

“The Hand of the LORD”

The ninety-fourth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 3:12-30; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

You have probably heard me say that the Bible is an “earthy” book. I say this because of passages like the one before us. When we read the account of Ehud—the shifty left-handed assassin—and Eglon—the obese bad guy—it becomes clear that we can’t expect the Bible to conform to the socially accepted standards of Victorian England. To the prudish Victorian’s chagrin, the Bible describes bodily functions, it depicts all kinds of sinful behavior (including sexual behavior) and the Bible makes no bones about how foolish and sinful people can be. In the very “earthy” passage we are covering this Lord’s Day, the author of Judges takes delight in poking fun at Eglon’s weight and even describes a crowd of people waiting outside the toilet while Eglon relieves himself. The Bible doesn’t tell us these things to entertain us or make us laugh. The Bible (in this case the author of Judges) describes what really happened in the days of Ehud—one of the judges whom God raised up to rescue Israel from their enemies. That said, what did happen is funny, and the author of Judges intentionally uses this humor to make an important theological point. God will rescue his people in the most surprising and mysterious of ways. And human behavior, while sinful, is often times so foolish as to be funny.

We resume our series on the Book of Judges. Last time, we covered the bare-bones account of Othniel in Judges 3:7-11. Othniel was a man whom God raised up to rescue Israel from eight years of oppression at the hands of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. In that very brief account, there are virtually no details given about what happened. We are only told that when YHWH called Othniel to rescue Israel from king “double-evil” from the east, YHWH placed his Spirit upon Othniel, who was then empowered to led Israel to victory over their enemy. That victory over Cushan-rishathaim, ensured that Israel would have forty years of peace. But even in this short report of Othniel, we see the familiar pattern found throughout this section of Judges. Israel turns away from YHWH and so YHWH sends an oppressor. The people of God then cry out to YHWH for help, before YHWH has pity on his people and sends them a rescuer (deliverer, judge), who then defeats those oppressing Israel. The outcome is that Israel enjoys a time of peace, before the whole process repeats itself.

But unlike the account of Othniel, our passage for this Lord’s day is replete with all kinds of interesting information—in fact, there may be too much information here. We learn that YHWH’s chosen deliverer is an assassin named Ehud, who is distinguished because he is “left-handed.” This is significant, because if you were to look up “right hand” in a concordance, you’ll find a significant number of references to God’s “right-hand” which he is said to stretch out, the symbol of his might and power. But Ehud, Israel’s unlikely deliverer, is left-handed. In fact, as one writer tells us, this whole account of Israel’s second judge is “left-handed,” meaning that what happens in this passage is totally unexpected, especially if we contrast this account with the earlier business-like account of Othniel which had no similar details.¹

Another writer calls this section of Judges “colorful and humoresque,” and concludes that it is a kind of literary cartoon which pokes fun at the Moabites (one of Israel’s traditional enemies), while giving glory

¹ Wilcock, [The Message of Judges](#), 39.

to God.² That may indeed be the case. We learn that Eglon, the king of the Moabites, was obese and he's treated as a pompous and gullible man, not worthy of the reader's respect. We are also given details of what happened to Eglon and to the armies of Moab after Eglon died, to remind the reader of YHWH's sovereign control over all of the affairs of men and nations. And yet, the humor here is real and it is intentional. The author of Judges is probably mocking Israel's enemies, while at the same time, reminding us that Israel's troubles were the result of their own sin. So, it is okay for us to see the humor in the passage, if we don't lose sight of the bigger picture. God will not be mocked and he will preserve his covenant people, thereby accomplishing his purposes for Israel. He will allow Moab to chasten Israel, but he won't allow Moab nor its king, Eglon, to wipe Israel from the face of the earth.

As we turn to our text, verses 12-30 of Judges 3, we learn that during the forty years of peace won for Israel by YHWH through the hand of Othniel, God's people have not repented nor have they changed their ways. In fact, Israel is so thoroughly Canaanized during this time that the people of Israel don't remember YHWH or what he had done for Israel, the Israelites did what was right in their own eyes, and they were actively engaged in the worship of Canaanite deities (Baal and Ashteroth)—all of this, in direct violation of the law of God. And this sinful behavior will bring down the covenant curses upon Israel. This time, these curses will take the form of a humiliating defeat at the hand of some of Israel's oldest enemies.

The opening words of verse 12 have a sad and familiar to them. *“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”* This tells us that pattern which unfolded during the days of Othniel will repeat itself in the generation which follows and which culminates in the next crisis and divinely-sent deliverer, Ehud. We also see again that God's providential purposes involve strengthening of one of Israel's enemies to serve as the agent of YHWH's chastisement of his disobedient people, Israel. This is clear from the last half of verse 12, when we read that *“the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”*

While the armies of Cushan-rishathaim likely had no contact with Israel before YHWH brought them to Canaan from the east to oppress Israel for eight years, in this case, the situation is much different. The Israelites were well acquainted with the Moabites, a people whom they soundly defeated back in the days of Balak (recounted Numbers 22-24) before Israel entered the land of promise. While YHWH had previously kept the Moabites in their own land to the east of Canaan (in what is now Jordan), YHWH now brings the Moabites into Canaan, specifically for the purpose of defeating Israel and then subjecting them to military and economic control. At this point, we need to understand that a victory by the Moabites over Israel, would be a humiliating thing for the Israelites to endure. To accomplish his purposes and mete out the covenant curse upon Israel due to their disobedience, YHWH “strengthens” Eglon, the king of Moab, so that Eglon becomes much more aggressive than he had been and now seeks to invade Canaan and reverse Moab's earlier defeat at the hands of the Israelites.

Having been raised up by YHWH for this very purpose, Eglon forms an alliance with a number of Israel's historic enemies. According to verse 13, *“[Eglon] gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms,”* which is the city of Jericho. There are no details given here, only the declaration that this coalition of Israel's former enemies defeated Israel and occupied the eastern-most part of Canaan near Jericho. Recall that Jericho stood at the entrance to Canaan on the main trade route leading directly to Moab and parts east. Jericho

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 156.

was the strategic choke point from which you could control all of Canaan—as we saw Joshua do when he led Israel into the promised land. The Moabite-Ammonite-Amelkite alliance was victorious over Israel and we read in verse 14, that “*the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.*”

The familiar pattern of Judges now plays out again. When the people of Israel turned their backs upon YHWH, YHWH removed his hand of protection from his people and then raised up an oppressor (Eglon of the Moabites, who, in conjunction with a number of Israel’s old enemies, would have enjoyed exacting revenge). The Israelites now found themselves serving Eglon and his alliance of old enemies for eighteen years. While Cushan-rishathaim was a strong military foe (his was the strongest empire in the region), Eglon is portrayed as a buffoon, ruling over a people the Israelites were capable of defeating.³ But now for eighteen long years, Israel must serve an alliance of old enemies, headed by a man they did not fear and whom they would never respect. We miss a critical part of the story if we don’t see that by raising up Eglon and this particular coalition, YHWH added insult to injury. This must have been a very difficult and humiliating time for the Israelites.

Well, as we learn in verse 15, “*then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.*” Miserable, after eighteen years of living under subjugation at the hands of old enemies led by a buffoon, the people of Israel cry out for a deliverer, again. Notice (again), that the people of Israel are not repentant, but they are miserable. The Israelites don’t want to change their behavior, but they do want to be free from the oppression of the Moabites so they can go back to what they were doing before being defeated—forgetting YHWH and doing what was right in their own eyes. They now remember YHWH only because they know of his power, not because they love him and desire to serve him and obey his word.

Because he has pity on his people, again, the LORD raises up another deliverer (judge) in the person of Ehud, son of Gera, who himself was from the line of Benjamin. While this doesn’t mean much to us, this is important information to those Jews reading this in the days of the monarchy, and it sets the tone for what follows. Benjamin, literally means, “son of the right-hand.” This point acquires a certain irony in the narrative. That God’s chosen deliverer was a descendant of Benjamin should not surprise us. Jericho is located in the region given by Joshua to the tribe of Benjamin, although this tribe has already been singled out earlier in the Book of Judges (1:21) as not very interested in fighting Canaanites.⁴ Since the descendants of Benjamin would be the most impacted by Eglon and his Moabite coalition, it is only natural that the deliverer would be from the tribe of the “son of the right-hand.”

The irony becomes clear when we learn that Ehud was left-handed, given the fact that Ehud was from the tribe named “son of the right-hand.” Being left-handed was something that the Jews regarded as a birth-defect, but was an attribute which the ancients thought to be an advantage in battle.⁵ In the narrative, Ehud’s being left-handed is tied to his clever and deceptive ways, especially in light of Eglon’s buffoonishness. It is also important that we consider that the name Ehud, means something like, “where is the splendor?” In this sense, it is similar to the name Ichabod, “where is the glory?” This is obviously

³ Block, Judges, Ruth, 158.

⁴ Cundall, Judges & Ruth, 75-76.

⁵ See the discussion in: Cundall, Judges & Ruth, 76; Block, Judges, Ruth, 160-161.

is a name given to a son at a time of national despair.⁶

With that background information in mind, story itself begins to unfold in verse 15 and the irony can now be seen by all. *“The people of Israel sent tribute by him [Ehud] to Eglon the king of Moab.”* Here’s the left-handed son of the tribe of the son of the right-hand, whose name tells us the he was born at a time of great despair, and who has now been raised up by YHWH himself to be Israel’s deliverer. It is hard to conceive of a more unlikely man to serve in this capacity. Ehud is the one chosen to bring tribute (payment in the form of gold, or produce, or livestock) to Eglon. While the text simply says that Israel chose Ehud to bring the tribute, all the while the reader knows that Ehud is YHWH’s chosen deliverer. If we don’t see the many ironies here, we are missing the author’s point.

As the account unfolds, we learn that Ehud will not just be a courier, but an assassin. In verse 16, we are told that *“Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes.”* Ehud’s double-edged dagger was about eighteen inches in length and was designed to stab, not to slash. Placing the dagger on his right side under his clothes ensures that it will remain hidden, simply because no one would expect a left-handed assassin to come in such an audacious manner. Normally, a right-handed man would carry his weapon on his left-hip where anyone could see it. Ehud may be left-handed, but his plan is well thought out and he’s obviously very clever.

In verses 17-19, we learn how Ehud’s plan to assassinate Eglon plays out. *“And [Ehud] 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.’”* After delivering the tribute payment to Eglon, Ehud dismissed the laborers who were with him carrying the tribute on to Gilgal—that place where Israel first camped in Canaan and erected a stone monument to YHWH’s faithfulness—but now a place dominated by pagan idols. The reference to idols may indicate the marker stones that Eglon would have erected to indicate the boundary of his empire, now placed on that same spot belonging to YHWH, which he, in turn, gave to his people, Israel. These stones probably had the image of Chemosh (a Moabite “god”) carved into them and their presence on the very spot where Israel had built a stone monument to YHWH’s faithfulness either can be taken as a sign of the Canaanization of Israel, or as an indication of Israel’s bitter subjugation (or even both).

After returning to the royal palace alone, Ehud gains an audience with Eglon, who is described as a “very fat man.” There is more irony here and we must not miss it. The name “Eglon” is a play on the word “bull” or “calf.” He is now described by a term used of animals who have been fattened for the slaughter.⁷ Little does Eglon know the fate that is about to befall him and the irony involved—he is, in effect, someone who has been fattened for slaughter, just like the animals for which he is loosely named. Neither does the slow-witted Eglon understand how skillful Ehud has been in gaining a private audience with him using the ruse that he had a secret for king Eglon. Eglon, eager to hear the secret, has no idea whatsoever that (Lee Harvey) Ehud is about to whack him.

Lacking any discernment and proper regard for his own safety, Eglon eagerly responds to Ehud’s flattery in bringing to him a secret message—*“and [Eglon] commanded, ‘Silence.’ And all his attendants went*

⁶ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 160.

⁷ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 158.

out from his presence.” This was the very thing for which Ehud had hoped. Ehud will be alone with Eglon because the palace guards have all been dismissed. In the Hebrew text, the term translated as “secret message,” can also mean “thing” or “object.” Since we have already been alerted to the fact that Ehud is carrying a secret weapon on his right-hip, hidden under his robe, the author might be using this play on words to make the point that Ehud’s secret is not a message, but a dagger soon to be used on Eglon, who has been fattened for the slaughter.⁸

As an obese man living in a very hot climate, Eglon sought comfort by building a room above the king’s formal chamber. The afternoon and evening breeze would cool such a room if it was built high enough not to be blocked by near-by structures. As we read in verse 20, “*and Ehud came to [Eglon] as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber.*” Ehud finally has Eglon alone, exactly where he wants him. All he has to do is get close enough to be able to deliver the fatal wound. Ehud’s skill as an assassin is made plain with the next ruse. “*And Ehud said, ‘I have a message from God for you.’*” Like others in the region, Eglon knew of YHWH and his great power, since YHWH had once given Israel victory over Moab, as well as all the nations in the coalition (the Amorites and Amalekites).

Although there was no indication that Ehud was a prophet, the very thought of receiving a word from YHWH was too much for Eglon to resist. Eglon is obviously eager to learn what, if anything, YHWH has to say about the current situation and condition of Israel. “*And he arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into [Eglon’s] belly.*” The deed was done quickly and stealthily. Eglon was mortally wounded. The graphic details are recounted in verse 22. “*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.*” Ehud had cut through Eglon’s intestines and the man was so large that Ehud lost his dagger in Eglon’s body mass—too much information, perhaps.

Ehud will not wait around to get caught by Eglon’s body-guards. As we read in verse 23 and following in what is intended by the author to be funny, “*then Ehud went out into the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them. When he had gone, the servants came, and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, ‘Surely {Eglon} is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber.’*” None of the servants dared to interrupt the king at such an important moment of official business, and so as we read in verse 25, “*they waited till they were embarrassed.*” You can just imagine the discussion among the servants waiting for Eglon to come out. “I’m not going in there . . . You go in there and get him.”

At some point it was clear that something had happened to the king. They waited and waited, and Eglon did not come out. And so the author tells us “*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.*” Ehud had done the deed. Eglon was dead. Meanwhile, we learn from verse 26 that “*Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Seirah.*” We don’t know where Seirah was, but it was near Gilgal. The left-handed son of the tribe of the son of the right had achieved his goal and was now regarded as a hero throughout the land.

Having killed Eglon and shown his skill, Ehud is now the *de facto* leader of Israel. As we learn in verse 27, “*When [Ehud] 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.*” Given the importance of what

⁸ Block, Judges, Ruth, 165.

happened, it didn't take long for word for the news of Eglon's death to spread. The sounding of the ram's horn signaled to everyone that something dramatic had happened and that the men needed to assemble for battle. Acting decisively and heroically, the people of Israel seem to immediately rally around Ehud. The text says the Israelites followed him into battle and accepted him as their leader.

After the men of Israel assembled and followed Ehud into battle, they were soon victorious and delivered from the humiliating oppression of their old enemies. *"And he [Ehud] said to them [the men of Israel], 'Follow after me, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.'"* Ehud issues the classic battle cry "charge." He is certain that YHWH will give Israel the victory over the Moabites. And that is exactly what happens, *"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."* By capturing the crossing point at the Jordan, the Moabite soldiers were cut off and slaughtered as they tried to cross to Jordan so as to leave Canaan and return to Moab. The cream of Moab's army was wiped out as they tried to cross the river, at the exact point where they would be the most vulnerable. It was a brilliant military maneuver, and yet another sign that when YHWH promises to deliver his people, he sure makes good on that promise. The whole episode ends with the declaration, *"So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years."* Israel's old enemies were put in their place, and this time, the people of God were granted were granted eighty-years of peace, double that won for them by Othniel.

What, then, should we say by way of application?

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church, it was important that the apostle remind the Corinthians that God's kingdom does not advance in ways discernable to human wisdom. Those things which pagans consider to be significant and demonstrations of human greatness, God sees as so much human foolishness and sin. And yet, while the pagans see the ways of God as foolishness, God is demonstrating how he will accomplish his purposes—through human weakness so as to shame the wise. In our New Testament lesson, Paul writes, *"consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose 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."* If the story of Ehud and Eglon is not proof that God uses the foolish things to shame those who think themselves wise, then I don't know what is. God chose the most unlikely of ways to deliver his people.

If Ehud was the unlikely deliverer of Israel, how unlikely was it that God would take to himself a human nature in the person of Jesus, come to the world in a backwater part of Palestine, born of an unknown Jewish virgin, for the purpose of saving us from our sins? In the series of judges God sends to Israel, we see that while each judge may act heroically and deliver his people from enemies who think themselves to be great and mighty, we also see that these enemies are mocked by God and they are no match for God's power and purposes. Yes, God works in mysterious ways. He saves Israel through a left-handed assassin, and he shames the wise through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God became weak and veiled his glory under the robe of human flesh so that Jesus might assassinate our greatest foe—death. When Jesus dies upon the cross—the ultimate act of foolishness to a pagan—Jesus achieves the greatest victory humanity has ever known. In the most unlikely of ways, Jesus defeated sin, death and the grave, in a demonstration of God's mighty power. And thinking themselves to be wise, the pagans will never understand that in human weakness, God demonstrates his power. God did this in the days of the judges, he did this in the cross of Jesus, and he still does it today. The hand of God is mysterious, yet mighty.