

(Judges 3: 12-4: 1; Colossians 1: 15-23)

When I was at primary school over 50 years ago, there weren't many children who wrote with their left hand. Left-handedness was actively discouraged - it was almost seen as a disability! In the story of the first of the judges we will look at in the book of Judges, we find that the man of God's choosing, Ehud, was left-handed, surely an unlikely and unexpected deliverer for God's people. But this passage poses a problem for some because it is one of those apparently R-rated sections of the Old Testament and is slightly embarrassing. One expositor has apologised for the narrative, saying "By even the most elementary standards of ethics (Ehud's) deception and murder of Eglon stand condemned. Passages like this, when encountered by the untutored reader of Scriptures, cause consternation and questioning". But the apostle Paul is quite emphatic isn't he? He makes it clear that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable (2 Timothy 3: 16).

What is the theme of this story? What is it all about? You will find that in verse 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 Benjaminite". There you have it - the theme of this racy little episode in the history of God's people is the way God saves his people in their afflictions (and, indeed well-deserved afflictions). And it says that God is responsible for this lefty Ehud - "God gave them a deliverer", a saviour. Not a murderer, or an assassin, or a liar or a deceiver - but a saviour. This is a story of salvation. The focus of the story is not "why does God get himself mixed up with a character like Ehud?" but "See how God delights to save his people in their troubles!" We are not to see the problems God creates but the salvation he brings. What an incredible blessing and assurance to know that in our troubles - whether as a result of our sins or not - we have a compassionate God who actually hears our cries for help and comes to save us in our distress.

I want to look at the story this morning under 3 headings, first, Problem Children, second, an Unlikely Saviour, and, third, Peace Secured?

1. Problem Children

The story of Ehud begins with a damning indictment against Israel, "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (v.12a). Israel has a constant problem - they continue to forget their God. They know all about the goodness and grace of God - how he rescued them from the bondage in Egypt and brought them into the promised land of Canaan. They know that he is a covenant God who demands that they worship only him. But it just does not seem to be enough for the Israelites - they go chasing after other gods, looking outside the God who had proven himself to them time and time again, who has given them grace upon grace. They chase after something else, something better.

But God isn't going to allow them to continue in their rebellion. And so we read, "because they did this evil the Lord gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel" (v. 12b). With the help of the Ammonites and the Amalekites, Eglon attacks Israel and they are in bondage to Eglon and his Moabites for 18 years. God uses the enemies of Israel as a judgment upon them because they have disregarded him and his commands. God gives Israel over to their enemies - they are separated from God, they lose their freedom, they are under bondage - now servants of a foreign king. God will not stand by idly and watch while his people engage in persistent,

intentional rebellion against him. Sin is serious (especially the sin of idolatry - of having other gods and not worshipping the true and living God alone) and God takes it seriously. Oh yes, he sets his heart upon his people, and he continues to hold a special regard for them, but he is also going to chastise and discipline them when they turn their back on him.

There are always consequences when we sin. It breaks our relationship with God and we experience his judgment in our lives now. Are you worshipping and serving the living God? Is Jesus Christ King in your life? Or are you living to please yourself - to satisfy your desires, your ambitions? Is the real God in your life status and power, or money and security, or the praise and recognition of others, or sport or leisure or something else? Are you aware that God takes your rebellion seriously and that a time is coming when he will act? How can we escape God's judgment for our sin and rebellion, for turning our backs on him? What can be done to find peace and reconciliation with God? It is a very serious issue, isn't it? There are unthinkable eternal consequences if we die under the judgment and wrath of God.

2. An Unlikely Saviour

What will God do? Will he allow his people to go on suffering? Well, v. 15 tells us that 'the Israelites cried out to the Lord'. They remembered their God, that he is a God of mercy and grace. They cry out to him in their suffering and distress, they acknowledge their helplessness, that he alone can help them. And God responds to their prayer, their cry for help, and gives them a deliverer - Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera, a Benjaminite. "Benjamin" means "son of the right hand". God gave his people a deliverer but he's left-handed and so he is not a normal person, he has an affliction or disability. Judges 3: 15 literally says that Ehud was "unable to use his right hand". It is very possible that his right hand was paralysed or disabled in some way. If you were choosing someone to save you, you wouldn't choose him! But Ehud is uniquely suited for the task of deliverance for which God has chosen him.

In any event, Ehud is chosen by the Israelites to deliver tribute to Eglon, king of the Moabites. This was a humiliating task to be given - an act of subservience to these foreign oppressors. But what it does is to give Ehud access and opportunity. God raised him up and God put him in a situation where he had the opportunity to act for the deliverance of God's people. We are told in v. 16 what Eglon cannot know, namely that "Ehud had made a double-edged sword...which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing". Right handers carried their swords or daggers on the left. Will Ehud's sword, hidden on his right side, go undetected? Can he get close enough to Eglon to use it? At first he cannot. He "presented the tribute to Eglon". Ehud and his delegation leave, but near Gilgal he sends them on home but turns back to Eglon himself, saying, "Your Majesty I have a secret message for you". We know what that 'message' is!

Now we see how Ehud is fitted for his task. The king told his attendants, "Leave us!". Eglon does not expect a handicapped man who is unable to use his right hand to pose any threat. In his eagerness the king rises from his seat and it is Ehud's left-handedness that allows him to strike down this tyrant who has demanded tribute from God's people: "Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly" (v. 21). It is the

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king's obesity which seals his fate. In the providence of God Eglon's "bowels" discharged ("the dung came out" - ESV). It provides opportunity for Ehud's escape - since the king's servants remain outside, assuming (based on what they can smell) that Eglon "must be relieving himself". By the time they open the doors and see their king dead, Ehud has got away and escaped to Seirah. There he blows the trumpet and gathers the Israelites to battle. "Follow me", he orders them, "for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands". And a mighty victory is won by Israel. But Ehud gives the credit to God; he has fought for his people. Ehud is merely the instrument through which God provided deliverance for his people, Israel.

Can you see that Ehud points us to God's great Deliverer, the true Saviour, Jesus Christ? Ehud was a weak and unlikely, unexpected deliverer. The same can be said for Jesus. Isaiah prophesies of Jesus: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem" (Isaiah 53: 2-3). Jesus was a man who lived in a remote corner of the Roman empire. He wasn't an army general or a charismatic insurgent. He never took up a sword or formed an army. There was nothing about him that was noteworthy or remarkable from the world's point of view. He was an outsider, someone the world could not believe was either God's chosen Ruler or his Rescuer. Indeed Jesus is even more of an unlikely and unexpected Deliverer than Ehud. For he delivered his people not through great triumph, but through crushing defeat. He is stripped, beaten and hung on a Roman cross, the cruellest of Rome's torture devices, and there he dies. To the world this is no heroic victory but an overwhelming defeat. But the reality in God's purposes is much different. The cross is Jesus' greatest victory. There he defeats sin, there he defeats Satan, there he defeats death. As Paul writes: "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1: 22-25). In the cross, God shows his strength and power to deliver his people, not from a tyrant, not from human bondage, but from the just judgment of God upon our sin. Because on the Cross Jesus took the punishment for our sin, we, by faith, are delivered from God's wrath against our sin and freed from bondage to sin.

3. Peace Secured?

Ehud, having disposed of Eglon, escaped, called out his troops, controlled the crossing-places on the Jordan (and so shut off a homeward escape for Moabite troops), and defeated Moab's finest troops. The result of all that is summed up in v. 30: "That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for 80 years". Peace is what God delivers through Ehud. The Israelites had rest from war, from the nations around them - no enemy incursions, no invaders plundering the land for its produce, no pillaging in villages. But that peace is only temporary because although they cried out for mercy, they didn't truly repent of their idols

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and eventually they rebelled again. Chapter 4 begins: “After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (v. 1).

Unfortunately, Ehud is not a totally adequate saviour, for though God brings a certain kind of salvation and help through Ehud, nothing Ehud did could change the hearts of Israel. He may have exerted some beneficial influence on them while he lived, but he could not release Israel from the bondage of sin or rip the idols out of their hearts. Here is the real tragedy of the people of God - namely slavery to sin (“once again did evil” - a refrain in Judges 3: 12, 4: 1, 10: 6, 13: 1) - and no left-handed saviour disposing of foreign kings can release from that bondage. Utter helplessness! It is what the apostle Paul speaks about when he says that all human beings - both Jew and Gentile, both religious and pagan - are “under sin”, that is under the power of sin. Note “sin” not “sins”. Sin is not merely, or primarily, an act but power. Being “under sin” is to be held in its clutches, bound by its chains. The Israelites of the time of Judges were the people of God - yet they were in utter bondage to sin. We can be baptized and members of the church of Jesus Christ, the people of God of the age of grace, and yet be a slave to sin. That’s why it is such good news to hear of “him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Revelation 1: 5). There is One with nail-scarred hands who can and does free us from our tyrant - sin. Paul speaks in Colossians 1: 19-23 of the peace that comes through Christ’s blood, by his death on the cross. It is a peace with God that begins now as we cry out in faith for his mercy and grace. It is a peace that announces that our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God. It is true peace - knowing God and having a right relationship with him, a relationship by which we know and experience his love. It results in blessing now - the guilt and shame of our sin is removed and the power of sin in our lives is broken - though we may still experience conflict and hardship. And it is a peace that lasts into eternity, where in the new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness, we will be freed even from the presence of sin and evil. It is an everlasting peace.

The challenge then for each one of us is this: Do you know and experience God’s peace in your life? If you are living a self-centred life, enslaved to sin, if you do not know God’s judgment now, be sure that a time is coming when it will be dealt out in full. The good news is that God has provided the perfect Saviour, the only Saviour, Jesus Christ, weak and frail in the eyes of the world but powerful to save from bondage to sin. The only tragedy in our story will be if, having this Saviour, we do not “cry to him for help” for God has raised up for us a Saviour called Jesus who shall indeed save his people from their sins.

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.