

Judges 3

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 May 2023

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Judges 3, we're going to preach this book, Morning and Night, through May and into the start of June. And we come to Judges 3. So, you know the Peanuts cartoons, Charlie Brown and Lucy Snoopy.

! Linus, one of the characters there, he's chomping away on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. That's a jam sandwich, isn't it, with peanut butter. He's chomping away, Linus is, and he's enjoying the sandwich and he notices his hands.

And he says, Linus, hands are fascinating things. I like my hands. I think I've got nice hands. My hands seem to have a lot of character. Just then, Lucy comes into the room and Linus continues. He's on a bit of a roll.

These hands may be hands that one day do a wonderful work. Build bridges, heal the sick, or hit a home run, or write soul-stirring novels.

And looking straight into Lucy's face, he says, these are hands which someday may change the course of destiny. They've got jelly on them, said Lucy.

[1 : 09] And sometimes the Bible has got jelly on it. Jam on it. So that we don't get the point. We miss the message of an X-rated book like Judges.

Instead of rejoicing in a God who's mighty to save, a God who comes to the rescue of his people. Over and over again, we say, it's got jam on it.

And there are yucky bits to this story, and I don't like it, and so I'm not going to take it seriously. It's got jam on it. But before you judge judges, just think for a moment about kids' TV.

Kids' TV, apparently on average, there are five acts of violence an hour. That increases five times during Saturday morning cartoons.

I don't know whether there are Saturday morning cartoons anymore. But by the time children have left home and grown up, they've witnessed, in cartoons, 5,000 murders.

[2 : 13] So let's not take the moral high ground too much when we come to the book of Judges. How are we to handle a book like this? Lots of people would dismiss the book of Judges, and they would say, well, it's just primitive.

It's sub-Christian, so don't bother with it. There's a lot of churches out there that never preach from the Old Testament. Somebody said to me recently they'd never preach from Judges on a Sunday morning.

They think it's sub-Christian. Some people would sanitize it. They take the Bible a little bit more seriously, but they spiritualize it. Have you heard sermons like this? Ehud's dagger becomes the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword.

But I doubt whether Eglon got the point of that. Not in that way, at least. Or we moralize it, don't we? We look for lessons that we can learn from it.

So Ehud, he seems to be vengeful and deceitful. Don't be like that, children. And of course, all of that is to miss the point. It is to completely mishandle the Word of God.

[3 : 15] All of that is to attempt to scrape the jam off it and get rid of the yucky bits. But Paul tells us, doesn't it, that the Bible, that scripture, and he's talking about the Old Testament when he wrote, all scripture is God-breathed and profitable for us.

That includes the book of Judges with all its yucky bits in it. And Jesus explains in a conversation after he's come back from the dead on the Emmaus Road, he tells us that the whole of the Old Testament, that includes the book of Judges, points to him.

It's all about Jesus. And so as we go through the book of Judges, unashamedly, we will be looking for Jesus and how the book of Judges points us to him. And the truth is this, God isn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

And we'll see again and again, won't we, that God reaches down into the mess that we've made for ourselves because of our sin and our rebellion. And he raises up a saviour.

And so tonight I want us to look at the first three saviours, the first three rescuers, the first three judges that God raises up. Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar. But especially Ehud.

[4 : 23] Ehud takes up a lot of space in this chapter. Not as much as Eglon, but Ehud does. Now first of all, and before we get to Ehud, let's look at all three judges together.

And can you notice how different they are? So you've got Othniel, he's a retired colonel, he's a decorated war hero, a five-star military general. He's got a track record and a pedigree as long as your arm.

We're told he's the youngest brother of Caleb. He's got breeding, he's got background. He's got guts and initiative, he's just the man for the job. And he seems to be the perfect fit, the perfect model for someone who'll save Israel.

He's the very model of a modern major general. To quote Gilbert and Sullivan. Ehud is disabled. He's left-handed in a world where everyone's right-handed.

And that is a considerable disadvantage. We'll see that. No one expected a left-handed saviour, least of all Eglon. And Shamgar, well he's only got one verse at the end of the chapter.

[5 : 34] He wasn't even an Israelite at all. If he was an Israelite, he was compromised because somebody's given him a Canaanite name. Shamgar is a Canaanite name. Perhaps he's a convert to Israel, we don't actually know.

He's a farmer, not a soldier. Judging by the weapons that he uses. To trounce the Israelite. An ox goad. He saved Israel.

That's some achievement. And so before we come to zoom in on EHUD, I want to just make a couple of points of application. By looking at these three judges.

The first point is this. Don't put God in a box. We do that, don't we? We look at certain ministries, certain churches. And we wonder, how could God possibly be at work at that church down the road?

We're so tribal, aren't we? Well, I certainly am. And we wonder, how can God possibly use people who don't quite dot their I's and cross their T's in the same way that I do?

[6 : 41] And many of us only recognize the hand of God and the things that we approve of. And I think that's why sometimes the very people who've prayed for revival and they've longed for God to work, actually when it comes, they miss it.

If you look through church history, and that's what happened again and again and again and again. Because God is a God of surprises, isn't he?

And just when you think you've got him taped, God surprises you. As one commentator has put it, out of the Othniel hat, he produces the Shamgar rabbit.

And you can't tie him down, you can't second guess him. Now C.S. Lewis captures it so beautifully, doesn't he, in that discussion.

In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe between Lucy and Mr. Beaver. And they're talking about Aslan, the Lion, and she asks, is he safe? Asks Lucy.

[7 : 42] Safe? Said Mr. Beaver. Who said anything about safe? Of course he's not safe, he is. Good. He's the king, I tell you. And so God is a God of surprises, isn't it?

And we mustn't put God in a box. And then don't think that you have to fit into some sort of mould to be used by God.

That you have to be a certain sort of person. That you have to have certain qualifications for God to use you. Often we feel like that. Perhaps you've been reading too much romanticised Christian biography and you don't feel gifted enough.

Or perhaps you think that there are too many skeletons in your cupboard and God could never use a person like me. Maybe you've got health problems. Maybe you've got physical limitations like Ehud.

Hebrews suggests that he's not only left-handed, he couldn't use his right hand because of injury. And yet God uses this man's left-handedness to rescue Israel, as we'll see in a moment.

[8 : 51] And if this chapter teaches us anything, it teaches us that God breaks the mould, doesn't he? He uses people of all shapes and all sizes. And so just look at these three people here.

You've got a senior citizen, a disabled person and a new convert. And there are no stereotypes, is there? There is no one who is too old or too green or too disabled to be used by God.

And the very thing that you might think that is a disqualification might be the very thing that God may use. Because God chooses the foolish things of this world to shame the wise and the weak things to shame the strong.

And the things that are not to bring about, to bring to nothing the things that are. And I think we'll see that over and over again wonderfully in the book of Judges. Hudson Taylor, looking back over 30 years in which he saw 600 missionaries recruited to work in China, he wrote these words.

He says, God is sufficient for God's work. God chose me because I was weak enough. God does not do his great works by large committees.

[10:00] He trains someone to be quiet enough and little enough and then he uses him. It says, doesn't it, in verse 10 about Othniel. The spirit of the Lord was upon him and he judged Israel.

Hudson Taylor and Gladys Aylward, they were turned down by missionary societies because they were too awkward to angle it in their personality. C.H. Spurgeon, Martino Jones.

Paul Levy didn't go to theological college. Neither three of us. That's the only time we're in that list, aren't we? But there will always be people on there. And I think it's difficult sometimes for Presbyterians.

There will always be people that don't fit our neat systems. And the danger is we can organise the Holy Spirit out of office by our patterns and our assembly lines.

Let's look at E. Hood, alright? He takes up most of the chapter. Verse 12 sets the scene. Look at verse 12. The people, they abandoned the Lord. Once again, they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers.

[11:09] Verse 12, sorry, there's chapter 2 I was reading. Verse 3. 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.

There's the downward spiral. It's the same old, same old. The cycle of sin and judgment and crying out for deliverance. And then God raising up a deliverer. In his autobiography, *To Hell and Back*, the American singer Meatloaf has got a chapter called *My Favourite Concussions*.

My Favourite Concussions. Now, I've not read it. Apparently, it's supposed to be a very, very good book and very readable. And the chapter is on his favourite concussions. Apparently, Meatloaf was concussed no fewer than 17 times.

He just kept getting himself knocked out in lots of interesting ways. Well, spiritually speaking, that's what keeps happening in the book of Judges to Israel. Israel just keeps knocking itself out over and over and over again.

And various consequences when she should have known better. God had warned them, didn't he? If they ever came into the land in the book of Deuteronomy, if they didn't keep the covenant, God would hand them over to their enemies and they would be oppressed by their enemies.

[12:25] But they kept doing this over and over and over again. Listen to what it says. The Lord gave Eglon. Didn't he? The Lord gave them over to Eglon.

He strengthened Eglon, the king of Moab, against Israel because they'd done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And he gathered it to himself, the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and they went and they defeated Israel and they took possession of the city of Palms.

So can you see there's a consequence for chasing after the other gods. God gives them over to their enemies. And then in verse 15, Now you and I don't get the joke, but Judges chapter 3 is full of jokes.

The story is a kind of pantomime. Maybe it's black comedy. There's the in-joke in the Bible. Three times left-handedness is talked about in the Old Testament.

And in each of those three times, it's always mentioned in connection with the Benjamites. And the Israelites would be laughing because Benjamin means what? It means son of my right hand.

[13:48] A lefty born in the tribe of the son of my right hand. And God has raised up a saviour, a left-handed saviour, out of the tribe of Benjamin. Now we're not laughing, are we?

But they would have found that amusing. But the joke is on Eglon. Don't get the two mixed up. Ehud and Eglon.

I know their names sound familiar, don't they? One of them is lefty. The other is hefty. But the joke is on hefty on Eglon. And the Moabites, as we'll see.

Ehud's left-handedness is not just incidental. We're meant to notice it. It's the punchline of the story. There's a principle in storytelling which has been attributed to Chekhov, the Russian writer.

It's called Chekhov's gun. Chekhov says, if you're a writer, you should remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter of your book that there's a gun hanging on the wall, in the second or the third chapter, the gun must go off.

[14 : 55] If it's not going to be fired, then it shouldn't be hanging there. And Ehud's left-handedness is the gun hanging on the wall of the story. As you read it, you're just waiting for it to go off.

The story plays out. Everyone is focused on what Ehud can't do. He can't use his right hand. No one is paying attention to what Ehud is going to do with his left hand.

For 18 long years, Eglon, the 20-stone king of Moab, built like a sumo wrestler, has been throwing his weight around. And no one's been able to stand up to him.

And now, just like God, God takes the weak things of the world, the foolish things of the world, the things that are of no consequence whatsoever, to shame the powerful, to bring to nothing the things that are.

And he raises up, out of the tribe of Benjamin, a left-handed leader. He raises up a saviour who is unable to bear arms. What is God doing? Here is Ehud.

[15 : 55] He's a bit of a joke, really. A left-handed deliverer from the tribe of right-handed people. And we're told that he comes with an unexpected message. Verse 12, second half. They've done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

And we're told, aren't we, that he gathered to himself, Eglon had, he gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites. These are people that should have been driven out, but they're still there because Israel hadn't kept the covenant.

And Eglon gathers himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites and he went and he defeated Israel and he takes possession of the city of Palms. Now again, there's something that we really easily miss, but we need to notice it.

Do you know what the city of Palms is? So remember when Joshua led the people of God into the Promised Land, what was the first city when they entered the Promised Land?

Jerusalem, Jericho, isn't it? The walls came tumbling down. That's the city of Palms. It's the site of that very famous victory, that city that God had given them over.

[17 : 10] The city of victory has now become a city of very humiliating defeat. And for Israel, you must not miss that. And to make matters worse, Eglon is now demanding tribute from Israel.

And so the Israelites send Ehud as the guy in charge to bring tribute. He's harmless enough, isn't he? He's no risk. He gets through security, no problems at all.

They won't find a sword on him because he's left-handed and he can't really use his right arm. And there's another comic twist in this story. It depends on your sense of humor, but we're told in verse 17, aren't we?

He presented the tribute to Eglon, king of Moab. Now, Eglon was a very fat man. It's not a playground insult. It's not bullying. Eglon is quintessentially, he is the epitome of a fat cat. It's interesting, down in verse 30, where it talks about 10,000 Moabites who are vigorously strong. It's exactly the same word that's used there. I don't know why it's translated differently. The translators, for some reason, can't imagine 10,000 warriors who are fat, but it's the same word.

[18 : 24] The Moabites have grown fat off the tribute that they've exacted from the Israelites. In fact, the word tribute is the same word that's used in Leviticus for the grain offering that the people of God were to bring.

And so, now do you see what was intended for God is being brought to Eglon and his hordes, and they're growing fat off it, off the sweat of God's people. They're taking for themselves what God had promised Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey.

And who is tasked with bringing Israel's tribute to this overfed king? Well, none other than Ehud, the unexpected hero. And as I've said, he's got no problems going through security.

He couldn't draw a sword even if he had one, so they thought, he's no threat to the king. He's even allowed a private audience with him. In verse 19, there's another little pun there. In verse 19, he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, I've got a secret message for you, O king, from God.

Now, the Hebrew is kind of ambiguous. It can mean a secret message or I've got a secret something for you. Someone says to me after the series, I've got a secret for you.

[19 : 43] Will you want to know it? Do you know, straight away? And probably Eglon thought this is going to be some little tidbit of military information. He can't wait to hear what Ehud has got to say,

so he arranges a private audience.

There's no threat from this disabled man, Ehud, so he can come in. He dismisses all his attendants. And Eglon probably thought he's been given a bit of military intelligence.

But in fact, this something from God was a sword strapped to Ehud's right thigh and with his left hand, he delivers something from God right into the belly of the king.

And the story at this point gets very, very mucky, doesn't it? It goes into slow motion at this point. The story slows right down very deliberately.

It's brilliant storytelling. You might not like it, but it is brilliant. So you actually see it happening in slow motion. Verse 20, Ehud came to him as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber and Ehud said, I have a message from God for you.

[20 : 52] And he arose from his seat. He got up and Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, thrust it into his belly. And the hilt of the sword also went in after the blade and the fat closed over the blade for he did not pull the sword out of his belly and the dung came out.

It's gross, isn't it? And notice what it says. It says the dung came out. There's something horribly fitting about this. Biblical scholars call this kind of justice, lex, talionis.

It's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The punishment fits for crime. This man has grown fat through his cruel oppression of God's people and now he's going to be judged and that's why it's so graphic, it's why it's in slow motion, that's why it's described in such detail.

This tyrant who for the last 18 years has lived for his belly is now going to die by his belly. I suppose that Ehud actually could have dispatched Eglon with his two-head sword in a number of different ways but he chose to spill his guts on the floor deliberately.

And while the attendants wait outside holding their noses sniggering about the king relieving himself and how it stinks Ehud makes his escape, verse 24. When he'd gone the servants came and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked they thought surely he's relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber and they waited till they were embarrassed but when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber they took the key opened them and there lay their Lord dead on the floor.

[22 : 45] He'd escaped while they'd delayed, passed over the idols, escaped to Sarah and the people of God knew 80 years they'd rest. The cycle is complete only to start again as we'll see.

It's a horrible story and I hope you're not feeling too squeamish but wait till you hear how I'm going to apply it. So a couple of things. First of all let me make an application about our sin.

How we're to fight it in our own lives. Notice what it says. There's a really interesting detail there in verse 19. What happens when you look at verse 19?

It seems that Ehud has gone with a kind of group of people to carry the tribute from Israel to Eglon. And then they've gone, they've returned and he's dismissed the other men.

And then we're told in verse 19, but he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal. And he said, I've got a secret message for you. And they've come, they've delivered the tribute.

[23 : 51] He's dismissed the rest of the group at a place called Gilgal. They're actually stones. I think the ESV is right there. I think it's not idols. I think it's stones. There are certain stones at Gilgal and he turns around and he decides to go back and have a private audience with the king.

What is the significance of Gilgal? Look at verses 1 of chapter 2. The angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal and left Gilgal.

Where is Gilgal? You look in Old Testament history, it's the place where they renewed the covenant. Once they crossed the Jordan, Gilgal, that pile of stones, was a sign and a seal of the covenant that God has made with Israel.

So every time they pass those pile of stones at Gilgal, they're reminded of God's faithfulness to his people. It's like a wedding ring, isn't it?

A wedding ring is a reminder, every time you see it, of promises made and promises kept. Promises made and promises given. A wedding ring is a powerful thing.

[25 : 05] So when girls, you see a guy taking off his wedding ring in a pub, you run away from him. You want nothing to do with him. Because a wedding ring is a sign of promises made and promises given.

And the stones at Gilgal were to serve a purpose. Every time they passed that place at Gilgal, every time they saw the pile of stone, it was a reminder of promises made and promises given. And when

he had got back to near Gilgal, he sees the pile of stones, he turns around.

Why does he turn around? Because he would have thought we are God's people. And what are we doing? What are we doing paying tribute to Aglon? We belong to the Lord God Almighty. It's part of the reason for the Lord's Supper, isn't it?

Why do we have the Lord's Supper regularly? It's because you come to the Lord's Supper and you are reminded of what am I doing living in the way that I'm doing? When we're convicted of sin, we come to the Lord's table and we think, what have I been doing?

I belong to the Lord God Almighty. He has made promises to me. He has given us a land, he's given a place to serve him, but we've compromised him and we've forsaken him.

[26 : 22] We've chased after other gods. What is going to happen if we keep giving tributes to Aglon? What belongs to God? What is going to happen to you if you keep on worshipping Jesus on a Sunday but during the week you give yourself to the gods of money, power, sex, relationships?

What do you get in return? I'll tell you what you get in return, you get slavery and misery and bondage. And Jesus didn't go to the cross for that. God didn't send his son into the world for you and I to live lives like that.

Jesus didn't die to save us in our sins, he died to save us from our sins, didn't he? Sin like Aglon is cruel and greedy, he's a greedy slave master. And his wages are death and we don't really believe that because if we did we'd run a mile.

And Romans 6 tells us that if we offer ourselves as slaves to sin, we become slaves of sin. We become oppressed by it. But what should we do if I caught in this downward spiral?

We talk about besetting sins, don't we, that each of us struggle with. sins that keep tripping us up and bringing us into slavery. What are we going to do about that? How can we break free from them? How can we break free from the cycle of sin and judgment?

[27 : 47] Well, you cry out to God, that's what these people do. And even though they didn't deserve it for one moment, God raised up a deliverer for him. And if we are his people, God will not allow us to remain in our sin.

And God is chastening his people here through Eglon and the Moabites. And now the instrument of God's judgment is going to be judged. And God will turn the tables on evil.

And some of you might feel a little bit squeamish about how he does that here. But when you think about it, we want this, don't we? We all want justice to be done. Don't you want justice to come to a man like Eglon?

Should he be allowed to get away with behaving the way he is? When there's corruption, shouldn't there be justice for that?

When there's abuse, shouldn't there be justice for that? You care about that. You get hot under the collar about that and God cares about that. And God cares how we treat one another.

[28 : 55] And so ultimately this story shows us that justice must happen. it must be done. On one level, it's pantomime with King Eglon. There's the pantomime villain, but it's a very serious message that if you stand against God and you oppress his people, even if you're a big man like Eglon, you might find yourself the butt of God's jokes.

Psalm 2, the rulers of the world, they gather together, they plot against the Lord and his anointed, the think tanks, the multinationals, the corporate conglomerates, but he who sits in the heavens laughs.

He holds them in derision. And so don't be intimidated by the fat cats, by power brokers, by those people that throw their weight around and the little person suffers.

Because justice is coming and justice will be done. And God is a God of justice. And that justice is seen supremely at the cross, isn't it?

And that probably is the most offensive thing you've heard me say today, because I want to tell you that Ehud points us to Jesus. And you say, how can that possibly be?

[30 : 09] He's a deceitful assassin. How can he point me to Jesus? And Ehud is a flawed human being. All these judges are. And if I was going to save Israel, I would not have chosen Ehud. He can't even shake your hand properly.

How is he going to save Israel? But that's the whole point, isn't it? How does God save the world? If you were going to save the world, how would you do it? How does God save the world?

Through Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean peasants, save God save the world? Not even on the map. If I was going to save the world, I wouldn't have done it that way.

He's a condemned criminal, abandoned by his friends, unjustly tried, strung up on a Roman cross to die. Is that how God is going to save the world? Do you remember what Paul says to the Corinthians?

He says the message of a crucified saviour, a crucified rescuer, it is foolishness to those who are perishing. Imagine how Eglon would have felt with all his attendance and all the court of the Moabites when Ehud came stumbling into the court.

[31 : 27] They would have been laughing, wouldn't they? They would have said, is that the best that you can do Israel? send Ehud to us. That's the message of the cross. Ehud came with a message from God to Eglon.

And the message of the cross that we have for the world is foolishness. It is foolishness to those who are perishing. But that is how God does it.

Foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God unto salvation. And how does God save? Not through power, but through weakness. This pattern of the weak, shaming the strong, of the unexpected leader defeating the imposter king.

The pattern of rescue where justice is done. It's the storyline of the entire Bible. And it brings us into the New Testament to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom God has raised.

It brings us to the table of the Lord. That God has raised up Jesus to be our saviour. And so will you cry out to him tonight?

[32 : 44] Let's pray. Let's pray.