

# The Lord Sends Ehud to Bring a Sacrifice

*Scripture Readings: JUDGES 3:12-31 (text); Hebrews 4:12*

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**D**ear congregation of Christ: Who among you are left-handed? I am, and in my younger years, to be left-handed had its disadvantages. It was actually frowned upon, even considered “abnormal.” Some teachers would even hit your left hand with a ruler if you wrote with your left hand.

So months before the first day of my first grade year, my father trained me to write with my right hand. He promised me that I would get a bicycle (which never happened). I was able to write with my right hand, and to this day, I can only write with my right hand. But everything else I do – eating, throwing a ball, turning screws – I do with my left hand.

Today, we will study the next judge after Othniel, the ideal judge. Everything written about Othniel was positive. But when we come to the second judge, Ehud, the warts start appearing. Ehud, from the tribe of Benjamin whose name means “*son of my right hand*,” was a lefty. And he used his “abnormal” left-handedness to his advantage in saving the people of Israel from their enemies. As an assassin raised by God to deliver his people from their oppression, Ehud is an example of a plain, cunning, but flawed, sinful person used by God. And in our own simple ways, we too may be used by God in ways that we may not even know. Like Ehud, God may use us to bring sacrifices to God in the church and in our lives.

So our theme today is “**The LORD Sends Ehud to Bring a Sacrifice**,” under three headings: first, “**Ehud is Sent by the LORD**”; second, “**Ehud Brings a Sacrifice**”; and third, “**Ehud's Sacrifice Brings Rest**.”

## **Ehud is Sent by the LORD**

Ehud's story begins with the familiar refrain of the downward spiral in Israel's spiritual life, “*And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.*” Each of the judges' story begins with this refrain, and the result was God's judgment against them. The writer says that the Lord sent Eglon the king of Moab, together with Israel's old enemies, the Ammonites and the Amalekites, to defeat Israel. So Eglon oppressed Israel for 18 years, which was worse than the eight years that Israel was oppressed by Cushan the Double Wicked king of Aram.

Again, the people of Israel “*cried out to the Lord*” under Eglon's tyrannical rule. As we have studied last Sunday, this was not true repentance. God was responding to his people's cry for help to free them from under the cruel yoke of their enemy. He “*raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man*” (Jgs 3:15). The word translated “deliverer” is also translated “savior” in many other places. For example, King David praises God for hearing his cry for help, “*He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them*” (Psa 145:19).

Ehud is also from the tribe of Benjamin, a tribe which plays an important role in Chapters 19-21, when there was a civil war among the twelve tribes. And why does the insignificant detail of Ehud being a lefty mentioned? We will later see that his left-handedness plays an important role in this story.

Notice that it was God who raised Ehud to be Israel's deliverer or savior from King Eglon of Moab. The Lord put in Ehud's heart a plan to save Israel from the Moabites. It was not his own desire or feeling. The Spirit of God put this desire in his heart to accomplish his purpose of delivering his people from 18 years of slavery. We too cannot take credit for our salvation. It is God himself who changes our hearts so we may believe in the only Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, and repent of our sins. We cannot take credit for all our knowledge of the Bible; the Spirit illumines our minds. We cannot take credit for doing good works as a Christian; the Spirit enables us to do them.

Ehud may not even be aware of any divine calling, since we do not see any hint of this in the text. *"The Lord raised him up for a deliverer"* is all that the narrator says. So do not say you cannot do such and such a task for the church, for you have no gift. All Christians are given specific gifts so they may build up the church of Christ. Do not even say to God, "Show me a sign, so I may know what you want me to do," as one of the judges, Gideon, did. But it is God who puts a desire in your heart to do even a simple, ordinary task for his kingdom.

How did God raise up the VBS team to help us teach the children of our community? How did he call the TASC construction team to help build our parsonage? Did God whisper in their ears? Did God show them a dream or a vision? No, the Holy Spirit made their hearts respond to a call by their churches to join these teams. They then had a desire to go, even when they didn't have any idea how they would raise the needed funds, or how to hammer a nail into a board. This is how God uses us as instruments in the building up of his church. We are, of course, stones being built together into a building, with Christ as our Cornerstone. Just as wooden beams and studs, concrete, nails, bolts, insulation and plates are put together to build a house, Christ is using each of our gifts and resources to build his church.

So the next part of Ehud's story is that *"the people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab."*

### **Ehud Brings a Sacrifice**

The plot thickens in this main part of the narrative. Since Israel was a conquered nation, they had to send regular tributes to King Eglon of Moab. Moab has always been Israel's enemy. It is ironic that in the next book of the Bible, the Book of Ruth, Elimelech took his family from his hometown of Bethlehem to Moab, where his two sons married pagan Moabite women, one of them being Ruth herself.

But here, Israel had to pay tributes to a Moabite king for all of 18 years. The word translated "tribute" is often translated as "offering" or "sacrifice" offered for the atonement of sin or thanksgiving to God at the tabernacle (e.g., 1 Sam 26:19). This is a general term for grain offerings or animal sacrifices.

So when Ehud was tasked by the people to bring their tribute to King Eglon, he devised a crafty but dangerous plan to assassinate the king. He fashioned a small two-edged sword about a foot long. Then he bound it on his right thigh hidden under his garments. Remember that he was left-handed? This is why he placed it on his right thigh, so he could reach for it quickly with his left hand. The sword was short and small like a dagger, not noticeable to the

palace guards. And left-handed people were few, so if the guards would suspect anything, they would have frisked his left thigh. This would not have worked with today's full body TSA!

So Ehud presented the tribute to Eglon. But there is another strange commentary to the story, "*Now Eglon was a very fat man.*" Why is this important? The story will unfold the reason why. So all of Ehud's companions left, and Ehud traveled back alone to conceal his devious plot. At the idols near Gilgal, he turned back. Again, why are the idols of Gilgal mentioned in the narrative? Ehud went back to Eglon, saying, "*I have a secret message for you, O king.*" Through his men, Eglon might have known that Ehud went all the way to the idols near Gilgal, so he might have thought that this "secret message" is from the Moabite idols, his gods.

Because of his greed, gullible Eglon was so taken in by this "secret message from God" that he quickly dismisses his court and his guards. Ehud might not even have been much of a physical specimen that Eglon did not consider him a danger to his health. So even in his fatness, Eglon arose from his royal seat to get closer to Ehud's "secret message."

When reading this story to this point, did you have a feeling for what Ehud's "secret message from God" was? This secret word or thing from God is the dagger! Ehud swiftly reaches for the dagger hidden in his right thigh by his left hand, and plunged the dagger deep into Eglon's round belly. And Verse 22 adds gore and disgust to the narrative. Even the hilt of the dagger went inside Eglon's belly, and out came blood and dung (ESV) or refuse (NASB) or dirt (KJV). Other versions say that his entrails (ISV) or insides (Holman) spilled out.

In the next portion of the narrative, God adds humor. Ehud locks the door of the king's chamber and flees the palace. After Ehud was gone, Eglon's servants came to the door, but it was locked. So they thought the king must be relieving himself in the chamber toilet, so they waited... and waited... and waited "*to the point of embarrassment*" (NIV), until they couldn't wait anymore. Get the key to the chamber door! And when the door was opened, to their disbelief and shock, there he was! Their massive king lay on the floor, blood and entrails all over! If this was an assassination today, the first police officer on the scene would also be throwing up in shock and disgust. Meanwhile, the narrator says that after Ehud passed the idols, he had escaped. Their idols, like the palace guards, were also helpless in preventing Ehud's escape.

The narrator's spoof of Eglon and his court would not escape the Israelite reader. Eglon was a greedy but gullible, helpless, fat king who couldn't defend himself against an ordinary, left-handed Israelite. And his guards and courtiers were an embarrassing sideshow to the whole story.

But the narrative is not only comical; it also has overtones of sacrificial themes.<sup>1</sup> Ehud brought an offering to Eglon. Eglon's name itself means a young fat calf or bull. There is also word-play on his name, so that it means "round" or "rotund." So the narrator is actually calling him a *fatted calf ready for sacrifice*. This greedy and oppressive king has fattened himself on the backs of the people of Israel. But in the end, he becomes a fatted calf slaughtered in the altar of sacrifice so the people of Israel would be saved from his tyranny.

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<sup>1</sup> For this nuance, see K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Judges/Ruth, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 117-8.

One of the temple sacrifices is a peace offering. After the animal is killed, the choicest parts are offered as *“a food offering to the LORD, the fat covering the entrails... And the priest shall burn them on the altar as a food offering with a pleasing aroma”* (Lev 3:14-16).

## **Ehud's Sacrifice Brings Rest**

When Ehud arrived back in the hill country of the tribe of Ephraim, he sounded a trumpet call to war against the Moabites. Now the Moabite leader is gone, and Israelites would finally defeat them. Ehud's call is *“the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.”* Now he realizes that God was with him, even in his devious plot of assassination. His plot was not discovered until the Moabite king was dead. He was able to enter his court freely. God showed him that he was an instrument of God's salvation plan for Israel.

Israel controlled all the exits and entrances in the Jordan River, so that the mighty Moabite army was completely flanked and destroyed by Israel led by their left-handed savior. As Eglon the big, round Moabite king was “sacrificed,” so was his mighty and “stout” army. While Ehud escaped the wrath of Eglon's guards, Eglon's army did not escape the sword of Israel. So God gave his people rest for the next 80 years. God again fulfilled his promise to his people that he would never break his covenant promises to them.

**D**ear friends, even when Israel's crying out to God was not true repentance, God heard their cry of pain and anguish under oppression. We too must not lose hope when we are in great distress when our relationships break down, when a beloved one dies, when we're in financial trouble, or when our children or grandchildren stray away from the path of righteousness. God hears our cries for help, and he acts on our behalf, because Christ has cleared the path of salvation for us on the cross and in the empty tomb.

God delivers his people from hopeless situations in surprising, even strange ways like a left-handed assassin. Most genealogies in the Bible have only men. But the genealogy of our Savior Jesus Christ – surprisingly – has four women, and women of ill reputation! Tamar, Rahab, Ruth were all Gentile women. Even Mary's pregnancy had its doubters. And the most surprising deliverance was when God sent his only-begotten Son from heaven to earth in humble human form. A Savior born in a manger? And how did he save God's people? Not by assassinating kings, not by calling an army to war, but by offering himself as a sacrifice for the sins of his people on the cruel cross. This is so astonishing and strange for the Jews that they rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

As in the case of Ehud, God is able to turn evil into good. Ehud's method of delivering Israel may not be God's preferred way, but nevertheless, God used this flawed judge, a sinner like you and me, to accomplish his purpose. And like Ehud, we may not even be aware that we are God's instruments.

And our weapons of war are not swords to kill, but God's Word, *“living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword... and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart”* (Heb 4:12). The Word of God is living and active, just as God himself is living and active. He does not sleep, and he works in ways that we don't even know, in ways that surprise us. God's Word is able to penetrate man's deepest thoughts and plans, even the wicked plans of kings and people.

Finally, the killing of Eglon and the destruction of his army is a picture of God's final vengeance on those who oppress, persecute and murder God's people. When Jesus returns from heaven, he will not be a humble baby, and will not ride a humble donkey. He will ride as a conquering King on a royal white horse. And the sword coming out of his mouth will slay not only a few, petty kings of small nations, but all kings who rage against him. He will send the fires of hell to all those who martyr with the sword God's people all over the world. As the Light of the world, he will send to the outer darkness all those who say there is no God and all human beings evolved from apes. He will trample under his foot all those who trample God's Word and commandments against idolatry, profanity, breaking the Sabbath, rebellion against God-appointed authorities, murder, sexual immorality, stealing, lying, and covetousness.

So dear Christian, do not be discouraged when great distress come to your life, and it looks hopeless. For God hears your cries of repentance and cries for help. But if you find yourself a slave of sin and temptation, repent of your sin and believe in the only Savior Jesus Christ.