

Ehud the Left-Handed Liberator
Judges 3:12-30 Doug Christgau
July 6-7, 2013

OBJECTIVES:

1. Unique characteristics give special opportunities to serve God.
2. To gain victory we must face the enemy.
3. Risks taken for God in his power are not risks at all.

INTRODUCTION:

Do you know what it's like to be different? Most of us don't want to be thought of as "odd" or unlike the norm, but it's easy to assume that some natural disadvantage prevents us from doing all that God has for us to do. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Jim Abbot (show baseball card slide) was a successful major league baseball pitcher. His ten-year career included a stint with the Chicago White Sox, as you see in the photo, as well as some years with my beloved and currently beleaguered New York Yankees. Jim threw a no hitter against the Cleveland Indians, though I'm not sure it should count since it was against the Indians. Jim had a very athletic body but he did not have a right hand. That didn't stop Jim from his goal of becoming a major league baseball pitcher. He learned to move his fielding glove to his throwing hand very quickly after resting it on the stump of his right arm. (Demonstrate) He was able to pitch and defend his position as a result. Jim Abbot showed courage in overcoming a disability that might have stopped others from the lofty goal of being a major league baseball player.

Ehud, the second Jewish judge, also had a physical characteristic that made him different. He was left-handed. During the time of the Judges, being left-handed was considered virtually a handicap. Being right-handed was the dominant characteristic in the tribes of Israel. Back then even more so than today, it was a right-handed world. But Ehud found a way to turn what was thought of as a liability into a mighty asset to gain victory for Israel.

1. The Jews were subject to King Eglon for 18 years.

As the Jews settled into the Promised Land after Joshua died, they began to imitate the faith of the people they had conquered,

instead of setting the spiritual standard of their new surroundings by obeying the God of Israel. Shortly before Joshua's death, the Jews had promised to follow God, but once Joshua was gone that covenant was forgotten within just one generation...about 40 years. Because God was being ignored He brought enemy attacks so the Jews would feel the need for His divine intervention. Tribes that had been conquered by the Jews under Joshua now came back to haunt them. God motivated the Jews to obedience through suffering at the hand of their enemies.

There had been many peaceful years under the first Jewish judge named Othniel. God had established judges rather than kings to lead Israel. These civil magistrates saved the Israelites from various oppressors through the grace of God. When the Jews disobeyed God, the Moabites, Amalekites and Ammonites formed an alliance and conquered Israel. The Moabite King Eglon set up court in Jericho, called the City of Palms in our text, the very city the Jews had conquered through God's miracle of bringing down the walls. How's that for rubbing defeat in the face of the Israelites!

Did you ever gain a victory and then lose it because of your own stupidity? Pastor Jay addressed this recently and the Judges passage raises the same question. The Israelites had conquered the Promised Land as a result of God's blessing and their willingness to obey Him in battle. But within a generation they had lost large portions of that land. The Jews were pretty foolish to have done such a thing, but how different are we? I've seen marriages destroyed within a few years of their creation through the unfaithfulness of husbands and wives as well. I've seen friendships lost because people refused to apply the biblical principles of conflict resolution. I taught a large Sunday Community group in a former church. At one point I discovered that two people sitting under my teaching weren't speaking to each other! I began to understand why they sat on opposite sides of the room each Sunday, a sad testimony to what can be lost when friends refuse to obey God in relationships.

The Moabites who occupied Israel at the time of Ehud were an abomination to the Jews. They were descendants of Lot through an incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was humiliating for the Israelites to live in subjection to Moab, but that's how God communicated their need to obey Him. For 18 years the Jews had to submit to the Moabites.

Their forbearers conquered the Promised Land by following Joshua and obeying God. Now these grandkids of the conquest had grown up and drifted away from their faith in the living God. They rebelliously chose to co-mingle with the ungodly inhabitants of the land their parents had conquered. “The sin in their lives that they failed to conquer eventually conquered them,” Warren Wiersbe says. Every year they were reminded of the consequence of their unfaithfulness as they brought King Eglon a tribute: money and farm products demanded by their Moabite masters.

2. Ehud decides to challenge Moab.

The Jews began to look for God after 18 years of oppression under King Eglon. In the book of Judges the Jews became willing to return to God after periods of oppression that lasted anywhere between 7 and 40 years. It’s hard to say why they decided to turn from their evil ways in such widely varying periods of time. How long does it take you to realize that doing things your way is not going to give you what you’re looking for? The more we ignore God, the longer we’ll suffer through resisting His will for our lives. The more we spend time with God, praying and reading the Bible, the faster we’ll admit our need and get back to fellowship with Him. There are people I care about a great deal who are disobeying God and are miserable. Are you willing to admit that about your own disobedience or are you still trying to kid yourself into thinking that living a life outside God in a given area will give you what you want?

In response to the cries of the Jews, God gave them Ehud. Being the Judge of Israel at this time in their history was no easy task. He was the puppet head of state in an enemy-occupied territory. The Bible doesn’t tell us why, but somehow Ehud had a relationship with God that was much more vibrant than that of his Jewish countrymen. It’s safe to assume that the Spirit of God moved within Ehud since that’s how many of the judges were empowered to do mighty works. Even Jephthah, the gang-leader in Judges 11, had an experience with the Holy Spirit that allowed him to use his street-fighting tactics to overcome the mighty army of the Ammonites.

Ehud, under the Spirit’s direction I’m sure, made a courageous decision. It was time to confront the enemy! The name Ehud means, “Where is the splendor?” That’s what Ehud seemed to be asking about his nation. “What happened to the splendor of Israel?” Ehud decided

that enough was enough! It was time for action. As a wise leader he discerned that the Jews were now willing to live godly, obedient lives rather than continuing to suffer under their enemies.

Is some of the splendor gone from your spiritual life? Do you repeat bad behavior time after time? Is there an unreconciled relationship that has gone on too long? We tend to ignore the painful realities of our lives as we go through the routines of what is perceived as normal. Here's a story from my teen years that may be instructive.

I accepted Christ enthusiastically at the start of middle school. By my early teens I had a leadership role in the Boys' Brigade program of my church, similar to what Valley offers for boys here on Tuesday nights. As a 15-year old I was sincerely trying to be a Christian example before my young charges. But despite my shining reputation at church, I had a relationship with a neighbor that was outside of God's will.

My neighborhood in Queens, NY, consisted of houses on 40 X 100 foot lots laid side by side with an occasional apartment house breaking the monotony. With house lots this small you couldn't help but know your neighbors. All you had to do to borrow a cup of sugar was to stick your hand out the kitchen window to the people next door! On one side of our house lived Mr. Green. He was a hard-living construction worker who swore constantly, but his greatest distinction is that he almost never wore a shirt...even when he was shoveling snow! For this feat Mr. Green was a neighborhood legend among us kids. My other neighbor, Mr. Novembre, worked with my father as a NYC fireman. While my dad tolerated the foul-mouthed Mr. Green, my dad and Mr. Novembre clearly didn't like each other. Mr. Novembre had a physical condition that required him to sleep in the afternoon, just about the time my friends and I began to play basketball in my backyard after school. Playing hoops was the favorite sport of my youth. My dad asphalted a large section of our yard and put up a basket on the back of our property. My yard was the best basketball court in the neighborhood. My friends and I played come rain or shine. The only problem was that Mr. Novembre specifically asked us not to play at our favorite time to do so, right after school. For a long time we played after school anyway, ignoring my neighbor's request.

My father never challenged us. Due to his own conflict with Novembre, I imagine, it seemed he really didn't mind our irritating this contentious neighbor. Once our basketball bounced over some tall bushes into Novembre's yard. We didn't dare retrieve it and the ball was

never seen again. My father scarcely said a word. He just bought me a new ball and we continued to play during our neighbor's naptime.

After a long time, though I'm sure it was shorter than 18 years, it dawned on me that I couldn't be a good leader at church if I wasn't living as a Christian at home. I played ball in the afternoons with a growing pit of guilt in my stomach. Finally, the weight of my misdeed was just too great. One night I telephoned Mr. Novembre to apologize for the grief I had caused him. My voice almost trembled, "Mr. Novembre, please forgive me for playing basketball when you asked us not to. I'm a Christian and I know I shouldn't have done that. We won't do it again." From my neighbor's surprised reaction I can imagine him staring at the phone in confusion and amazement. (Look at the phone.) I'm sure a heart-felt apology from me was the last thing he was expecting. Mr. Novembre accepted my admission with an air of bewilderment, and then he made a peace offering. He told me he really only needed quiet during a much briefer period than he had gruffly demanded over the back bushes many months before.

This experience taught me that the tension of postponing doing what's right is harder than actually doing what's right. The anxiety I felt prior to the apology was palpable and painful. Not playing ball, especially in the reduced time frame that was requested after my apology, was not very difficult. This experience has impacted me to this day. As an adult, I don't wait very long when I need to make amends for a mistake. I pray hard, take a deep breath, and approach the person with whom I have an issue. Is it fun to admit I'm wrong and seek peace? No. But it sure beats the anxiety of anticipating the confrontation. Matthew's gospel urges us not to allow unresolved differences to be ignored:

Matthew 5:23-24 ...if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Does some disobedience gnaw at you? Here are some

Strategies for doing what's right:

1) Don't just pray about doing what's right.

Of course it's fine to pray about a misdeed but it is also possible to use prayer as a sanctified excuse for not taking action. More than once people have told me "I'll pray about it," when they actually mean, "No way am I doing that!"

2) Do what is needed to correct the wrong.

Action is needed to correct wrongdoing. James 4:17 says if we know the good we should do but still don't do it, it's sin. We may have to speak to someone. We may have to repair or pay for some mistake we have made. Whatever it is, ask God for strength and move forward.

3) Remember that delayed obedience is disobedience.

I disobeyed God by delaying talking to my neighbor. The Israelites disobeyed God by delaying 18 years. Don't get caught in the same trap. One area of delayed obedience is baptism. Most of us recognize that God commands baptism and that biblical baptism is done by the immersion of believers. Yet people say, "I'm not ready to be baptized." Let me ask, "What will make you ready?" We have a baptism in the Farmington River on July 28. If you've been waiting to be baptized, don't wait any longer.

3. Ehud kills King Eglon.

God gave Ehud a rather risky strategy. If he succeeded, Israel would be free from tyranny; if he failed...he would be put to death in a painful public execution. Ehud obeyed as the God-appointed leader of his people.

It was Ehud's responsibility to bring the annual tribute from his people to King Eglon. This may have been the part of being a judge that he disliked the most. Ehud probably endured all kinds of insults as he brought livestock, gold and silver from the Jews through the streets of Jericho and into the court of the king. The conditions under which the Jews lived made it very difficult to gain any wealth. The Israelites were poor. The occupying Moabite forces made sure they stayed that way.

Before Ehud's trip to the palace, he carefully strapped a double-edged sword almost two feet long to his right thigh. He had hand-crafted this for the occasion. (Show sword) It was easy to keep the right side of his body covered with his robe, because it was assumed that hidden weapons would be on the left side to accommodate the typical right-handed warrior. As a left-handed warrior, Ehud passed security with no problem!

With the support of some other Jewish officials, Ehud presented the tribute to King Eglon. One of the reasons giving the tribute was so distasteful was that King Eglon was morbidly obese! Some estimate his weight to be as much as 375 pounds. One rendition of his name, Eglon, meant, "fatted calf." Eglon got fat off the tribute the Jews gave him every year! You might say giving tribute to Eglon was hard to stomach! After

this awkward ritual was over, Ehud and his colleagues began the trip home. But just outside the city, where Ehud knew his fellow Jews could continue in safety, Ehud sent his men homeward and returned to the court of the king alone. Ehud's heart must have been pounding as he entered the chambers of King Eglon for the second time. Ehud could have been put in prison if his presence simply displeased the king. However, Ehud was allowed to speak to Eglon. Ehud said that he had a secret message for King Eglon from God himself. The idea of a personal message from God appealed to Eglon's immense vanity. King Eglon told his attendants to leave the room so Ehud could speak in private. Apparently he didn't want to share God's message for him with anyone else. At the same time he was foolishly dismissing all those who served as his bodyguards.

Now Ehud and King Eglon were alone in his private chambers. It was a hot day and Eglon was relaxing in a room where an open lattice allowed breezes to come in off the roof. This was Ehud's moment! The only secret Ehud had to tell was that he was going to kill the King! Oddly enough, King Eglon stood up, visibly curious that the God of Israel would have something to say to him. As Eglon came closer in anticipation of Ehud's whispered words, Ehud pulled out his sword and thrust it with all his might into this huge man. Eglon wasn't exactly quick on his feet. He was a very large target, so the sword hit its mark. His body was so big that the sword literally disappeared as his adipose tissue enclosed around the handle. Ehud left the sword deep in Eglon's body, virtually invisible except for the point, which stuck out of his back.

4. Ehud escapes and rallies the Jews.

Acting quickly now, Ehud locked the doors to the room from the inside and fled the building across an upstairs porch. It wasn't long before the king's attendants began to wonder what was taking place in Eglon's chambers. However, since the doors were locked they were hesitant to disturb him. After waiting quite a while they became concerned. Then they found a key, opened the doors, and found the dead king lying on the floor.

In the mean time, Ehud was running for his life! No one stopped him as he moved quickly through the Jericho gates. Ehud ran to a remote area called Seirah. He climbed to the top of Mt. Ephraim and blew a trumpet to summon the Israelites. This area was remote enough so that Jewish troops could be gathered without raising the suspicions of

the Moabites. There was no reason to think that the Israelites would mount an attack, especially from this location.

Ehud spoke to his fellow Israelites with God-inspired power. "Follow me," he shouted, "for the Lord has given Moab into your hands." The troops went to a shallow section of the Jordan River. At this location Moabite reinforcements might be brought in or the occupying soldiers might try to escape back to their homes knowing their king was dead. Ten thousand Moabites were killed that day. Not one escaped. The Lord responded to the cries of Israel and used left-handed Ehud to liberate them.

That day Moab became subject to Israel. There was peace for eighty years, the longest period of peace in the Book of Judges.

The Jews' deliverance began with Ehud's commitment to God and the fact that his left-handedness allowed him to conceal his sword. It continued because he was willing to follow God's strategy and take great risks in order to gain victory. God's grace and mercy were shown to a repentant people and they won the day.

CONCLUSION

What can God use that some consider a disadvantage?

Being young: I Tim. 4:12 Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

If you're convinced that nothing special will happen in your life until you're older, you are like the Bible character named Timothy. Paul told Timothy to put his youth aside and to be an example. Young people who evidence their faith by the way they live quickly gain respect. You may be a recent graduate or just married. This doesn't matter to God. He will use you as you follow Him in obedience.

You may be concerned about...

Being old: Isaiah 46:4 Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

If you're convinced that nothing special will happen in your life because you are old, you should remember the words of the great Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Gray hair and old age don't matter to God. He can use you as you follow Him in obedience.

The point is, we all can probably identify a disadvantage that could hinder our effectiveness. It could be an actual disability like Jim Abbot's or simply something that separates us from the norm like being left-handed. Ehud shows how God can work through us, regardless. It starts with obeying God and seeking His courage, strategy and power to make you free to what he wants.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for this amazing story. Like Ehud, let us set aside whatever we think might stop us from doing your will, so that You can achieve your purposes through us.

Benediction: As you go, recognize what you might think of as a disadvantage, God can use to accomplish a great victory for his sake.