An Unlikely Deliverer

Devotional Reading: Ecclesiastes 7:1–13
Background Scripture: Judges 3
Today's Scripture: Judges 3:15–23, 30

I. Public Tribute
Judges 3:15–18

15 But when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded: and by him the children of Israel sent a present unto Eglon the king of Moab.

16 But Ehud made him a dagger which had two edges, of a cubit length; and he did gird it under his raiment upon his right thigh.

17 And he brought the present unto Eglon king of Moab: and Eglon was a very fat man.

18 And when he had made an end to offer the present, he sent away the people that bare the present.

15a. God is rescuing the *children of Israel* through the efforts of a man named *Ehud*. He is the second recorded *deliverer* of God's people during the period of the judges, serving in that capacity from approximately 1319 to 1239 BC. Scholars consider him a "major" judge because his recorded account includes extensive details.

The Israelites are subject to oppression by the Moabites. The root of their oppression is the declaration in Judges 3:12 that the Israelites "did evil." Elsewhere, this phrase is followed by an identification of the evil as idolatry; therefore, it's reasonable to conclude that the sin here is the same (compare Judges 2:11–13; 3:7; 10:6). The fictitious gods the Israelites have been serving have not helped them. So, as a last resort, they cry out to *the Lord*, and He raises *them up a deliverer*.

The text provides what may strike us as a peculiar detail about Ehud: he is *lefthanded*. This detail is essential later in the account. It's natural to think that this description refers to Ehud's dominant hand being his left. However, it could also mean his right hand is limited or disabled. For the mission ahead, however, he will use his left hand for a specific reason.

There is a certain irony here in that Ehud is also a *Benjamite* because the Hebrew name "Benjamin" means "son of my right hand." In ancient Near Eastern culture, the right hand signifies a place of honor, trust, and authority. By contrast, being positioned at a person's left hand could signify dishonor. But neither of these meanings seems to be in view here.

Unlike many other judges, the text gives no indication of God's Spirit coming upon Ehud for empowerment (compare Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 15:14). Rather, Ehud's divine commission flows from the gifts God has already given to him: valor, weaponry, skill, and cunning. These are all things Ehud has cultivated, which God puts to use at the right time.

15b. In the ancient Near East, subordinated people sent tribute to ruling powers. Israel's *present* to *Eglon the king of Moab* indicates Moab's control over them. A typical tribute might be sent to appease ruling forces, but it also took the form of oppressive taxes of precious metals, grain, livestock, or unusual artifacts. At worst, tribute could be demanded by those in power in the form of forced labor.

The territory of *Moab* is on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, near its southern end. As the first generation of Israelites who escaped from Egyptian bondage made their way toward the promised land, they were careful not to provoke the Moabites (Deuteronomy 2:9).

16. Our modern concept of a *dagger* is that of sharp, pointed knife. But the word being translated here is also translated as "sword" in numerous other places. Perhaps to keep his mission and intent a secret, Ehud *made* the blade himself. *A cubit* translates to about eighteen inches. Scholars guess this *length* is probably a "short cubit," closer to fourteen inches—the span from one's elbow to the knuckle of a closed fist. Certainly, the knife's size and shape fit Ehud's frame so that he could carry it on his *thigh*.

Soldiers draw swords from across their bodies, typically reaching for the hilt with their dominant hand. The majority are right-handed. Therefore, they draw their swords from their left side. Guards might, thus, inspect only the left side. In any case, Ehud's intent to hide the weapon is obvious.

17. Scholars consider the description of *Eglon* to mean he is very obese. The word translated as *fat*, however, is sometimes a signal of health (examples: Psalm 73:4; Daniel 1:15). In Eglon's case, the description follows the abundance and prosperity he enjoys as the reigning and oppressive king; he savors the plentiful life.

18. Ehud travels with an entourage. The way Ehud arrived and now departs gives the visit an air of being official. He and his companions appear deferential. The group's presence is also necessary to bring the entirety of their *present* to the *king*—assuming it is heavy enough to require a crew to *bare* it. Ehud and his retinue present the tribute to Eglon together. The reason Ehud then *sent away* his traveling companions is explained next.

II. Private Message
Judges 3:19–23

19 But he himself turned again from the quarries that were by Gilgal, and said, I have a secret errand unto thee, O king: who said, Keep silence. And all that stood by him went out from him.

20 And Ehud came unto him; and he was sitting in a summer parlour, which he had for himself alone. And Ehud said, I have a message from God unto thee. And he arose out of his seat.

21 And Ehud put forth his left hand, and took the dagger from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly:

22 And the haft also went in after the blade; and the fat closed upon the blade, so that he could not draw the dagger out of his belly; and the dirt came out.

23 Then Ehud went forth through the porch, and shut the doors of the parlour upon him, and locked them.

19. We get the impression that Ehud initially departs with his retinue but then appears to change his mind after traveling the short distance to *Gilgal*. There is more than one town named Gilgal in the Old Testament.

The name *Gilgal* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "circle" or "rolling" with connotations of a "circle of stones." It suggests this town is connected with nearby *quarries* and is a prominent landmark

outside Jericho. In this location, such stones would be erected in dedication to the cultural gods of the area. They would also be used as a memorial or monument and could stand as a boundary marker.

Since this particular Gilgal stands near Jericho, its location coincides with where the Israelites set up camp after crossing the Jordan (Joshua 4:19). There, Joshua commanded God's people to erect twelve stones from the Jordan River to memorialize their entrance into the promised land (4:20–24).

Regardless of the geographic marker's significance, Ehud returns alone to the palace to accomplish his real mission. The tribute has established trust with Eglon, giving the impression that Ehud is a dutiful, subservient Israelite. Ehud uses that trust to obtain the king's attention and earn a private audience. The idea of a *secret* entices the king. He sends his royal attendants away.

20. The *summer parlour* is a private space for the king. Translated literally from the Hebrew, it means "roof-chamber of coolness." It is a well-ventilated upper room built on a flat rooftop with many windows for breezes. We don't know the time of year this meeting occurs, but the average daily temperature from late May through early October in modern Jericho exceeds 90°F. The chamber is separate from the king's main audience chamber on the ground level, making it an excellent place for a personal conversation.

Ehud evokes Eglon's interest, and the king rises from *his seat*. Ehud uses a plural word for *God*, which may tempt Eglon to believe he will receive an oracle from "the gods." He is so interested in it that he stands up! Kings do not usually change their posture in the presence of underlings. His choice to rise is even more surprising, given his obesity. Ancient kings deeply desired knowledge of future events to maintain control.

21. With the king moving toward him, Ehud takes full advantage of the situation and acts quickly. Ehud can lunge forward faster than the obese king can move backward. As with Joab's murder of Amasa (2 Samuel 20:9–10), the motion of his *left hand* draws no suspicion—at least, none in time for a suitable reaction.

22. On the nature of *the dagger*, such weapons have three primary parts: a handle (or *haft*), a *blade*, and a cross guard to separate the handle from the blade. As the phrase *cross guard* implies, its function is to guard the user's hand from crossing into the sharp blade. In doing so, it also limits the penetration depth of the weapon. The fact that Ehud's *blade* enters Eglon's belly completely, handle and all, indicates that the sword lacks such a cross guard.

23. The details of Ehud's escape are not clear. The departure hinges on the meaning of the word *porch*, but this is the only place in the Old Testament where this Hebrew word is used. Perhaps it is a roof exit. In any case, Ehud somehow leaves the king's chamber without raising an alarm and locks the doors. Because the doors are locked, the servants give the king privacy. As they wait, believing Eglon is using the restroom, Ehud flees (Judges 3:24–26).

III. Peace Regained
Judges 3:30

30 So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest fourscore years.

30. Like many judges who govern after Ehud, he assists God's people in subduing their enemies. The term *subdued* signifies bending the knee—the Moabites now submit to Israelite power and rule for the next eighty years. This period probably represents two generations and is the longest span of peace recorded in the book of Judges.

Involvement Learning

An Unlikely Deliverer

Into the Lesson

Summarize the plot of a fictional story—from a book, play, or movie—in which an oppressive ruler or villain is killed.

We enjoy heroic stories in which evil is destroyed and oppressed people are set free. In today's lesson, consider the villain and deliverer symbolically. What might they represent for the nation of Israel and in our lives?

Into the Word

Read Judges 3:15–18 and write down all the details you know about the appearances of Ehud and Eglon.

Ehud

Eglon

What qualities might you assume about each man based on the information provided?

Ehud

Eglon

Read Judges 3:24–26. How did Ehud ensure the success of the assassination?

Read Judges 3:27–29. How did Ehud lead the Israelites to defeat their enemies?

Key Text

When the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded.
—Judges 3:15a

Into Life

When we turn away from God and lean into sinful tendencies, what sort of things oppress us?

Think of King Eglon as a symbol of these tendencies, growing bigger and more settled in your heart, keeping you captive and helplessly oppressed.

Think about a difficult situation or place of oppression you are facing or have faced in the past. Write a prayer to God, describing the oppression and asking God to deliver you from it.

Thought to Remember

God uses people you wouldn't expect.