

## ***Southpaw Savior***

In the name of him who delivers us from all evil – especially our own, dear friends in Christ: Last week, when we began this series of Lenten meditations on Judges, I said that it was a book of repeated cycles. At the top of each cycle, we find God’s people in a state of relative faithfulness, being blessed by the Lord. But then they turn away the Lord and his goodness and begin to worship of the gods of their Canaanite neighbors – the pagans they were supposed to have driven out or destroyed, but didn’t. Responding to his people’s apostasy, the Lord withholds his hand of blessing and protection, and he raises up enemies to oppress his people. Often these enemies are the same Canaanites the Israelites were supposed to have gotten rid of – which is an illustration of how unfinished business in spiritual matters always grows and comes back to haunt you later. Anyway, when their affliction becomes unbearable, it eventually occurs to the Israelites that the hand of the Lord is against them because of their idolatry, and they cry out to him for deliverance. When they do, the Lord sends them a deliverer in the person of one of the judges; who, with God’s help, throws off the yoke of oppression and leads the people into another period of relative faithfulness to the Lord. And then the whole thing happens again. In fact, as you read through the book of Judges, you know that you’re taking the plunge into the next cycle when you come across these words: “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” –a phrase which shows up in the course of the narrative no less than seven times.

Seeing this, our initial thought is probably something like: “How can these people be so stupid? Do they learn nothing from the history of their experiences with the Lord?” And while that’s not a bad thought, we should recognize this is the cycle of our own lives. Daily perhaps, weekly to be sure, and maybe even over longer cycles of our lives, we confess our sins to the Lord, we receive his forgiveness and then we set out to do his will with great intentions and high hopes ... but invariably somewhere along the way we get sidetracked, and we let the various idols we’ve allowed to remain in our lives lead us astray. Before long we find that we too need a deliverer – someone to save us from our sin and foolishness. The Israelites had the judges the Lord raised up. We have the Lord Jesus Christ, who for us was raised up on the cross. He is the Great Deliverer whom the judges of old foreshadowed. And so we should expect to see in each one of the judges some portrait, some prophetic picture, some revealed truth about the Lord Jesus and his work to save us from sin. And that’s what we’ll be doing this evening and in the weeks ahead: finding Christ in the judges.

But before we do that, we have to ask “What exactly were the judges? What did they do? How did they become judges?” There’s a lot of confusion about them. Most people think they were political leaders, something like kings; but not kings exactly. But that’s not right. We need to understand that at this time in history, Israel was a tribal society. The idea was that the Lord was the King of Israel, and that under his kingship each of the twelve tribes of Israel ruled itself. So, in every family, the father was in charge. Dad was law and order – the Lord’s representative – among his own. He upheld the law of God, enforced discipline, and punished those who strayed. Families were grouped together in clans over which there would be clan leader. So when families in the same clan were in conflict over something, or if crimes were committed, the clan leader decided the issue and ordered the appropriate punishments and restitutions – again, in accordance with the Law of God. For harder cases or for conflicts between clans, they’d kick the case up to the tribal counsel, which probably consisted of all the clan leaders together. They’d decide the case. And this system worked for probably 90% or more of the problems that needed to be resolved.

But what about conflicts that arose between members of different tribes? Who could hear a case like that? This is where the judges came in. These were certain individuals who had some kind of celebrity status that transcended the tribal structure. Perhaps it was because they'd done something famous, or maybe they were recognized for their wisdom and learning – whatever. The point is that they were looked up to enough that members of more than one tribe could agree that this was a person whom both sides could trust to hear a case and make a judgment without showing partiality. So at any given time there were many judges scattered throughout Israel. The few we read about in the book of Judges are those with special Christological significance. And that brings us to this evening's account of Ehud – the first of the Christological judges

The text begins with that much repeated refrain, "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." And this time the Lord raises up the nation of Moab to oppress his people. The country of Moab was just east of Israel, on the other side of the Jordan. It seems that they crossed the Jordan and occupied what had been the city of Jericho (aka the City of Palms). There they build a base of operations from which they conquered and controlled the rest of Israel. What this means mostly is that they forced the Israelites to pay them an oppressive annual tribute consisting of grain, other commodities, and no doubt gold and silver as well. This guaranteed that Israel remained weak and powerless and that Moab grew increasingly richer as well as politically and militarily stronger. The whole situation is illustrated in the person of Eglon, the enormously fat king of Moab. It's probably no coincidence that his name is derived from a word that means "to be round" for so he is. Anyway, with food comparatively scarce and so immensely more labor intensive to produce than today, it was quite an accomplishment in the ancient world for anyone to carry a few extra pound much less be called fat. And Eglon is what we would call morbidly obese. It suggests that the tribute amount is excessive. The Moabites are like leeches or big round ticks getting fat from the hard work of the Israelites who are wasting away, and being forced to get by on next to nothing. The nation of Moab is parasitically sucking the life out of Israel. And this goes on for 18 long years.

Apparently it takes that long for the Israelites to renounce their false gods and turn back to the Lord – which is pretty sad when you think about it. You know that at some point fairly early on they must have realized that this affliction came upon them because of their turning away from the Lord; but they are so determined to keep on rebelling and clinging to their idols that they're willing to suffer the consequences. It's only when the Lord makes it absolutely unbearable for them that they finally come around and call out to him for help.

And when they do, the Lord sends them Ehud, who is about as unlikely a deliverer as might be found. Why? It's because he's left-handed. Why is that a problem? Well, it's hard for the 89% of us who are right-handed to properly understand; but those of you who belong to the other 11% might appreciate it. I mean even today it's not easy being left-handed. It's a distinct disadvantage. You have to sit at the end of the table so you don't knock elbows with the person next to you. And tools, especially power tools, and firearms, musical instruments, and anything else made to be held in the hands – they're all made for right handed people, which means you either make do or pay lots extra to find the same items made for the left hand—if they're available, which usually they aren't. You get called names too. If you're a gangster, they'll call you Lefty, for sure. If you live in Australia, they'll call you a Mollie Dooker (of course, they have funny names for everything). Other names include: buck fisted, scrammy-handed, and southpaw; the latter refers to the fact that baseball diamonds used to be oriented with home plate on the west side. That way in the afternoon when most games were played, the sun would not be in the batter's eyes. So a left-handed pitcher threw with his south arm.

But if it's something of an inconvenience today to be left-handed, it was much worse in previous ages. Just consider: the Latin word for left is *sinistra*, from which we get the word

sinister, which means evil. On the other hand (literally) the Latin word for right is *dexter*, from which we get the word dexterity, which means skillfulness. Consider too that in most languages the word for the direction right also means “correct” or “proper” – as when speak of *right* behavior or *right* answers. Conversely to do something left-handedly, is to do it dishonestly or insincerely – as when someone pays “left-handed compliment”. It means they don’t mean it.

Do you left-handers feel discriminated against yet? I’m afraid it gets worse. You see, in the ancient world, the right hand was used for clean and noble purposes such as eating, greeting people, and blessing others. The left hand was used for other less noble purposes. Think about it: in an age when there was no hot and cold running water in places we think it to be indispensable today, the left hand was used for personal hygiene functions – and mind you, they had no handy disposable paper products on rolls to assist in such things, if you catch my drift. Ah, the things we learn at church on Wednesday evenings. Anyway, the upshot is that the left hand was considered unclean. You kept it to yourself. If it was used in public, it was for issuing curses – which is why, for example, in the judgment scene that Jesus describes in Matthew’s Gospel, the saved are gather on his right hand and the damned are on his left. It’s why too even today you shake hands with your right hand—never your left.

Okay, because of this, in the ancient world left-handed people had to operate under these social conventions, which means that they were naturally kind of klutzy. They couldn’t use their dominant hand for doing the things that required the most skill and concentration. And there were other problems. A left-handed soldier couldn’t stand in the battle line with the other soldiers. Why? Because everyone carried their shields on their left forearms in such a way that they could overlap for defense, with their swords or spears in the right for attacking. If you put a lefty in the line, either he’d have his weapon in his weaker hand, or you’d have two weapons together and a place where the shields didn’t overlap right. Either way, it makes a weakness in the line – which could prove disastrous in a battle. Therefore left-handers were used as archers or slingers, never as swordsmen. This is significant for our story, because no one expects a left-handed person to be carrying a sword. Only right-handed men did. And naturally, so as to draw the weapon effectively, the sword was carried on the left side. So when the Moabites give Ehud the pat down to make sure he’s not carrying a weapon when going to see king Eglon, no one is looking for a sword where he has it concealed on the inside of his right thigh. It’s the last place anyone would carry a sword.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. The point, thus far, is that Ehud is an unlikely deliverer. With the cards stacked against him like they are we don’t expect him to be one chosen by the Lord to break the oppression of the Moabites – and more importantly, perhaps, neither do the Moabites. But it is precisely this disadvantage he has, this weakness, if you will, that proves to be his strength.

It happens this way: on the 18<sup>th</sup> year of their subjection to Moab, Ehud is the one tasked to head the delegation that brings the annual tribute to king Eglon. It’s probably a large shipment: cartloads of grain, dried fruits, wine, silver—all kinds of stuff. There are many men with Ehud both to guard the shipment of goods and to handle the animals and the conveyances. And it can’t be a very happy group. This is all our stuff – food we worked hard for – food we could be using to feed our half-starved families. And here we are handing it over to these pagan Moabites who are getting fat at our expense. It’s both infuriating and humiliating. And I don’t imagine the Moabites make it any easier. There’s no thanks for this; they treat us like this is their due. And they nit-pick everything. They carefully weigh the silver and count every bushels of grain, because if we’re even a little short they’ll make us pay in blood. They evaluate the quality of the food items too. Even though it’s the best we have, they make it sound like they’re doing us a big favor by accepting it. You get the picture.

No one tastes the bitter bile of the shame more than Ehud, the man in charge. And so it is that when the group is on the return trip – now traveling light and empty – that he turns back. He has a covert plan about which he's told no one. He's all on his own. He takes all the risk – and suffers all the consequences if he gets caught.

Ehud returns to Jericho asking for a private audience with Eglon. He claims to have a secret message for him. Eglon, greedy pig that he is, most likely assumes that Ehud is going to offer to reveal the locations of secret stashes of goods the Israelites have hidden from the Moabites to avoid confiscation in exchange for a share of the action. This, to Eglon's way of thinking, would explain why Ehud didn't come forward when his men were around. So, thinking he's dealing with a would-be traitor, and wanting to keep his own people out of the loop to ensure that his own share is as large as possible, Eglon agrees. As I mentioned before, Ehud's left-handedness helps him smuggle his specially prepared weapon past the guards that surely would have checked him over.

The two men meet in the airy apartments built on the roof of the palace. And there Ehud delivers his message from God: a sharp blade of cold iron in the king's expansive gut. He must have delivered the message with quite a bit of enthusiasm too, for we are told the blade went all the way through. The Hebrew text even adds that the lacerated intestines spilled out of his back; but they clean that up for most English translations. Anyway, leaving his sword where it's again hidden – now in Eglon's midsection, Ehud locks the door and makes his escape – presumably by jumping from the roof. And he's given a good head start. Eglon's attendants dutifully stand at the locked door, waiting for their king to appear. However the odor they detect suggests to them that the king is occupied in such a way that he doesn't want to be disturbed. So they keep waiting. There are some things that ought not be rushed or interrupted. Who ever said the Lord doesn't have a sense of humor?

Meanwhile, Ehud, safely out of reach of those who might pursue him, ascends to the hill country of Ephraim. There he blows the battle horn, summoning the men of Israel to rise against their oppressors. Taking no credit for himself he exclaims, "The Lord has given Moab into your hands." The army of Israel sweeps down on the Moabites and seizes the fords they need to cross to escape back into their own land. The victory is complete. The power of Moab is broken and its oppression ends. Israel enjoys peace and prosperity again.

But what does this story tell us about Christ? At first brush, we might be reluctant to link Jesus with a rather sneaky left-handed assassin like Ehud. But if we start to connect the dots, a portrait of our Savior does indeed appear – especially if you cast Eglon in the role of Satan. He is our oppressor. He's the one growing fat, as it were, from our bondage to sin. All our efforts to free ourselves ultimately serve his purposes, not the Lord's. And here's Jesus. Like Ehud, he's an unlikely deliverer. He comes in weakness and humiliation; making an offering of himself. He comes alone; there's no one to help him. And he is, properly understood, like a left-hander. Over him hangs a cloud of defilement; yes, a curse of uncleanness – for he carries our sin to the cross. But in his death on the cross there is a concealed weapon; one that Satan didn't see coming. It's the sword of God's promise to us that when Christ dies, delivers the death stroke to Satan. And just as it was for Eglon, this weapon is hidden in the wound and the truth about his fall is not discovered right away. Indeed, there are people today who still don't know that Satan was defeated by Christ's death on the cross; but to those of us who do know, Satan is dead. His power to oppress us is broken. In Christ we're free – free to enjoy his peace, his forgiveness, and his reign here on earth and forever in eternity. So, this evening I give you Ehud, the Lord's southpaw savior; and through him a glimpse of Christ our Lord and Savior. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***