



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

WASHINGTON, DC

GUTSY DELIVERANCE

Judges 3:12-30

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The book of Judges contains a series of historical vignettes that are increasingly reminiscent of Jesus' story the Prodigal Son. Each vignette describes how the Hebrew people, having arrived in the land of milk and honey, squander their inheritance in the pursuit of pleasure and popularity and power. Whenever they come to their senses, they cry out for a deliverer, and the Lord sends one to save them. However, successive vignettes demonstrate a downward spiral. After every deliverance, their repentance is increasingly short-lived. They go right back to their old, idolatrous ways, and their hearts get a little harder every time. As these vignettes become darker and darker, the necessity of God's ultimate deliverance in Jesus becomes clearer and clearer.

From Generation to Degeneration (3:12-14)

The opening paragraph sets the stage for the gutsy deliverance that will follow:

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. (Judges 3:12-14)

The Moabites, Israel's neighbors to the southeast, formed an alliance with their other near neighbors the Ammonites and the Amalekites,. Together they took possession of Israel. A few generations earlier, when the Israelites first entered into the land of Canaan, they conquered and destroyed the City of Palms, the ancient city of Jericho. But now it has been rebuilt, and Eglon, the King of Moab, appears to have taken up residence in a palace there.

But how? How could the Hebrew people who had triumphed over Egypt and brought down the walls of Jericho and seen so many other victories in prior generations now end up enslaved all over again? What happened to them? How did they go from generation to degeneration?

The answer, consistently repeated throughout the book of Judges, is that they abandoned God. In particular, they abandoned his Word and they gave their hearts to idols. Listen to some of the charges brought against them in the previous chapter (Judges 2):

I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? (Judges 2:1-2)

The people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath. (Judges 2:11-13)

They did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. (Judges 2:17)

After God miraculously rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, after his miraculous daily provision of food and water for them in the wilderness, after everything that God had given them in the Promised Land, it is difficult to fathom how they could have rejected God so quickly. How does this happen? How could they forget the Lord?

They forgot the Lord the same way that we forget him:

"Look at all my nice things. How did I come by these things? I worked hard and earned them.

"Consider, also, my many accomplishments. Were they gifts to me? Of course not. I earned them as well. I worked hard to be where I am today.

"Yet if I'm honest, I'm not satisfied. I want more, and I won't be happy until I get it. Of course, as a Christian, I've tried praying and asking God to give me what I want. He hasn't. So I'm taking matters into my own hands. I'm not planning to leave the faith. I'll still come to church. As the old saying goes, if you're going to get anything done around here, you've got to do it yourself."

How do Christians forget the Lord? We talk ourselves into syncretism, keeping Jesus in our back pockets, but giving our hearts to some other power. We lose hope in Jesus. Instead of placing all our hopes in the risen Christ, we hope in wealth, or brains, or popularity, or beauty, or politics. We should be worshiping Jesus, but we worship these other gods instead.

The Israelites were enslaved to the Moabite alliance for eighteen long years (Judges 3:14). Think back to where you were in 1999. What has happened in your life since then?

My wife and I moved to Washington in 1999, a city entering an era of enormous material prosperity. During these years God has blessed us with five kids and a house that we've renovated and serves us well. Yet Washington is clearly not a place in which God's kingdom is fully realized. Despite our city's material prosperity, it can be a difficult place to live:

- The gods of Washington demand so much work, there's never any time to rest.
- The gods of Washington demand youthful vitality, so we have to stay fit and looking good.
- The gods of Washington demand total conformity to their ethics, so we must keep silent and never disagree or offend them.
- The gods of Washington demand partisanship, so we must choose sides and join in the alienation that is ripping our country apart. Peace and charity aren't allowed.

Our material prosperity comes at a high price. It's difficult to be a committed Christian in a place where the majority worship other gods. So we forget the Lord and conform to the culture around us, soon finding ourselves enslaved to our city's false gods, just like the Israelites did during the days of the Judges. Is there any hope for us? What can we do?

Returning to the Lord

What should we do when we realize that we have forgotten the Lord and given our hearts to other gods? The answer, according to the book of Judges, involves a two-fold response: 1) cry out to the Lord for a deliverer, and 2) repent by putting away your false gods.

First, we must cry out to him, *personally*. Jesus is not a machine. He's not a salvation dispenser, as if one might deposit enough good deeds and charitable giving and well-intentioned promises into a machine and then receive deliverance in exchange. Jesus is a person, and he cannot be bought. Crying out to him isn't transactional—it's relational. If you want his deliverance, you'll have to ask him, saying something like this: "I need you in my life. I want to be close to you, Jesus. Come rescue me and be my Lord (i.e. king) forever."

Secondly, having cried out to Jesus for deliverance, then we must repent by putting away our false gods. Before his death, Joshua addressed the people of Israel and said, "Choose this day whom you will serve," whether false gods or the Lord. "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." The people responded by making a covenant with the Lord. Then Joshua said, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord." (Josh 24:23). Why did Joshua say this immediately after they had enacted the covenant? Because Joshua knew that they still had their false gods!

In a marriage, after saying your vows at the altar, if you try to keep dating other people you'll soon see your marriage fall apart. Joshua knew that the Israelites wouldn't keep their promises if they didn't put away their false gods. In the same way, you can't give your heart to Jesus but also keep serving other gods. You must instead destroy them.

From Idolatry to Repentance (3:15-30)

We will see both elements of this two-fold response in the story of Ehud, both calling to the Lord for deliverance, and then making a clean break with idols.

First, the call for help. "Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord..." (3:15). After eighteen years of slavery, the Hebrews finally came to their senses. Who knows why it took so long, or what finally caused them to remember the Lord. But they did, and they called for help.

"The Lord raised up for them a deliverer" by the name of Ehud (3:15). We are told that Ehud was a Benjaminite, i.e. a descendent of Jacob's son Benjamin. In Hebrew, "Benjamin" means "son of my right hand." Ehud, however, is left handed, and somehow noticeably so. Perhaps his right arm was maimed or missing. The text is not clear. In any case, everyone Ehud met, including the King of Moab, knew that Ehud's right hand was no threat.

Having called to the Lord for deliverance, the next step is repentance by putting away their idols. Ehud's assassination of the Moabite king is a dramatic depiction of repentance. There are several unique and interesting elements from the story that make this clear.

1. *The Sacrifice of Eglon.* The King of Moab wasn't merely the political embodiment of Israel's oppressors. As an ancient near eastern king he also would have been viewed as the son of (their) god. Thus, he was a living, physical representative of the Moabite god—one of the false Canaanite gods that the Israelites had adopted. (And notably one of the most cruel, requiring child sacrifice.)

By assassinating the King of Moab, Ehud symbolically put Moab's god to death, offering it as a sacrifice to the Lord. We see this in the language describing the assassination, language that closely echoes the Old Testament law regarding animal sacrifice. Here are five examples showing this unique connection:

- The King of Moab's name was Eglon (v 15), which in Hebrew means "little calf." Thus, Eglon was the same kind of animal that faithful Israelites were instructed to sacrifice to the Lord.
- The noun used for "tribute" in vv 15, 17, 18 is the same Hebrew word that is used to describe burnt offerings roughly one hundred times in Old Testament law.
- Likewise, the verb for "bringing" the tribute is elsewhere in Old Testament law used some one hundred and fifty times to describe bringing an offering to the Lord.
- In 3:22, the word for the "blade" of Ehud's sword nowhere else means "blade." Elsewhere it is used to describe the flame underneath a burnt offering.
- Even the word for "dung" that comes out of Ehud in 3:22 has sacrificial significance. Everywhere else this word is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, it describes the offal that is to be removed from the animal sacrifice and not burned on the altar.

So not only is Judges 3:15-30 a thrilling assassination story, it's also a story told using special religious language reminiscent of animal sacrifice. Why? Because what Ehud did in destroying the embodiment of Moab's god is what all of us are supposed to be doing with our own false gods. We are called to lay them on the altar before the Lord and leave them for dead. That's what repentance is all about.

2. *The Idols in Gilgal: Ehud's turning point.* We know from Judges 3:16 that Ehud came prepared with a special sword that he had made and hidden on his right thigh. However, we don't know what he was thinking as he came to offer the tribute that the Israelites had sent to King Eglon. Was he waiting for an opportunity to attack? Did he lose his nerve? Was it his plan all along to leave and come back? The narrator doesn't tell us. What he does tell us in 3:18-19 is that after having paid tribute to Eglon, Ehud and his comrades left the palace and went to Gilgal, on the banks of the Jordan River.

Gilgal was a place of religious and national significance, a kind of "Plymouth Rock" on the Western bank of the Jordan. When the Israelites first crossed into the Promised Land through the Jordan, they brought out twelve large river stones and erected a monument to the Lord, naming the place "Gilgal" (Joshua 4). It was meant to be a holy Israelite shrine.

When Ehud arrived in Gilgal, however, he found Canaanite idols erected there. Imagine North Korea carving Kim's likeness into our Mt Rushmore, or a swastika painted on a synagogue, and you get a sense of the desecration that Ehud saw. Israel's first holy shrine in the Promised Land was no longer a monument to the God who had given them safe passage there. Instead, it was a monument to the false gods that had kept the Israelites enslaved for the past eighteen years. Perhaps the Moabites had erected them there. Or perhaps Ehud's own people had put them there when the apostasy began. In any case, they were what Ehud saw after his initial encounter with Eglon. And the text tells us that when Ehud saw them there, he turned back with a "secret message" for Eglon.

3. *Big Little Eglon.* One more remarkable element of this story is Eglon's diminishing size. Eglon was described in v 17 as being a very big man. (Perhaps that's why people feared him?) However, as Ehud found courage in the Lord, big Eglon got smaller and smaller.

When Ehud courageously returned to the palace, big Eglon did something really stupid. It's the sort of thing that a little man with a big ego might do upon hearing that his guest was bringing him a secret message. Big Eglon asked for privacy, sending away his guard and his servants. A truly "big" leader wouldn't have made such a mistake.

In v 20, Ehud was invited up to big Eglon's "cool roof chamber," or a more wooden translation of the Hebrew might be his "happening chamber." The expression is most likely a euphemistic way of describing a special room that we also like to describe euphemistically, i.e. the "rest room." Big Eglon was sitting on the throne, i.e. the toilet, presumably in some state of undress. Again, a truly "big" leader would not have done this.

Ehud entered and said, "I have a message from God for you." Then big Eglon arose from his "throne," and Ehud pulled out his little sword (v 21) and drove it in deep—so deep that the fat closed over it (v 22), and the sword didn't come out. What did come out was the dung, thus rendering big Eglon a kosher "little calf," well prepared for sacrifice to the Lord. Big Eglon was done in by the little sword of a left handed servant of the Lord.

Eglon was successfully assassinated, but Ehud still needed to escape, and it is the finale to this story that is perhaps the most disgusting. Ehud locked the doors from the inside (v 23) and escaped, Shawshank style, via the shaft beneath the toilet.¹ While the servants waited and waited outside until they were embarrassed (vv 24-25), Ehud descended into the pit and then rose again to lead the Israelites in battle against their oppressors. The victory was already theirs (v 28). The Lord did it for his people. He gave their enemies into their hands. So the victory belonged to the Lord, and it lasted for eighty years!

Cleaning Up

I love this story. It's full of irony and double entendre. It's told in a funny way that's intended to remind us of what Psalm 2 says explicitly: "He who is enthroned in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds his enemies in derision." God's enemies don't frighten him. They shouldn't frighten us either. We can join God in laughing at them.

This story isn't merely funny. It's also dirty, and that's intentional too. Salvation is messy business, because our sin is disgusting stuff. It's infidelity and betrayal, self-indulgence and thievery and violence. All the rotten, selfish, unkind things that we've done in our lives amount to stinking piles of dung. Someday when we meet the Lord face to face, all we'll have to offer him is a pile of it. Unless, of course, we cry out to Jesus for deliverance.

By the way, if you think Ehud's deliverance is disgusting, try reading the Passion of Christ. When Jesus was born, he was given gifts fit for a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Sadly, he wasn't treated the same when he died. In fact, Jesus was treated like dung. He was betrayed, wrongly arrested and condemned, mocked and humiliated, scourged, and then nailed spread eagle to a Roman torture device—the very symbol of human cruelty.

Jesus didn't have to do it. He *chose* to do it. He dove right into the middle of our piles, so that we might be cleansed and sanctified from everything we've ever done wrong. No amount of counseling and exercise and good deeds and charitable giving will ever make us that clean. Only Jesus, who pulls us out of the miry clay and sets our feet upon a rock. Not only does he

¹ The word translated "porch" occurs only here in the Hebrew bible, and its meaning is unknown. Interpolating from the doors being locked from within, and the naming of the chamber as a place of "happening," Ehud must have escaped through the sewer chute.

make us clean, but he also makes us good, freeing us from bondage to sin, the flesh, and the devil. Why does he do it? Because he loves us so much.

Choose this day whom you will serve. You can try to keep Jesus in your back pocket while hoping in the false gods of wealth, or brains, or popularity, or beauty, or politics. Or you can choose to follow the Lord.

As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. What about you? Will you serve him? If so, then you've no choice but to lay those false gods on the altar. Give Jesus everything. Tell him, "Lord, all I am, all I have, is yours. I don't care if I never become wealthy, or famous, or powerful, or successful. I don't care if I never get married, or I never have a baby, or I never own a home. All that I desire pales in comparison with you."

Lay your false gods on the altar today. Sacrifice them to the Lord, and put all your hope in the risen Christ.