of you boast.

How many of you have read the book of Judges? How many know who Ehud is? If you do, you're probably left-handed, which we'll see why.

We're going through a series of sermons over the summer, which we call redemption stories. But stories in the Old Testament that don't just tell stories, but also point us to the gospel and the grace we see in Jesus.

And this morning, leave it up to me to find an obscure story. I want us to look at a story that you probably have not heard, but is in many ways funny, but also quite sad.

[1 : 22] So follow with me. We're going to be reading Judges chapter 3, verses 12 through 30. Judges 3, 12 through 30.

Where we have the story of Ehud. And the people of Israel, again, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

And the Lord strengthened Eglon, the king of Moab, against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites and went and defeated Israel.

And they took possession of the city of Palms, which is Jericho. And the people of Israel served Eglon, the king of Moab, 18 years.

Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer. Eglon, the son of Gerah, the Benjaminites, a left-handed man.

[2 : 29] The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon, the king of Moab. And Eglon made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length.

And he bounded on his right thigh under his clothes. And he presented the tribute to Eglon, king of Moab. Now, Eglon was a very fat man.

And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, I have a secret message for you, O king.

And he commanded, silence. And all his attendants went out from his presence. And Ehud came to him as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber.

And he had said, I have a message from God for you. And he arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly.

[3 : 39] And the hilt also went in after the blade. And the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly.

And the dung came out. Then Ehud went out into the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them. And when he had gone, the servants came.

And when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, surely he is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber. And they waited until they were embarrassed.

But when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. And there lay their Lord, dead on the floor. He had escaped while they delayed.

And he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Sierra. And when he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader.

[4 : 39] And he said to them, follow after me, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand. And so they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites and did not allow anyone to pass over.

And they killed at that time about 10,000 of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men, not a man escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel, and the land had rest for 80 years.

You know, the Ehud, I think, is by far one of the most interesting and fun stories in the book of Judges, in particular, maybe through the Old Testament.

And it's primarily known because this left-handed guy, this Benjaminite Southpaw, overthrows, contrives this brilliant scheme, and then overthrows with his leadership, this Moabite domination of Israel.

But at the same time, it's stories like this that give us difficulty. Part of it is this story, if you didn't pick up a little bit, the English doesn't do justice, but it's the graphic nature of the telling of this story.

[6 : 10] I'm going to have a very difficult time relating to you what is in this text in a way that will not violate our Southern polite church sensibilities.

This is a story of every middle school boy's dream. It's got everything in here. But maybe the toughest aspect of this is there are some moral dilemmas here.

Is this what we want? Is this the kind of leader that we need who leads by deception and outright murder? Is this what God calls us to?

And I think because of this, this story is kind of left off to the side because we don't know how to process this, especially today.

But we don't know what to think of it. Ehud's not one of these leaders that's put up here for our admiration, kind of like Gideon is. Gideon is the poster child of the book of Judges.

[7 : 24] But unfortunately, he had his issues too. So what do we do with this story? I think I really want to change our approach, maybe to the whole of the book of Judges, but particularly to Ehud here.

And I want us to see three basic things in this story. One is that we're going to see some very wonderful things about the character of God and his compassion for his people.

we're going to see the pure idiocy of idolatry. And then we're going to see some pointers that point us to a much better Savior to come.

So first, let's look. Our covenant God's compassion in the face of ongoing rejection.

You see there in the text, and the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of their God. That word again is very prominent. Because if you read through the book of Judges, it's a downward progression.

- [8 : 36] They start with faithfulness as they enter into the land of Canaan, led by Joshua. But then as soon as these leaders die, things deteriorate spiritually.
- And so they do evil. Then God sends a judge, a savior, to take care of them. The first one was Othniel. And so he just overpowered.
- Overpower. He came against these overpowering forces and saved Israel. And they had rest for 40 years. Well, at the end of 40 years, now we see the cycle starting all over.
- Othniel dies out. Those leaders die out. And again, Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord.
- After 40 years, you would think that they took that time to learn their lessons from their previous enslavement, but it did not sink in.
- [9 : 36] And so very quickly, they revert back to their idolatries, their old ways of rejecting Yahweh, their covenant God, for the gods of the land around them.
- But this time, God does it differently. The last time he brought this overwhelming force against them and enslaved them. This time, he strengthens this sniveling little king.
- He empowers him to bring Israel into slavery. Now, it's probably just a regional issue around the Jordan, around where Jericho was.
- But still, what God does here is he strengthens somebody who really has no power at all and makes them unstoppable and brings his own people into slavery.
- And after 18 years of this slavery, after 18 years, they finally cry out for help. And this tells us two very important things.
- [10 : 55] Also, well, notice before I say that, we never, in this whole thing, see evidence that Israel repented. Never.
- They cry out. God. So, two things we need to see from this. First, when God disciplines his people, he doesn't do it just out of anger, but he does it with this strong sense of compassion for those people.
- He does not enjoy bringing pain. But in fact, when they are in pain, pain that he himself brings on them, it's his heart that breaks first.
- If you look back in chapter 2, verse 18, when we see this overall description, kind of the shortened version of the rest of the book of Judges, we have this statement in verse 18.
- Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, the Lord was with the judge and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.
- [12 : 21] This is kind of like when you have to give your child a, well, should I say spanking? I'll say it anyway.
- If you had to give your child a spanking and you want to say to your child, this is going to hurt me a lot more than it's going to hurt you. And your child kind of looks up at you incredulous.
- Is it seriously? It's my behind that's going to be sore. Not yours. But what they don't realize is that it's the heart of a parent for his child that is breaking for the child.
- And no parent enjoys in any form bringing pain to a child. And if that's true of us who are evil, how much more so is it true of the covenant God who now pursues this rebellious, rejecting people?
- The second thing is notice his salvation is not always or necessarily precipitated by repentance.
- [13 : 50] God brings salvation to his people long before their hearts are ready to turn back. Their cry out to God is not oh we're so sorry for our sin.

Their cry is from the pain that they're having to live with because of God's discipline. That's all they wanted. They wanted relief.

And God gave it to them. Only Israel it's interesting in this passage is said to have done evil.

Not Moab not anybody else but Israel. I think sometimes we often believe that God is only going to come and help us.

He's only going to come and get us take care of us and give us good things when we finally repent. That we are repentant and we get our hearts right and that's when he comes to save us.

[14 : 57] When I quit pursuing this addiction then God's going to come and help me. He's not going to come and help me until I stop. Until I can change my heart about this God's not going to come.

When I change it then that's when he's going to come. We think that the pain that God brings us is corrective.

Well in some ways it is. And as we go through the book of Judges you'll see that more and more and more it becomes that. But the pain also points what he gets the reason he gives us the pain is so that we can see the dead end of our idolatries.

The pain is not directly inflicted on him it's what we bring on ourselves. The real corrective in this discipline is that this covenant keeping God shows kindness to his people.

when they are the most desperate and they can do nothing. He just comes because they're his people. We as his people are not like animals that have to be punished to correct our behavior.

[16 : 29] We are like wandering spouses houses that he is now in pursuit of to win back by his love. And that's what he's doing here.

And they will come back it'll be very short lived but this is a picture of the heart of this covenant God that we serve. God is the second thing we see in this passage again is just the total utter foolishness of idolatry.

In here I love reading one of the commentators and I think he's really on target here. You have to imagine a bunch of Israelis sitting around the campfire telling this story.

And as they go through this story they are in stitches. This is hilarious stuff. I wish I could give you all of it that's in here but I can't.

But I'll give you enough. You know this is one of those great examples where if you see in Psalm 2 where God just holds the nations as they rage against him he holds them in derision.

[17 : 44] Here's a good example of that derision that these enemies of God's people have. We begin with the statement the Lord raised up for them a deliverer Ehud the son of Gera the Benjaminite a left handed man.

Now you've got to know that in Middle Eastern culture being left handed was not normal. In fact it was so contrary because the left hand is considered highly unclean because of what was done with it.

And so here the author is telling you there's something unusual about to happen with him being left handed. And it's not just that he was left handed.

Again you read farther down through the book of Judges you find out that in Benjamin there was a group of soldiers. There was a whole group of them that were specifically trained to fight with their left hands.

Literally the text says his right hand was restricted. Because everybody's fighting with their right hand with their sword and they got their shield but if you put somebody now with a sword in their left hand that's totally unexpected and it gives them an advantage.

[19 : 11] And so we're told here again pointing to something unusual. Ehud is left handed. Important detail. So you know and at this point I have to say too there are more than one theory of what happens in this story.

I'm going to give you what I think is the one that makes the most sense. Okay. All right we've met Ehud.

Now we need to meet Eglon. Oh the funny thing I forgot Ehud he's left handed but actually what his name means son of my right hand.

Now we get Eglon. Eglon's name means little calf. It's also feminine.

Eglon. This is a rotund effeminate king of Moab who has made himself fat off of Israel.

[20 : 32] And so Ehud makes he is going with this group to present the required tax but actually the text says it's more like an offering with this delegation but before he does he makes himself a sword.

This is not a battle sword. This is more like a foot or 18 inches long and then he straps it because he's left handed he straps it on his right thigh.

Now this is important if every soldier fights with his right hand he's going to have his sword on his left thigh so when they go in and search these are enemies so when they search them for weapons they're more than likely not even going to think about a sword being on the right side.

So and more than likely he straps this on the inner thigh again so it would be totally undetected. And now the story is framed between the idols these idols that demarcated the land of that now Moab controls these stone idols that were set up you see that they come in past these idols and after presenting their offering Ehud follows with the group back to those idols and then says goodbye to them sends them off but then returns and he's returning with a message or literally a thing for Eglon now again if you're sitting around the campfire you're hearing this story you know the thing that Eglon is going to get and it's just starting to get funny so

Ehud comes back catches Eglon sitting in the cool roof chamber this is the toilet and the way they designed these toilets was it was a raised room so that when the toilet was used it could be cleaned out below important detail but literally the text says when Ehud comes back Eglon was sitting on his throne you wondered where that came from so now the question is why would Eglon send out all of his people to be alone with an enemy in the toilet this is where it gets a little tricky

[23 : 38] Eglon we think was expecting sexual favors and so you know which would explain why he sends everybody out and so forth but then Ehud rephrases his statement he says I have a message for you reaches with his left hand to his right thigh pulls out his little sword thrusts it in to his belly and this guy is rotund he was so fat the sword went all the way in and disappeared causing a reflex bowel movement and Eglon dies in the toilet in his own dung now the escape well

Ehud locks the door from the inside and then escapes down through the toilet into the room below where they're not going to be looking for it and he's able to clear and goes all the way out again past the idols that supposedly had given control of Israel over Israel to Moab but were now powerless to stop one little Benjaminite soldier the utter powerlessness of idols but the story keeps going the writer because now you've got Egon dead Ehud has escaped but now you've got these buffoons of soldiers that are Egon's and they're outside the toilet they're waiting on their king they smell something that tells them this is not the time to go in but they keep waiting and waiting and he doesn't come out and he doesn't come out and they don't know what to do if we go in there and we embarrass him it's going to be trouble for us and finally they just had to they break in they unlock the door and find their king dead and then you see the rest of the story if

Israel is held captive by this bunch of Moabite idiots whose gods are totally impotent to save their people who are the real fools the enemies of God's people are powerful for one reason because God gave them that power over them but the idea that these it's not the Moabites the issue of idolatry they don't know any different but Israel rejected the covenant God for these other idols and they thought these idols would be enough to satisfy them and save them and protect them and then they were overrun by this fat effeminate powerless little calf

Isaiah 44 16 and 17 says this very starkly about idolatry speaking of a cedar tree that a man cuts down he says over half of it he eats meat he roasts it and is satisfied also he warms himself and says aha I'm warm I have seen the fire and the rest he makes into a god his idol and falls down to it and worships it he prays to it and says deliver me for you are my god how foolish idolatry is not only the epitome of evil and rebellion it is idiocy when

I lived back in Atlanta there was a radio commercial that I heard a couple of times as I would drive around town when you're in Atlanta you drive around town a lot but it was a car commercial for some luxury car it could have been Audi something but the tagline of commercial was what does your car say about you meaning that if you really want to be somebody you need one of their cars well I drove an old 20 year old almost red pickup truck with oversized tires electronics that went haywire it had a nice brush guard on the front and a tree shaped indentation in the back end because I forgot to put the brake on once and so

[29 : 48] I'm sitting in this truck thinking hmm what does my truck say about me and the temptation was you don't want to know but when I think the purchase of a bunch of metal and rubber and wires is going to somehow give me a sense of value going to give me an identity maybe if I buy a house in a certain neighborhood maybe if I get this certain person to put their arms around me in such a way that's going to tell me I'm somebody who's the fool you got that right when I turn from the one who's loved me who continues to love me who calls me by name who made me his own and then saves me from myself who makes me into his image and promises me everything if I turn from him to a heap of metal or to another person

I am the one to be pitied you know maybe Eglon's got the excuse he just doesn't know any better but we do we do but there's one more thing in this text that you may not see you know at this point we really should be asking a question that we're probably not asking what do and that is Eglon this food is put to death by an act of God's judgment the methods by which he was murdered of course are not necessarily those we should emulate but nonetheless God brings about his fate which he deserves why not the same thing for Israel they deserve it in fact they deserve it worse because they knew better

Israel was more foolish they broke the covenant even here a story where God is very conspicuously absent except for that statement that he would raise up a savior we find some clues as to why if you read through here this story is full of sacrificial language egg line the fattened calf ehud's sword is more like a sacrificial knife rather than a sword for battle and this little calf was offered as a sacrifice for the salvation of God's people what they did not recognize was in all of this that God himself provided that sacrifice but there's something else here and this is a picture that Israel did not catch on to that sacrifice of this king pointed to another king who would come he would not be a buffoon but he would be the pure the holy one the king over Israel where he himself would come and he would be sacrificed for the sins of his people he would die the death that Israel deserved as egg line dies this death and takes this judgment though he deserved it this other king would not he would be innocent but because of the compassion and the love and the mercy and justice of God he would pay for the sins of his people himself and set them free from their idolatry this is what the covenant

God does this is what he has done here in this table this table is really a remembrance of how that king came and was slaughtered justice was fulfilled but it was our sin not his and so he came offered himself went under the knife and was the sacrifice that was sufficient to pay for all of your foolishness all of your idolatry all of your sin all of your rebellion this is the one we celebrate here a much much better sacrifice than a fat moabite king this king would do the job completely let's pray before we come to the table lord jesus we thank you that you have come that you took the judgment that we deserve oh lord jesus we are the fools we are rebellious we turn so quickly to so many other things to give us life to give us satisfaction to give us hope and we turn away from the real source of life and hope we think we can make it with our own hands we are such fools but we bow now and we come to this table and celebrate that you say fools you have given yourself for the greatest of fools that we might again know life as sons so as we eat as we celebrate this table would you feed us with your grace in jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org