

Judges | When All Hell Breaks Loose

The Cycle and the Offering

Judges 3.7, 12-28, 29b

9.22.19

The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth...

Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So, the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. ¹³ And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees. ¹⁴ The sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

¹⁵ But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab. ¹⁶ Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak. ¹⁷ He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. ¹⁸ It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute. ¹⁹ But he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he said, "Keep silence." And all who attended him left him. ²⁰ Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And he arose from his seat. ²¹ Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. ²² The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out. ²³ Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.

²⁴ When he had gone out, his servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room." ²⁵ They waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore, they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.

²⁶ Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. ²⁷ ... and no one escaped.

We're looking at the Book of Judges (second week) and this is the period immediately following the Exodus and then the time of Joshua who brought the Israelites into the Land of Promise. He divided the Land as God instructed (among the tribes) and each tribe was to drive out the inhabitants... who were like squatters on God's Land (Ps 24.1).

In this process, each tribe faltered...and each tribe began to absorb the basic spiritual/religious views of the Canaanites. That basic Canaanite approach was what we've been calling cause-and-effect religion: the worshiper does for the deities and then the deities return the favor. It's a spiritual transaction and it's the root of idolatry.

And IN this period of time, the Israelites (whose parents and grandparents had witnessed this mode in Egypt) and who already struggled to see their God (YHWH) differently were now surrounded by this kind of karma religion so that: 1) they tried to incorporate the worship of Canaanite gods into their spiritual life and 2) they tried to relate to YHWH as if He were like the Canaanite gods (another in the pantheon of gods).

This would eventually lead them to join their Canaanite neighbors in child sacrifice. It all started (as we saw) in their failing to believe God and thus failing to expel the idol-worshippers from God's Land.

Today we meet the second judge (governor/leader) named Ehud and we meet a simple/sad word that may be THE KEY word in the book and it introduces us to the basic conflict that drives the plot of this whole sad history... In the process, we start to think of how we can avoid the spiritual disease that led to so much devastation then (and NOW). Let's look at:

- 1) The Soul Cycle
- 2) The Unexpected Interruption to the Cycle
- 3) The Referent and the Relevance

The simple almost disposable word I have in mind, a word that embodies the whole spirit of this book is – “again”. You see it in the second verse from the top: (3.12) “Now the sons of Israel AGAIN did evil in the sight of the LORD...”

It's not that the word is complex or theologically significant but it clues us in to the fact that this book unfolds in cycles. Basically, stemming from their initial unbelief that resulted in their refusal to see the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as UNIQUE... they forget that they're married to YHWH.

You see it in v. 7 (even though the word again isn't there) “The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.” And the basic cycle that repeats is – 1) Israel forgets God and turns to idols 2) God brings some king/army against His people to wake them up 3) When it gets painful enough they cry out to the Unique God 4) God strengthens a rescuer to save His people 5) there's peace for a time and then... A G A I N... the Israelites forget God and turn to idols and AGAIN...and AGAIN and AGAIN.

And sitting in the safety and comfort of our climate-controlled sanctuary, we think, “Those boneheads! When will they ever learn? How could they forget AGAIN and AGAIN and AGAIN?”

But I have found in my own life that this sad cycle is NOT simply the story of the ancient Israelites – it's not only a NATIONAL STORY but it seems pertinent to the church and to individual people IN IT!

It's not only a corporate cycle – it's a soul-cycle, the story of every person who seeks to live in real and vibrant relationship with God and desires to make progress in the spiritual life. We make a new start every New Year... we try to diet, to pray, to be more generous, to get involved in doing good in the world, to read the Bible, to reign in our finances, to have a good “work/life balance”, to stay in touch with loved ones and friends, to attend worship services, to get into a small-group or class... and maybe you have been successful at keeping some of the ping-pong balls under water...but others pop up... A G A I N ! !

And then...you sort of resign yourself to this state of coldness toward God and perfunctory prayers (no real passion/feeling/heat) and what you really need is some good, old-fashioned... pain.

“God whispers to us in our pleasures but screams to us in our pain” (C.S. Lewis) and then, the hurricane comes and we feel very neighborly. Or several big and unexpected bills and we get very prayerful (in fact passionately prayerful!) or we have a steep fall into some sin (maybe you get caught and shamed) and then you cry out to God, start attending church, start to tell people around you about the Good News and “Then the land had rest forty years” (3.11) and then A G A I N... eventually you cool off – and the soul cycle continues. The question is: is that really all there is...carrot & stick spirituality, reward/punishment?

It's another reason this book should appeal to us because what we've ALL experienced in micro-form in here on a GRAND SCALE. (More on this in a bit!)

And in this particular place in the book... when it happens A G A I N...when Israel forgot they were married to YHWH – pain comes in the form of the king of Moab, a man named Eglon whom God has strengthened to be His instrument... and (13) he gets two other armies to join him in defeating/subjugating Israel.

He cruelly dominates God's people for 18 long years and they're miserable...so much so that, AGAIN, they cry out (part of the cycle) and God raises up a man from the Tribe of Benjamin (Ehud) who makes a sword and plots to assassinate Eglon the King of Moab.

Ehud is chosen to, accompany a group of representative leaders of Israel who take the taxes from the Israelites to the King of Moab.

And here's where we find FOUR unexpected facts in this Unexpected Interruption to the Cycle:

First, the name Benjamin means “son of the right hand” but Ehud is a left-handed man. That was a stigma... a weakness... it remains so in some cultures.

Second, he makes a short sword (v. 16 “cubit” is a guess – probably 12 inches long) and it has two edges or in Hebrew (and Greek!) it’s literally, “two mouthed” (straps it to the right leg where they wouldn’t notice).

Third, the name Eglon means “calf” and it’s noted that he is very fat. In other words, he’s a fattened calf... grown rich on the produce of the Israelites.

Fourth, v. 17 says that they “presented the tribute to Eglon” and that’s a Hebrew phrase that occurs in the books of Leviticus and Exodus as an act of worship to God, “when you present an offering” – it’s expressly the language of worship and sacrifice. They made an offering to Eglon.

And the thrust of the story (so many possible puns!) the point of the story is that the king who is accepting the sacrifice is also the fattened calf who becomes the sacrifice!

Ehud, brings the offering and then leaves with his friends and gets to Gilgal – that’s where Joshua set up those stones of remembrance when the Israelites first crossed the Jordan River and entered the Land and maybe Eglon added his own Moabite idols to those stones... and Ehud sees the Jewish stones mixed with the Canaanite idols and he says, “You guys go on...I’ll catch up...I forgot something at Eglon’s.”

He’d just been there so the royal guards let him right in and he tells the greedy king, “Sire, I have a secret message for you...” and Eglon (probably figures he got an oracle for the idols) and says, “Shhh!”

He sends the guards away (doesn’t want them to hear this investment advice) and Ehud comes to the king – the fattened calf – while he’s in the bathroom and says, “I have a message from God for you” and the king gets up and approaches and Ehud gives him the message.

He pushes that two-edged sword all the way in and everything comes out. Ehud gets out somehow and the guards wait and figure the king is using the bathroom and finally they’re worried and they unlock the door and find the fattened calf has been sacrificed.

Ehud returns to where the idols were and he blows the trumpet and evidently tells the story and says, “Go get those Moabites – YHWH has given them into our hand!”

And maybe when they heard the story, they were so emboldened that their fears evaporated and they fought the “stout” Moabites (29) and while Ehud HAD escaped – none of the Moabites escaped.

Now why in the world are we reading this series of unfortunate events (unfortunate for Moabites!) in 2019 South Florida and what in the world does it have to do with our own soul-

cycle and our hope to NOT forget the Lord and stay close to him and become consistent in the spiritual life.

Well, as much as these events really DID take place, they are also symbolic. They're a part of our mythology – what Lewis called, “the one myth that's true”. And IN symbolic writing, we have to ask, “What is the referent (i.e. the thing, the reality or larger truth to which the symbol points – referent) and what is the relevance – the take away?”

So here it is: Ehud is an unexpected rescuer. We do not expect a man from the Sons of the Right-hand (Tribe of Benjamin) to be left-handed.

We do not expect a little dagger to be the secret weapon that changes everything.

We do not anticipate the funny and horrific scene to even be in the Bible (like it was directed by Quentin Tarantino and written by Flannery O'Connor) – it's all so weird. It's all so unexpected.

No wonder that on an even grander scale – on the biggest stage of human history – when the Ultimate Savior was coming and the Prophet Isaiah saw Him coming from hundreds of years before it happened, Isaiah wrote these shocking words: “Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” (Isa 53.1)

To put that in modern vernacular/phrasing, “Lord, who will possibly believe this?”

The story of Ehud and Eglon, the south-paw savior and the fattened calf who thought he was getting an offering and instead became the offering – this whole weird story is there to prepare the world for the paradoxical and foolish way that God would send the True Rescuer into the world – not as we would expect!

Eglon says to the guards, “Yeah...let 'im in – he's a loser who can't even use his right hand – he couldn't hurt me unless he has a nuclear device strapped to his back!”

And so with Jesus Christ – “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” – what's He gonna do? And how is a Jewish rabbi from the first century, who, to look at Him, was just a man – how could that POSSIBLY be the answer to the world's deepest needs...and to MY deepest needs?

But don't you see (and isn't Judges showing it very, VERY vividly...maybe TOO vividly for our sensitivities) that God will use weakness to confound the strong. God is not wringing His hands over human sin and rebellion – He's not worried. He who sits in the heavens laughs (Ps 2.4)

Even the thing that most concerns me – the fear under ALL our fears, Jesus Christ (the unexpected Savior – like all the Judges we're considering this Fall) Jesus Christ came (Heb 2.14-

15) that He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”

The very worst things that we fear – all stemming from our fear of death – He, the south-paw Savior can defeat those things, can defend us and save us like it was nothing. He is the referent – the thing to which Ehad points.

All the powers that torment and dominates us, He makes a mockery of them all: “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through the Cross.” (Col 2.15)

You know the word, “double-edged”, in both Greek and Hebrew is actually double-mouthed – like a mouth that devours and tears through flesh. That’s why WORDS came to be associated with swords.

And Jesus Christ, the greater Ehad, conquers by His Word – “sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Heb 4.12) In The Revelation He’s seen with a two-edged sword coming from His mouth.

We are living in a time when people are apparently turning from traditional Christianity – but just like the ancient Israelites turned from YHWH TO other gods... people are turning to other pursuits – like SoulCycle – I mean that’s a name of an gym where people ride stationary bikes... and so-far-so-good but this is what it says in their advertising: “SoulCycle is more than a workout – it’s an experience. It’s a space to come as you are and celebrate who you are; to emerge feeling stronger and inspired. Because moving your body and working your mind changes your Soul.”

See...exercise is great...technology is great...travel is great...politics... shopping...parenting...romance... career – they’re all great – but they don’t change your soul. They’re pursuits and devices that can help us even change our bodies and behaviors but they can’t change your soul because they depend on YOU working them – you have to support them (that’s how all idols work).

What breaks the rewards/punishment cycle and what really CAN change the soul is this unexpected Savior. It’s musing on, praying about, singing about, talking about, hearing and believing what God has worked. How God has defeated and mocked our enemies (world, flesh and devil) so that all things MUST work together for our good.

It’s a daily depending on the Lamb that was slain – the offering that saves, the death that makes alive – if you daily invite Him in, His two-edged sword will heal your wavering and actually transform your very self...AGAIN and AGAIN and AGAIN.