

The Search For a King:
The Left-Handed Leader
Judges 3:12-30
Bellevue Baptist Church
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If you will, please open your Bible with me to the book of Judges, chapter 3.

Today, we begin a new sermon series I'm calling *The Search for the King*, which will take us all the way to Thanksgiving. Over the next few months, we'll explore selected passages from these two Old Testament books: Judges and 1 Samuel.

If you're new to the Bible, let me help you locate these books in the larger story. The Bible contains 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. The Old Testament is organized by genre, and as you can see: Judges and 1 Samuel are located right here in the history section. These books tell the story of God's chosen people, Israel, and the ups and downs of their relationship with Him.

If you've read even a little of Israel's history, you know they had a tendency to drift. One generation would passionately pursue the Lord, and the next would wander. They would experience God's blessing, then become distracted by the world around them. Before we're too hard on them, we should admit that sounds familiar. We all know what it's like to be fully devoted one season and distracted the next. It happens.

When we arrive at the book of Judges, God's people find themselves in an unusual moment. Joshua, the great leader who succeeded Moses and led Israel into the Promised Land, has died. His leadership brought stability, direction, and confidence. But now Joshua is gone, and a leadership vacuum has emerged. There is no king on the throne. No national leader to unite the people.

Yet one of the great lessons of Judges is that God never abandons His people. Even in seasons of instability, He continues to provide. The book is not called *Kings*. It is called *Judges* because God repeatedly raises up men and women to provide temporary leadership and deliverance. The term judges is a bit misleading because when we think of a judge, we see a person in a courtroom, with a gavel. As you will soon see, these judges are not that. And they aren't royalty, or polished statesmen. In fact, each of them is a bit surprising, unlikely, and flawed.. Again and again, God accomplishes His purposes through people no one would have expected.

Which brings us to one of the most unusual figures in the entire book: a man named Ehud.

If you've never heard a sermon on Ehud, you're probably not alone. His story is tucked away in Judges 3. Here, Israel has once again drifted from the Lord and a foreign king has risen to power. And yet, just when things seem hopeless, God brings an unlikely deliverer.

Look how this story starts in 3:12...

The Israelites again did what was evil in the Lord's sight. He gave King Eglon of Moab power over Israel, because they had done what was evil in the Lord's sight. After Eglon convinced the Ammonites and the Amalekites to join forces with him, he attacked and defeated Israel and took possession of the City of Palms. The Israelites served King Eglon of Moab eighteen years. Judges 3:12-14

As we study the life of Ehud, I want you to notice three principles. The first is this:

What the Story of Ehud Suggests

1. God's greatest mercy is sometimes disguised as discomfort. (vv.12-15)

Notice the reason for the suffering is stated. Those eighteen years of frustration, humiliation, and hardship were a result of rebellion. It was their own fault. They ignored God and He brought the rod of discipline. That's what a loving Father does. He refuses to turn a blind eye to our wanderings.

The Scripture says, "because they had done what was evil in the Lord's sight, the Lord allowed them to be defeated."

Many years ago, a man named Sheldon Vanauken wrote a well-known book called *A Severe Mercy*. It tells the story of a young man who fell deeply in love with a woman who eventually became his wife. They shared a remarkable relationship, but tragedy struck when she died at a young age. The loss devastated him. He wrestled with grief, confusion, and heartache. Yet looking back, he came to realize that God had used that painful experience to draw him into a deeper relationship with Himself. That's why he chose such an unusual title: *A Severe Mercy*.

Think about those two words together. Mercy is something we welcome. Severe is something we try to avoid. Yet sometimes God allows things into our lives that are painful in the moment but merciful in their ultimate effect. The hardship itself is not the mercy. The mercy is what God accomplishes through it.

Now, we need to be careful here. Not all suffering is the result of rebellion. The Bible is very clear about that. Job suffered. Paul suffered. Jesus suffered. Sometimes suffering comes simply because we live in a broken world. But whether suffering is corrective, like it was for Israel, or

whether it is simply part of living in a fallen world, God is able to use it to draw us closer to Himself.

That's what is happening here in Judges. Israel's oppression under King Eglon was not evidence that God had abandoned His people. In fact, it was the opposite. God loved them too much to leave them in their rebellion. The hardship awakened them. It brought them to the end of themselves. It drove them to cry out to the Lord. Sometimes God's greatest acts of love do not feel pleasant in the moment. Sometimes He allows discomfort, frustration, loss, or discipline because He is determined to bring His children back to Himself.

Now notice what happens next. We get the next principle:

2. God uses unlikely people to accomplish His purposes. (v.15-22)

The text offers this strange description of Ehud...

¹⁵ Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he raised up Ehud son of Gera, a left-handed Benjaminite, as a deliverer for them. The Israelites sent him with the tribute for King Eglon of Moab. Judges 3:15

The Bible rarely includes physical details unless they matter somehow. So you can bet, when we are being told this guy was a southpaw, it's for a reason. And here it is—Ehud's rare left-handedness will provide an advantage in combat.

Most soldiers carried a sword on their left hip so they could draw it with their right hand. Security personnel would naturally check that side. But look what the Bible says next:

¹⁶ Ehud made himself a double-edged sword eighteen inches long. He strapped it to his right thigh under his clothes ¹⁷ and brought the tribute to King Eglon of Moab, who was an extremely fat man. Judges 3:16–17

So you see, Ehud is on his way to see the evil king. He will pass inspection, his dagger undetected. The pudgy king is in a heap of trouble. And by the way—what'd I just say? Physical descriptions in Scripture are usually for a reason. Why are we told that the King is chubby? Keep reading and we discover why...

¹⁸ When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he dismissed the people who had carried it.

¹⁹ At the carved images near Gilgal he returned and said, "King Eglon, I have a secret message for you." The king said, "Silence!" and all his attendants left him. ²⁰ Then Ehud approached him while he was sitting alone in his upstairs room where it was cool. Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you," and the king stood up from his throne. ²¹ Ehud reached with his

left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and plunged it into Eglon's belly. ²² Even the handle went in after the blade, and Eglon's fat closed in over it, so that Ehud did not withdraw the sword from his belly. And the waste came out. ²³ Ehud escaped by way of the porch, closing and locking the doors of the upstairs room behind him. Judges 3:18–23

Now this is unlike any sermon you've heard in a long while! This reads like a movie from the medieval ages. Ehud secures a private room with the King, then plunges his dagger into the big belly of the king. The whole weapon goes in, and the king's waste comes out.

What in the world? Some scholars argue this phrase refers to internal organs protruding from the wound after the dagger penetrated the abdomen. However, most commentators believe the simpler explanation is that Eglon lost control of his bodily functions as he died. Which would have caused others to think he was using the restroom.

²⁴ Ehud was gone when Eglon's servants came in. They looked and found the doors of the upstairs room locked and thought he was relieving himself in the cool room. ²⁵ The servants waited until they became embarrassed and saw that he had still not opened the doors of the upstairs room. So they took the key and opened the doors—and there was their lord lying dead on the floor! Judges 3:24–25

So now we understand why the servants didn't rush in. The door was locked. An unpleasant aroma was coming from the room. They assumed the king was relieving himself. In fact, the text says they waited past the point of embarrassment. In other words, they stood outside the door looking at each other and wondering, "How long is he going to stay in there? He must have really had to go!"

And they waited. And they waited. And they waited some more.

By the time they finally decided something was wrong and opened the door, Ehud was long gone. He was already well down the road, safe and sound. All things worked together for the good for old Ehud. The Lord had worked on his behalf, through locked doors, mistaken assumptions, delayed reactions, and a dozen little details that seemed insignificant at the time, but were all part of the plan. Ehud was just an ordinary guy.

Here we find once again, the great hope that we have in our ordinariness. Do you ever wake up and feel like your life is just hum-drum, run-of-the-mill, nothing special? If so, you're in good company. One author, Eugene Peterson wrote on the nature of life and the slow-moving process of discipleship in his classic book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Here, the seasoned pastor laments the way we moderns expect God to microwave our growth, transforming us overnight into spiritual giants. He writes:

Everyone is in a hurry. The persons whom I lead in worship, among whom I counsel, visit, pray, preach and teach, want shortcuts. They want me to help them fill out the form that will get them instant credit (in eternity) They are impatient for results. They have adopted the lifestyle of a tourist and only want the high points. But a pastor is not a tour guide.

This unhealthy expectation for instant results was what caused the burden to form in his heart to write his classic on discipleship: a long obedience in the same direction. In other words, we are all very ordinary people. We plod along in life. We don't often feel quantum leaps, but as we show up each day, doing the little things God puts before us, here we find our joy and our calling. Here, we will find ourselves being used by God.

That's the sense we get with Ehud—he was just a regular person, who was pretty good with his left hand in combat. God used ordinary him, to save His people.

Now, let's finish the story, with one final principle:

3. God is the real reason behind all success. (v.26-28)

Watch what happens when Ehud escapes and the people realize what's happening. V.26...

²⁶ Ehud escaped while the servants waited. He passed the Jordan near the carved images and reached Seirah. ²⁷ After he arrived, he sounded the trumpet throughout the hill country of Ephraim. The Israelites came down with him from the hill country, and he became their leader. ²⁸ He told them, "Follow me, because the Lord has handed over your enemies, the Moabites, to you." Judges 3:26–28

Don't miss that statement: "The Lord has handed over your enemies to you." Not / have handed them over. Ehud doesn't gather the people together and say, "You guys are never going to believe what I just pulled off." He doesn't tell war stories. He doesn't build a personal brand. He doesn't take a victory lap.

Instead, he points the spotlight upward. "The Lord has done this." Ehud understood something that all godly leaders eventually learn: if God has used you, the credit belongs to Him. He gets the glory for any good that flows from you.

This is exactly what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:16

Notice the goal is not that people would be impressed with us. The goal is that people would be impressed with God.

If you have a gift, it is not ultimately for your glory. If you have influence, it is not ultimately for your fame. If you have leadership ability, business success, musical talent, athletic ability, or intellectual gifts, God has entrusted those things to you so that others might catch a glimpse of God through your gifting.

One of the oldest temptations in the world is taking credit for what only God can do. That's what happened to King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. God had blessed him with extraordinary success. He ruled the most powerful kingdom on earth. But somewhere along the way, he began confusing God's blessings with his own greatness.

Listen at what the book of Daniel says:

²⁸ All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ At the end of twelve months, as he was walking on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon, ³⁰ the king exclaimed, "Is this not Babylon the Great that I have built to be a royal residence by my vast power and for my majestic glory?"

Did you catch all the first-person pronouns? I have built. By my vast power. By my majestic glory.

Nebuchadnezzar stood on the balcony of his palace and essentially posted his resume for the world to admire.

But God was not impressed. Before the words were even out of his mouth, God humbled him. He allowed the man to lose his mind, walking through a mental health crisis, choosing to live out in the woods like an animal in the wild. God taught him how quickly it can all be taken from him.

Now compare Ehud, to Nebuchadnezzar. Both experienced success. But one gave God the glory. And now we have the choice, don't we?

Will I live like Ehud or will I live like Nebuchadnezzar? When God gives me a win, will I give all glory to Him?

There you have it, the story of the left-handed leader, Ehud. So much good stuff packed into that little passage, isn't there?

Now, with my time remaining, I'd like to see what questions might rise from this story.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

How do I keep success from becoming pride?

This is a question that anyone who wins at the game of life, and calls themselves a Christian—must think about.

Recently I ran across the story of the undoing of Chevy Chase. Chase is a person most people here would recognize. He was one of the original cast members of *Saturday Night Live*, and almost overnight, he became its breakout star. NBC began promoting the show in a way that made it feel like Chevy Chase and everybody else. Suddenly, he was famous. Everybody knew his name. Doors opened. People laughed at his jokes. Chase has admitted that he wasn't prepared for what all that attention would do to him. Looking back, he said, "Nobody prepares you for what happens when you get famous, and I didn't handle it well." He described what developed in him as "unbelievable arrogance." Before long, he began to see himself as bigger than the show that had made him famous, and he left after only one season.

And apparently, the people around him felt the change. Over the years, story after story has surfaced from actors, writers, and coworkers who described Chase as incredibly difficult to work with. There were feuds with fellow cast members, cruel comments behind the scenes, and relationships that became badly fractured. His reputation for being difficult followed him from one successful project to another. Chase himself would later acknowledge that fame had affected him in ways he didn't handle well. Success can do that to a person. When everybody starts applauding you, pursuing you, accommodating you, and laughing at everything you say, eventually you can start believing the applause. Gratitude becomes expectation. Privileges become rights. And instead of being amazed that you've been given so much, you become irritated when you're not given more. Success doesn't always destroy us by giving us too much. Sometimes it destroys us by convincing us that we deserve it.

I've thought about this a lot—the danger of becoming a successful jerk. If I preach an effective sermon and several people tell me they were blessed, does that make me harder to live with at home? Does success begin to inflate my ego?

How can we avoid this gravitational pull? I think the answer is found in a lifestyle of repentance.

When we truly understand what it means to walk with Christ, we realize that no matter how much we grow spiritually, none of us are anywhere close to perfection. Holiness is a lifelong project. The Apostle Paul had a spiritual résumé that dwarfs all of ours. Yet he wrote:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:24-25

Paul never lost sight of his need for grace. He referred to himself as the chief of sinners because he regularly examined his own heart. He knew how easily pride could creep in. He understood that the same crowd that praises you today can become the occasion for spiritual arrogance tomorrow.

So if you're in a season of success right now, if God is blessing your work, your family, your ministry, or your leadership, keep looking into your heart and noticing all the places where you still have so far to go.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:

Why does God use violence in some Old Testament stories?

That's a fair question. In fact, many people who begin reading the Bible are surprised by how much violence they encounter.

It's true that the Old Testament contains stories of war, judgment, sacrifice, and bloodshed. But before we conclude that this is merely an Old Testament problem, we should remember that the New Testament is not exactly tame either. When Jesus is born, King Herod orders the slaughter of innocent baby boys in Bethlehem. John the Baptist is beheaded. Stephen is stoned. The apostles are persecuted. And at the center of the Christian faith stands a Savior who was flogged, beaten, mocked, tortured, nailed to a cross, and killed.

The Bible is not a rated-G book.

In many ways, the Old Testament is harder for us because it contains stories of military conquest and countless animal sacrifices. Page after page, blood is shed. Lambs die on altars. Nations go to war. People suffer the consequences of their choices. Why? The answer takes us all the way back to the beginning.

When Adam and Eve sinned, something entered God's good creation that had never been there before: death. God had warned them that rebellion would bring death, and from that moment forward humanity began living under the curse of sin. Even in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve fall, God clothes their nakedness with garments made from animal skins. Something dies so they might be covered.

As the story unfolds, God teaches His people a sobering truth. Sin is not a minor inconvenience. It is a deadly reality. That's why God says in Leviticus:

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it is the lifeblood that makes atonement. Leviticus 17:11

Throughout the Old Testament, blood serves as a constant reminder that sin is costly. Sin wounds. Sin destroys. Sin separates us from one another, and from God. Violence is a result of sin and there's sin everywhere in the Bible.

In fact, one of the remarkable things about the Bible is how honest it is about the brokenness of humanity. It's amazing that God can use any of us. He uses a drunk like Noah, a fearful man like Gideon, an adulterer like David, a traitor like Peter, and countless others. The Bible doesn't hide humanity's failures. It puts them on display.

But here's the good news. None of this was God's original design. God did not create a world filled with death, violence, war, disease, and grief. Those things entered through sin. And one day, they will be removed.

Revelation 2:4 says:

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.

Revelation 21:4

One day Jesus will return, and there will be a final death for death itself. No more funerals. No more violence. No more hospitals. No more war. No more tears.

So when we encounter violence in Scripture, we should not conclude that God delights in it. God plans to end it. That was our doing.

A Student Asks:

Older people always say that honesty is the best policy. If so, why was it ok for Ehud to deceive Eglon?

This is one of those moments when adults are tempted to say, "Be quiet, kid. Quit asking hard questions."

But it's actually a very thoughtful question.

After all, the Bible teaches us to tell the truth. God values honesty. One of the Ten Commandments forbids bearing false witness. So why does Ehud deceive Eglon? And why doesn't the Bible criticize him for it?

This question became very real during World War II. Many families hid Jewish people in their homes to protect them from the Nazis. When soldiers came knocking at the door and asked, "Are there any Jews in this house?" some brave people answered, "No," even though families were hidden upstairs or behind secret walls.

Was that wrong? Christian thinkers have wrestled with questions like this for centuries. Most have concluded that in a fallen world there are rare moments when moral duties collide. On one hand, we should tell the truth. On the other hand, we should protect innocent life. When a person is seeking to commit evil, many believers have concluded that protecting innocent life takes precedence.

That's essentially what is happening in Judges 3. Ehud is not deceiving a neighbor for personal gain. He is not cheating someone in business. He is acting as God's appointed deliverer against a wicked oppressor who has enslaved God's people for eighteen years.

We see similar tensions elsewhere in Scripture. In the book of Exodus, the ruler has called for all the Hebrew boys to be murdered, but the midwives can't bring themselves to do it. They disobey Pharaoh in order to protect Hebrew babies.

We see deception in the life of Rahab. She misleads the authorities in Jericho in order to protect the Israelite spies. And the Bible later commends her faith rather than condemning her actions.

At the same time, we should be careful. Stories like this are not permission slips for everyday dishonesty. Most of the lies we tell are not about protecting innocent people. They're about protecting ourselves. We lie to avoid consequences, to make ourselves look better, or to get what we want.

The New Testament teaches Christians to be truthful people, to pray for governing authorities, and to live peaceably whenever possible. But even in this, there are exceptions to obeying human authority. In the book of Acts, the apostles are beaten and told to speak no more the name of Jesus.

That's why, after being ordered to stop preaching about Jesus, the apostles responded in Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than people." In other words, Christians are called to be honest, respectful, and law-abiding citizens but our highest allegiance belongs to God. And when earthly authorities demand what God forbids, or forbid what God commands, we follow the Lord, regardless of the cost.

That is what we see here in the story of Ehud. The Lord was using him to overthrow a pagan, evil king who had, for 18 years, abused the powerless people of Israel. Ehud was God's chosen deliverer.

Thankfully, most of us will never face a decision as dramatic as Ehud's. But every day we face smaller opportunities to decide who we will trust, who we will obey, and whose approval matters most. The answer must always be: the Lord's.