

Ehud, Jesus and a History of Violence
Sunday, July 29 - First Baptist Church
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Imagine if you will that you are the cabin leader at a summer camp. You have 10 boys in your cabin – between the ages of 10-15 years old. These guys are rowdy, but they need their sleep (as do you). What can you possibly do to calm them down at night?

You read them Bible stories.

Gory ones.

It amazes me that we can have junior high kids disinterested in Scripture. Because there is wild stuff in the Bible. There are details where youth horror writer RL Stine of the *Goosebumps* series would say, “Well that’s just too far!”

So at night in my cabin the Bible was in high demand. Kids would ask for stories they had heard the year before, or they were telling everyone to shut up so the next story could be read. One of the favorites, and most hotly requested was from Judges 3:12-30.

¹² Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. ¹³ Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. ¹⁴ The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.

¹⁵ Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. ¹⁶ Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a cubit long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. ¹⁷ He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man. ¹⁸ After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way those who had carried it. ¹⁹ But on reaching the stone images near Gilgal he himself went back to Eglon and said, “Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you.”

The king said to his attendants, “Leave us!” And they all left.

²⁰ Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his palace and said, “I have a message from God for you.” As the king rose from his seat, ²¹ Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly. ²² Even the handle sank in after the blade, and his bowels discharged. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it. ²³ Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

²⁴ After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, “He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the palace.” ²⁵ They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead.

²⁶ While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the stone images and escaped to Seirah. ²⁷ When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them.

²⁸ "Follow me," he ordered, "for the LORD has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands." So they followed him down and took possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab; they allowed no one to cross over. ²⁹ At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not one escaped. ³⁰ That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.

Can you see why this story was so popular in the mind of a junior high boy? (Let's not kid ourselves – junior high girls would find this craziness engaging, too.)

Let's look at all of the details that would make this story stand out to a junior high kid, or any of our more imaginative and basic instincts.

- **God gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite.** The details of this guy are unique. Any kids who are left-handed are going to think, "Hey, just like me!" Others may ask, "Why is that important?"
- **Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a cubit long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing.** We have a weapon involved! Not just any weapon, but a concealed weapon. What could happen next?
- **He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man.** I know this shouldn't stand out. I know we should be kind about this, but for whatever reason the author of this story considers this to be a very important detail, and a detail that must be made early in the story. And this is obviously not everyday person fat – we're thinking Jabba the Hut type proportions. (Maybe King Eglon is the prototype that George Lucas used to create *Jabba for Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. Probably not, but that image of a figure that powerful and overcome by his vices serves us well in our reading.)
- **"Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you." The king said to his attendants, "Leave us!" And they all left.** We have suspense! The king has already been given a gift. And now Ehud has a secret message that no one else is to hear but this king. His own entourage has gone home, and he may be giving the king some other "tribute" in the form of espionage.
- **As the king rose from his seat, ²¹ Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.** There is the climax of action! As the king rises, Eglon greets him with his well-hidden sword! A surprise attack!
- **Even the handle sank in after the blade,** That's quite gross.
- **and his bowels discharged.** That's absolutely disgusting! But remember: think like junior high boys! This is an over the top detail.
- **Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.** Now this is gross. The author has gone over the top to describe this assassination in gory, disgusting and vivid details! Oh, but there's more to come!
- **After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the palace."** Ehud escapes. He locks

the doors from the inside and leaps off the patio. The servants assume that the king is using the bathroom. Every detail from this story gets more and more humiliating for the king as we move along.

- **They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead.** Not only do they wait for the king because they assume he is using the toilet – they wait to the point of embarrassment. The servants finally enter the room to find their king, their lord, dead. Ehud is long gone. He rallies the troops, and they win a battle over troops better equipped and trained than they.

So when all of this settles – when all of this blood and fat and disemboweling settles – we see a very clear victory through one of the Judges of Israel, enabled and equipped by God. Through all the gore and either intentionally or unintentionally hilarious details, some very clear things emerge.

Israel gets themselves in trouble, God punishes them, the people cry out for mercy and God intervenes. This crazy story, **this is a deliverer sent**. God provides a deliverer for the people, and as always this deliverer is unique. Ehud is left-handed. Cultures all over the world have been suspicious of left handed people. Some left handed children grow up learning to write with their right hand because parents or teachers force them to do so. We know this is just superstition, but many readers of this story would not see a left handed deliverer as someone blessed with advantage.

This story is also **an enemy defeated**. Israel had been given promises of a land of their own and prosperity of their people by God. Time and time again the only thing that stood in the way of what God had promised were their enemies – people who intended to do them harm. More often than not these enemies arose because they forgot their focus on God, or they outright disobeyed the plain things that God had commanded for them to do. Stories of victory over enemies were very important in the historical retellings within Israel. Almost all of these stories are underdog stories, where Israel defeats an enemy they had no business defeating. They are victorious because of the intervention of God. This is one of those stories – Israel being mercifully relieved from an oppressive enemy that God has delivered them from.

But this story in particular is **an enemy humiliated**. The gory and comedic details of the death of King Eglon are meant to embarrass Eglon in the retelling of this story. This is a cartoonish description of someone who has not just been defeated, but entirely embarrassed, and embarrassed for generations to come.

A deliverer sent. An enemy defeated. An enemy humiliated.

God seems to intervene like this often in the Hebrew Scriptures. But this intervention becomes a cycle. An insufficient cycle. Over and over again in Judges we read the phrase: **Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord . . . (Judges 3:12)**. Again and again we read the phrase that follows: **Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer . . . (Judges 3:15)**

The deliverance never “sticks”. The people wreck it through ignorance and disobedience, or some new enemy rises up to take their place. There is this cycle of violence that happens over and over again in the Old Testament that is never resolved. There is a cycle of violence in the Old Testament that is exhausting and demoralizing to read. Full and complete deliverance for the Israelites – for any people, really - never comes.

The deliverance through violence never remains. But then along comes Jesus. Jesus is a unique deliverer unlike any before him. As was read in Colossians 2 earlier in the service:

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

In Jesus we see – **this is a deliverer sent**. Jesus is sent and he teaches things that build off of the Hebrew Scriptures. And he teaches things never heard before, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.*” (Matthew 6:38-39). Jesus comes speaking with an authority never heard before, and he comes representing fully God in human form. How the people see Jesus act is exactly how God would act in that same situation.

Jesus is also a deliverer sent to deal with the problem of our sin. Sin always entrapped the Israelites as individuals and as a nation, just like it has every person and every nation since. Jesus comes not to deal with an enemy from another country – he comes and deals with the enemy of all people.

Through Jesus we see **an enemy defeated**. In the Old Testament we see God seeming to use violence to deliver people. But the cycle of violence continues and builds and never comes to full resolution. In Jesus, we see God take the violence upon himself. We read the gory details of what happened to Jesus in his trial and path to crucifixion and his crucifixion. This is God receiving violence. This is God receiving and becoming the object of violence in his own body. This is the violence of empires and hate and revenge exacted on Jesus instead of on people. God is the receiver of violence in the defeat of sin. *He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.*

In Jesus we see **an enemy humiliated**. *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.* Nothing is less victorious than dying on a cross. But in doing so, Jesus does not just defeat evil forces at work in our world – he embarrasses them. He humiliates every evil power at work. He defeats sin and the power of sin in our lives. Jesus, in dying on the cross, actually eliminates those things and their power.

Jesus is the deliverer sent. At the cross he defeats our enemies. At the cross he humiliates all that seeks to destroy us.

What does this do for us right now? Obviously, sin still exists in our world. Sin exists and tempts us in our lives. The cycle of violence is alive and well in our world. Innocent people have their lives in perpetual ruin every day.

In our world **the deliverer we want is Ehud**. Who hasn't wished for the death or pain of people that do extremely wicked things to others in our world? Who hasn't wished for "just desserts" or for "what's coming to them" to the predators of our world that destroy and harm others? We want someone to make swift justice happen. We want that justice to be spectacular and vivid. We want bad people humiliated. We want Ehud to save the day (or at least some other vigilante like Batman).

The deliverer we get is Jesus. Instead of exacting revenge on our behalf or on behalf of others immediately, Jesus dies. That doesn't seem like any solution. To anything. Who wants a deliverer who dies? But in doing so, he is God taking the very worst of this world on himself. He is God promising that one day all things will be delivered. He is God promising that in God's timing all things will one day be made right. And living in an unjust world, instead of loading daggers to our thighs or taking justice into our own hands, we trust.

We love violence. We really do. At my stupidest, basest moments I think it would be a great solution to a lot of problems. We see violent, unjust people run free and destroy lives, and we would love to be the action hero shooting our way into justice. Like Bruce Cockburn laments in the song, "If I had a rocket launcher someone would surely die." But it never ends. Violence perpetuates itself over and over again. The same bad characters and bad ideas and disgusting ways of destroying human life come to the surface over and over again.

So instead we trust. We trust that God has the final answers in his hands. We trust that Jesus has already humiliated every bad and destructive way of living on the cross.

Who trusts Jesus in this way? Christians who are persecuted daily for being followers of Jesus. They have found a way to live confidently with and for Jesus despite violence and threats of violence around them. Who trusts Jesus in this way? People who have had family members taken from them violently who have walked the hard path of forgiveness instead of legal justice or revenge. Who trusts Jesus in this way? People who have been mistreated, and instead of seeking revenge have entrusted the outcome to God. They have surrendered control and say, Jesus, I place my life in your hands.

Revenge. Violence. A thirst for "justice". All of these things become all-consuming and life-poisoning.

We can trust Jesus as our ultimate, final deliverer. Jesus alone offers hope in darkness. Jesus alone brings justice. Jesus alone brings us to a life of peace that we can confidently live in God.