

# Judges 3:12-30

Intro January 21, 2007 A Left-Handed Savior

How many are left-handed? Do you feel like a persecuted minority? You should. In just about every culture you have been marked as outsiders, to be hated, hunted down and tormented ...and *rightly* so. To be right handed is, well, right. Am I right? If I greet you I extend my right hand, but if I want to cover my ridicule with the veiled praise, I call it a left-handed compliment. Right is equated with authority and justice. It is good to be *righteous*, but what are you if you are a leftist? But English is not the only language expressing disdain for you southpaws.

As in English, German and Dutch speaks of the recht as right, French its droit (drwä), so as we speak of someone as adroit, we mean he is clever or skillful. In Slavic languages the root *prav* means correctness or justice as well as referring to the right hand. In Latin to be right is to be adept, so the word *dexter* is used (dexterity). So if right is right, what about left?

In Latin *left* comes from sinus, a pocket, placed on the left side of the Roman toga to be used for the right hand. But to use the left became sinister, so the association between evil and lefties took hold. German word for left is links, which means sly or devious, while linken means to cheat or betray. What is more left handed persons are clumsy, as in French where the same word is used for both – *gauche* which for us means to be vulgar and uncouth. The Portuguese use the word for left and the devil interchangeably. For the Chinese the left side is known as the bad side, the left path refers to immoral means. Even the easy-going Norwegians refer to sloppy or unsatisfactory work as left handed work. So when I Googled *left handed synonyms* what do you think I got?

- \* awkward, deceitful, duplicitous, shifty, two-faced, two-timing, underhanded, oily, untrustworthy, swindling, Hollywood (that's mean), faithless, unreliable, immoral, and guilty
- On a side note, what about the person who is so skilled as to use both left and right hands? We call them? ... ambidextrous, which we think means skillful at both, but from the Latin means being right handed on both sides. A bad dancer? 2 left feet.

And if you think you'll find refuge in God loving the downtrodden, taking the side of the underdog, don't forget that when Christ ascended he was seated at the place of honor, at the Father's right hand. Where are pleasures to be found? Psalm 16:11 tell us they are at God's right hand. Psalm 20:6 tells us that it is God's right hand that saves us, and what is in God's right hand? Psalm 48:10 ... *righteousness!* And when God separates the sheep and the goats at the last judgment – where will you find the sheep? You are right if you say right. And where will those nasty goats be consigned? To the left!

But before we brand lefties as heretics and stoke the fires at the stake, would you be surprised if God delivers us by a left handed savior? For all the right handed rhetoric, our passage this morning is more than a left handed compliment to our southpaw friends, for in it we see how God surprises us with the unexpected deliverer in the form of a left handed warrior named Ehud. Our passage this morning is one of the most comically gruesome texts of ancient literature, no less Scripture. In it we are given details we often don't read in the Bible, details that will once again make some of you squirm in your seats, but this time the topic is not sex, but violence.

As I read, ask the text, "Why is that included?" for as we go through this passage you will be surprised by the left-handed deliver God gave Israel ... and to us today. READ Judges 3:12-30.

## WHAT ARE THE SURPRISES IN OUR PASSAGE? <sup>1</sup>

Certainly not in the first verse ... "the people of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord." This is the same old song and dance we'll see through Judges. It is all too familiar not just on these pages but in our own lives. But what God does to root out the evil catches us by surprise. Here comes the unexpected.

As God promised before, when Israel was disobedient he would use people of far worse character to be the tool of correction in their lives. So we are told he strengthened Eglon the King of Moab.

I don't hear any gasps or see stunned faces. There is not even a derisive chuckle. Okay, it didn't pop out to you? It did to the Israelites that it was Moab who gave them grief.

The Moabites are not even in the Promised Land. They come from the other side of the Jordan River and were soundly defeated by Israel a generations before. Remember they were overcome with fear when Israel came their way. They are *girlie-men*. What is more, these guys are relatives, descendents of Abraham's unruly nephew Lot, who after fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah was manipulated by his daughters with a jug of wine to impregnate them. These children of incest were no threat. But surprise – they are now.

What is more ... they took the city of palms – unimaginable, horrible, unthinkable. Okay, let me explain. The city of palms refers to Jericho, whose walls came a-tumbling down and of which Joshua made the oath that anyone who builds this city will be cursed. This is not an annoyance for a short period of time. For 18 years Israel served Eglon.

Now comes the big surprise. God's idea of a savior!

The people cried out and God raised a deliverer. That's not the surprise, that's the cycle of Judges (remember spiritual ADD: apostasy, distress, deliverance). But notice God's right hand man for this job: Ehud, son of Gera, a Benjaminite. Small surprise in that Benjamin's tribe is so small, but the next phrase is critical in the story ... he's a left-handed man. Now, all go "Oouu...Ahhh"

His left handedness is almost a joke. First he's a Benjaminite. Not funny? Then remember that the name means "son of my right hand", given to Jacob's last child who along with Joseph was born to his favorite wife, Rachel. So Ehud is a left-hander from a tribe known as the right hand people.

But there is another possible surprise, possible only because scholars debate this point, but it still affects the story, no matter how the word is taken. In Hebrew, as with other languages mentioned above, the word describing left handed prominence is really a negative statement about the right hand, because literally it reads: shut or bound on the right side. It may have meant that he favored the left hand or that, literally, his right hand was useless.

What kind of savior is this? What is God doing sending this lefty boy to do a right man's job!

But still Israel recognizes his role and sends tribute to Ehud by him. Wait, not just by him, here comes that left hook, for literally it reads ... *by his hand*. Repeatedly through this story the writer focuses our attention on this guy's hand, as to remind us that God is doing something out the ordinary. He is going to give a tribute, a tax with his left hand, which to this day in Arab cultures, is the hand of insult, namely due to hygienic reasons. Enough said.

What happens next is shocking, grotesque and crude, for that reason boys young and old love this passage.

Ehud prepares to go, but he's got a plan, a surprise attack. He fashions a sword with two edges a cubit in length. Most battle swords are meant for hacking, so one sharp blade was sufficient to lop off an arm or sever a tendon. But his sword had a special function, it had to cut on both sides and it was not particularly long. This is not Braveheart's Claymore, but a dagger 18 inches long.

In an age before metal detectors, Ehud secures it in a place no guard would look. On his right thigh. Why? Because everyone knows soldiers are right handed and the sword has to be on the left. In fact, in Roman legions, right handedness was mandatory, so lefties were tried with their left arms tied to their backs to force the use of the right, simply because in military formation, all it takes is that one in ten left handed fellow to draw his sword and he pokes his comrade in the gluteus with his gladius. With the sword in place, well hidden on a side that would not be check, lacking any extra crosspiece to protrude from his robe, Ehud pays a visit to Eglon. A deformed man poses no threat to a mighty monarch, so it is thought.

Next surprise, as the tension mounts we have more humor

Why do we need to know this? We see God operating in ways we least expect. Ehud presents the tribute to Eglon, the a corpulent king. But the reminder in v17 only increases the humor.

No Israelite would have missed the caricaturing play on his name. Eglon is a diminutive form of `egel, bull or calf which is related to the word which describes the shape of a bull, rotund.<sup>2</sup> But it is not just that he is fat, the word used here is used of fattened cattle for slaughter. So here is an obese king receiving tribute, a term which implies not chests of gold, but of produce.

Just when we are expecting Eglon to get it in the end ... stomach, what happens but Ehud and his entourage turns and leaves. He gets past the guards, gives this tyrant his booty and just goes home? But that is not the end, a new surprise is brewing.

On way back to the tribal lands of Ephriam to the northwest, they leave the valley of Jericho in the south and pass by Gilgal. Gilgal, that place of the 12 stones to remind Israel of God's faithfulness to them in taking the Promised Land, where the covenant was reconfirmed, so that the reproach of Egypt was rolled back as all the men were circumcised. Now there are idols.

Ehud turns back to the palace in Jericho and, having already paid homage to this despot, gains entrance with a flattering statement: "I have a secret message for you, O king."

Eglon seems entranced by the oracle, so he sends away his body guard; certain he is safe with this unlikely warrior with the useless right hand. The king is sitting in the cool roof chamber, a term of uncertain meaning, but given what we read later when the servants think he is tending to his bodily needs, he may have been ... *indisposed*.

Again, Ehud speaks of a message from God, using the word *dabar* which means *thing*, but this *thing* is not some pleasant promise of a long life of continued feeding off God's people, for as the king comes forward, Ehud leaps to action.

He does the unthinkable, using his left hand, he reaches to his right, grabs his sword and as the king simultaneously raises from his *throne*, Ehud thrusts the blade into his rolls of fat. Here a different word is used, one which refers to the choice parts of the sacrificial animal. His girth is so great the 18 inch sword is swallowed up to the handle. With that thrust, the king finishes his *business*, as his humiliation is complete (v22c).

The shocking turns comical as Ehud secures the door, escapes by another means leaving the servants wondering what is taking so long. With the door locked, and perhaps the smell of the contents of his entrails spilled out on the floor, they surmise that he is occupied. So they spend their time talking about the chariot races, the price of figs or the king's need for more fiber. As enough time has passed, they finally enter only to find their leader slaughtered.

With enough time to escape, Ehud makes his way passed the idols at Gilgal, which may have served partly as a boundary marker to his home turf. Safely in the hill country, Ehud sounds the alarm to rally the troops. For the first time since he came to prominence, we hear his faith verbalized in the confidence that this is the time to attack the Moabites, for "the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your ... hand!"

Flowing down the hills, onto the plains they block the Moabites' way of escape and avenue for reinforcements as the shallow parts of the Jordan are secured by the Benjaminites. The slaughter continues as 10,000 Moabites are mowed down, all strong, but literally stout, a term used of prosperous, a synonym of fat, like their leader. What at first appeared to be muscle turn out to be blubber. For the next 80 years, two generations, there was peace.

Nothing in this story turns out like you think. Moab is thought to be insignificant terrorizes Israel for 18 years only to be reduce to a pile of flab, blood and, well, other stuff. God raises an unlikely hero who has no qualities any of us would expect in a deliverer. The otherwise strong men of Moab fall like the flabby leader does in the toilet.

We may scratch our heads at this horrific tale that certainly gets an R rating and scowls from social engineers who desire peace. But we must not forget that as much as God is the one who raised up Ehud and as all Scriptures are God-breathed for our correction and training in *righteousness*, we should consider how this works in us today.

## **DOES GOD STILL SEND LEFT-HANDED DELIVERS?**

Ehud, the unlikely left-handed hero, for all his violence is a powerful picture of our left-handed Savior, Jesus Christ. Like this story, we read over the details of the gospel but lose the surprise of the cross and the empty tomb.

When we read Isaiah 53 we may get misty eyed and the promise of the savior who takes on our sins, but forget the shock and awe of Isaiah who beings with the question: "who has believed what they heard from us?" This is not what anyone would have thought up.

But one who did not show the majesty, the power, the beauty that would attract us to him, one who was despised and rejected by men, one who was called a man of sorrows, one whom even God afflicted. That one was crushed for our failures, wounded for our breaking of God's laws.

Your relationship with God begins with this left-handed savior. Paul speaks of his work securing us over our enemies in Colossians 2 when he in v13-15 we are reminded of God's destruction of our enemies by means of the shockingly stealth sword of the cross.

What to all looks like defeat, God used for our triumph. Satan was defeated and the Father was satisfied. As the nails sank deep into his hands and feet, as the lance pierced his side, shame is poured not on us or him, but those powers which otherwise dominate our lives. We now have hope. Those who laughed at the cross stand slack jawed at the tomb.

If you trust Christ as your deliverer, you may miss what is obvious to non-Christians, that our salvation is so left handed, so much a surprise ... so underwhelming. To them the Gospel at first glance is a non-threat, has only a withered arm, it met with incredulity.

But Christ as our Ehud is not just an event 2000 years ago. The application of his victory means the Moabite forces which plague us today are still being routed. The scattering of the otherwise strong men of this world soon shows they are nothing more than portly weaklings, destined for destruction.

What Eglon and Moabites do we face now? What false pretenders do we still struggle under their tyranny? While they are legion, let us focus on a few and see how a left handed Savior surprises us with his power in our lives.

There is a corpulent king which rules many of our lives. He may go by many names but his tactics are the same, the demands that we worship another. We call this oppressor: fear of men. He feeds on our minds and thoughts, causing us to worry what others think of us, causing us to give in to sins that we otherwise would shun. We measure our worth by his approval and standards.

This tyrant demands tribute of our time, of our attire, of our every waking hour, checking our pulse to see if we are acceptable. A quick check may cause us to think we no longer fear other's opinions, that we have matured beyond childish peer pressure. But bowing down to the sow-like sovereign we give and give, but it is never enough. He feeds off our fears.

So God sends along an Ehud, hidden dagger to cut through the fat and let us see the dung which infests that tyrant. His tentacles reach deep into our minds and hearts.

God's left handed response is not clean and easy. We are often forced to smell the stench of our sin. We see those times we have remained silent about our faith, laughed at the boss' bawdy joke, or twisted the truth to please a friend – then we see in the mirror the bloated sin that infects our hearts.

The left handed savior may come in many forms, challenging us in ways we otherwise would so quickly ignore. When our health fades or our home is troubled, when a overbearing boss or troublesome teacher hurls the insult, we get a glimpse into what we really value. God may use the least likely person or event, but in the end, see that our hope lies in our health, our home, our work or our grades and then see what idols we really are serving.

The greatest solution to your greatest problems lie in the nail scared palms of a left handed savior. For your help comes to you in the seemingly powerless preaching of the Word each Lord's Day. The withered right arm of self improvement lays paralyzed. You've been told that it is with that arm you can save yourself, but you've come to see that it lacks the strength to help you. All the while the hidden left arm of faith, grabs the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit, that two edged sword and cuts deep. But like a scalpel that cut will heal us.

Change comes, but it comes by simple means. Hearing and applying the truth of the gospel that Christ is for you, that the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper when combined with the truth of Scripture will strengthen you to obedience.

I know I am a left handed preacher. I know that what I say to so many seems to be nothing more than words that mean little and change nothing. But, if you hear and with faith look to Christ as your left handed Savior, you will have rest for more than 80 years, but for all eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe much to Michael Wilcock, the Message of Judges from the BST series.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Block, The New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth p158.