

The Surprising Hand of God

Judges 3:12-30

7 March 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How does God save?

Big Idea: Salvation comes from the surprising hand of God.

Introduction

It's the second half of the quarter finals of the 1986 Soccer World Cup.

The score's nil-all when Argentine Diego Maradona finds himself alone in the penalty box with the English goalie.

They both go for the ball – the goalie behind with his right hand and Maradona in front with his left.

Maradona gets to the ball first and manages to use his left hand to smash it into the goal.

The whole idea of soccer – or football – is kind of in the name: FOOT ball.

Unless you're the goalie, it's against the rules to use your hands.

You're only meant to use your feet.

Now these were the days before technology, so despite protests from the English side, both the referee and linesman confirmed the goal.

It was the goal that gave Argentina victory and allowed them to go on and win the World Cup against Germany.

Maradona himself named that incident the "Hand of God".

He said afterwards that it happened "a little with his head, and a little with the hand of God."

I'm not really sure that his head had anything directly to do with it and neither did God.

It was the hand of Diego Maradona and definitely not God's hand that got the ball into the goal.

Actually, we could say that it was the SINISTER hand of Maradona since our word 'sinister' comes from a Latin word meaning "on the left side."

Scoring this surprising goal with his left hand is one of the most infamous moments in Soccer history.

It wasn't until nineteen years later that he publicly confessed that the goal was indeed scored with his hand.

And then he retracted it a few days later.

Judges 3 is an infamous moment in Israel's history when we see the hand of God at work. Although it looks very much like the hand of Ehud.

More specifically, it's the surprising LEFT hand of Ehud that takes down the Moabite king.

Somewhat surprisingly, God uses the sinister hand of Ehud to give Israel's oppressors into their hands.

Outline

The book of Judges describes what happened after Joshua died and the Israelites began to settling into the land that Yahweh promised to their ancestor Abraham.

In the first introduction, we saw the military disaster that resulted when the next generation put their methods above God's promises.

And last week, in the second introduction, we saw the spiritual disaster that came when they chose to worship the Baals and Astartes – the idols of the Canaanite people – rather than the one true and living God.

God's vow to leave other people in the land to test his people sets up the rest of the book.

Judges is about two key truths: faithless people and a faithful God.

Because of God, all is not lost.

Throughout the time of the Judges, God remains committed to his side of their covenant agreement.

He repeatedly sends deliverers – judges – to rescue the Israelites from the raiders.

Last week, we looked quickly at the first judge, Othniel, in verses seven to eleven of chapter three.

He's the model judge, squeaky clean and righteous, the model pattern of judging rightly.

Unfortunately, all of the other judges move further and further away from him as with each judge things spiral more and more out of control.

This week, we're well and truly into the body of the book.

Ehud is judge number two and he's certainly no Othniel.

He's not the valiant leader that you might expect.

God surprisingly uses a lone assassin who plays on the fringes of morality to be his hand.

Today, we're going to see that **salvation comes from the surprising hand of God.**

The outline for this passage is a little bit messier than usual.

There are two main movements with three parts in the second:

- God's Hand in Judgment (12-14)
- God's Hand in Deliverance (15-29)
 - A Surprising Deliverer (15-18)
 - A Surprising Delivery (19-26a)
 - A Surprising Domination (26b-29)

God's Hand in Judgment (12-15)

Firstly, we see God's hand in judgement.

Verse eleven finishes with the Israelites experiencing forty years of peace thanks to Othniel.

But then he dies.

The story rolls in verse twelve with the Israelites back to their old shenanigans.

They did evil in God's sight.

As we saw last week, that's code for them turning to worship other gods.

That's an act of treason, abandoning the God who'd delivered them.

The word we use to describe renouncing your religion is "apostasy" and so we're back to the first step in our judges cycle, which is "A" for apostasy.

God's response is to do exactly what he'd warned them that he'd do.

God doesn't send down rain of fire or open up the ground to swallow them.

The consequence of their apostasy is that they got put into bondage.

That's the next step in this cycle – "B" for bondage.

Surprisingly, God uses people who don't worship him as his hands to bring this about.

God hands Israel over to people who worship other gods.

In this case, God uses Eglon, king of Moab (Israel's next-door neighbour), along with his mates the Ammonites and Amalekites, to attack Israel.

The Moabites were the descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot, and they worshipped the god Chemosh.

They come from outside of Israel and although they're related to the Israelites, they worship a different god.

You might know the City of Palms by its other name, Jericho, which was in the area that was meant to be given to the tribe of Benjamin.

It was the first city in the Land to be conquered – a symbol of what Israel could do with Yahweh on their side.

Jericho was never meant to be rebuilt,¹ yet here it is, still standing and God's put control of it into the hands of a foreign king.

It's a sign that all the good work of Joshua 6 has been undone because God's no longer with them due to their apostasy.

The Moabites didn't just keep Jericho for a few weeks or months.

We're told in verse fourteen that the Israelites were subjected to Moab for eighteen years.

That's ten years more than they were oppressed by Cushan-Rishathaim.

The length of God's judgment is increasing.

God's hand in judgment was to hand the Israelites over to their enemies.

Their apostasy caused God to put them into bondage at the hands of the Moabites.

God's Hand in Deliverance (v15-29)

Next, we see God's hand in deliverance.

That's the second big point in this section.

The Israelites cried out to the Lord, verse fifteen.

We don't know whether they cried out for all of those eighteen years or whether it took them eighteen years to cry out to him.

Either way, it was a pretty average time for God's people and it caused them to cry out to God for help.

The third step in the cycle is 'C' for cry out.

However, most of this account is about the fourth step in the judges cycle.

"D" is for deliverer.

The Israelites cry out to God and he sends a deliverer.

That seems to be the main role of the judges.

They were sent to save the Israelites from the raiders that God had sent.

[A surprising deliverer \(15-18\)](#)

The second judge, the second deliverer that God sends, is a bit of a surprising choice.

His name's Ehud, which means "Where is the divine glory?"

His name suggests that what he's about to do has a deeper meaning than just the events that take place.

God's about to use this man for his glory.

He's the surprising hand of God.

We're told that there are two significant features of Ehud.

Firstly, he's from the tribe of Benjamin.

Judah was meant to be the leading tribe.

They were the first ones to go up to fight at the beginning of chapter one and Othniel, the first model judge, was Judah.

So, it's a bit of a surprise that this next judge comes from Benjamin.

Benjamin was one of the smallest and most insignificant tribes – not where you'd expect a leader to come from.

But being a Benjamite, he must be a good bloke, mustn't he!

Actually, their track record isn't so great.

The only time the Benjamites have been mentioned in the book so far is when they didn't drive out the Jebusites in chapter one.

The second thing we learn about Ehud is also surprising.

He's a lefty.

It don't mean that he was a progressive political leader, but someone who's left-handed.

Benjamin means "son of the right hand."

The guy from the tribe named "son of my right hand" turns out to be left-handed.

You might be thinking "What's the big deal? Why does that matter?"

We don't know how many people were left-handed in Israel at the time, but the events of Judges three suggest that it wasn't very common in the Ancient Near East.

What we do know is that even today, only about 10% of Australians are left-handed.

There's still research being done, but there was an interesting journal article published just this year by researchers from UQ which seems to indicate that environment might play a bigger role in handedness than genetics.²

Actually, the Hebrew literally means that he's "a man bound, restricted, as to his right hand."

That could mean that he has some kind physical deformity stopping him using his right hand, or it could mean that he was ambidextrous, or it could simply mean that he's left handed.

Whichever way, being a lefty didn't stop you from being deadly.

We'll meet some more left-handed Benjamites in chapter twenty who seem to be the elite troops, deadly assassins, like the SAS and with all the bad culture that goes with it:

Judges 20:16 NIV11 ¹⁶ Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred select troops who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.

Ehud was given the job of taking a tribute – a grain offering – to King Eglon.

That's a really nice way of saying that the Israelites had to pay protection money to Eglon.

Like the bully in the playground who demands the weaker kid hands over his tuckshop money or otherwise he'll get beaten up.

The very same thing has happened on a national scale for thousands of years.

The Israelites were under Moab's thumb and so they had to pony or Elgon's thugs would make sure they'd regret it.

We've got absolutely no idea why Ehud was chosen for the job since we're not given any specific reason, but we do know that he went prepared.

Ehud makes a small, straight, two-edged sword that was at most 45 centimetres long.

Making a straight blade at this point in history was cutting-edge technology since most blades were long and curved.

The bloke's got skillz.

He straps the blade to his thigh, under his clothing.

But he does something surprising by putting it on his right thigh.

In one sense, it's not all that surprising since he was left handed and that's where he'd need it to be to grab it easily.

And yet it's surprising because most people are right handed and so they would put a weapon on their left thigh.

It was this little twist that'll help him get past Eglon's guards unnoticed.

Even still he's taking a big risk that his little weapon won't be discovered when he enters the palace.

He's off to see the king and if they find the dagger, he's not going to be very welcome.

So, if you're reading this for the first time, it really leaves you wondering what's going to happen next.

Ehud goes to visit Eglon.

We're told, in verse seventeen, that King Eglon is a very fat man.

You've probably got this picture in your mind of someone who's wider than they are tall.

People often make the point that he's probably got fat off the Israelites' tribute.

He's meant to be this absurd character that you're supposed to laugh at because he's so ridiculous.

The thing is, the Greek translation of the Old Testament translates the word for 'fat' as 'handsome'.

In the Old Testament, it can mean 'healthy and strong', 'prosperous and attractive'.

It's the word used to describe Daniel of his mates when they're in Babylon on the Daniel diet of vegetables.

I think it's more likely that Eglon was a bloke who's experiencing the good life and is in absolutely top physical condition.

He's buff. He's got guns and a six-pack.

The word 'fat' also most often refers to the choice bits of the offering dedicated to the Lord.

It's the word used for the fat cows and the fat grain in Pharaoh's dream that represent the seven bumper years before the seven years of famine.

Cattle look fat when they're well nourished.

Interestingly, Eglon's name means 'calf'.

I think we're meant to see him as the fattened calf who's ready for slaughter.

God's the one who gave Israel into Eglon's hands and now he's going to give Eglon into Ehud's hand.

Ehud hands over the tribute and then walks away.

After all this build up, it's almost anti-climactic.

There's no search, the metal detector's don't go off.

He's in the same room as the king and even still, he doesn't even try to take the king down.

Where's the action? Where's the deliverance?

Well, Ehud the surprising deliverer sets the scene for...

A Surprising Delivery (19-26a)

... a surprising deliverance in verses 19-26a.

When Ehud gets to Gilgal, he does a 180.

Gilgal's not far from Jericho and we've already seen that it was an important religious place.

Why did he turn around there?

Perhaps he was provoked by the stone images, the idols that should've been destroyed.

What's clear is that he was working alone.

It's a bit surprising to us that Ehud goes back, but King Eglon doesn't seem surprised at all.

In fact, he seems to be eager to welcome Ehud back when he says quite mysteriously, "Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you."

Knowing that Ehud's just returned from Gilgal, he probably thinks that he's learned something new while he was there.

Perhaps the gods have provided him with a juicy bit of information, a direction that might bring him blessing and success.

The king obviously feels safe and comfortable in the upper room of his palace.

Secure enough to invite this Israelite into his inner sanctum and then dismisses all his body guards.

Ehud's low risk since he's been there earlier in the day.

This message is a secret, after all, and secrets aren't for wide consumption, so they need to be alone.

Ehud approaches the king, saying, "I have a message from God for you."

And he's right on point... he's got a short, sharp message from God just for Eglon.

The word Ehud uses here is quite rubbery.

In first year Hebrew, you learn that it means "word, thing, matter."

Eglon thinks he's about to hear a word while Ehud has a thing in mind.

Eglon thinks it's inconceivable that this could be anything but good, however I don't think it means what Eglon thinks it means.

As Eglon steps forward, Ehud grabs the sword from his right thigh and rams it into his victim.

The blade goes in so far that it disappears up inside of him.

If this was made into a movie, it would get an MA rating for gratuitous violence.

It's a pretty graphic description, verse 22: "Even the handle sank in after the blade[.]"

Ehud has single-handedly dethroned the Moabite king.

You've got to think that this was written by a bloke because the detail's dropped in that Eglon's bowels were discharged.

Some of you are definitely cringing at this point, while others of you are making a mental note to add this to your list of favourite Bible passages.

If this makes you feel uncomfortable, sorry, not sorry.

We should always be nervous about going beyond what Scripture says, but sometimes we're actually nervous about going as far as Scripture does.

The Bible's often direct and graphic in ways that make us blush, but this detail isn't just there to gross you out, it helps to make sense of what happens next.

Ehud doesn't run out of the room crying like a banshee, carrying a bloodied sword.

Instead, he leaves his weapon behind in the body and quietly exits the scene.

He makes sure to carefully close and lock the doors behind him on his way out before ducking out a side door and into the night.

Eglon's goons are a bit late to the party and so they miss Ehud leaving.

When they come along, they find the boss' door's locked.

They knew pretty well what's going on.

The pong in the air makes them think that the doors are closed for privacy and they assume that he's literally sitting there "covering his legs".

That's a Hebrew idiom that means that they think he's "on the can" or he's "in the bathroom," if you're that way inclined.

Verse 24:

Judges 3:24 NIV11 ²⁴ After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the palace."

I know you don't really want me to talk about this because waiting for someone on the toilet is always a bit awkward, isn't it?

His henchmen wait outside, wondering if their boss needs a bit more fibre in his diet.

They're too embarrassed to go in.

And as time drags on, it only gets more awkward.

Eventually, some brave soul decides that this's gone on long enough.

It's time to open the door, even if it's embarrassing.

Archaeologists have found a wooden lock that allowed a locked door to be opened with a key in some ruins in Nineveh.

A no-brainer today, but revolutionary at that time in history.

When they open the door and surprise!

There's the king, lying dead on the floor.

He's as dead as a log.

The real embarrassment is that they've been caught unawares and their king is dead.

Meanwhile, Ehud's long gone, ready to fight another day.

[A Surprising Domination \(26b-29\)](#)

At this point, the job's really only half done.

Eglon's been dealt with and Moab's a nation without a leader.

But Israel are hardly dominating.

There's still more to be done before Israel can relax.

We're told in verse 26 that Ehud bolted for the hills.

Is he just running away?

This time, he doesn't stop at the carved images and he escapes from behind enemies lines and doesn't stop until he gets to Seirah.

No one knows exactly where this town is on a map, but people's best guess is that it's somewhere in the hills.

He's chosen to flee to one of the highest points in the middle of Israel.

Ehud certainly isn't running away.

Instead, he starts blowing his own trumpet which is the first public sign that he's the new leader of Israel.

It's also a sign that he's not working solo anymore because it's a rally call for all of Israel to join him in finishing off the job that he'd started.

For eighteen years, they'd suffered under the hands of Moab.

This was all the work of the Lord.

But now, the Lord was giving their enemies into their hands.

They can move forward because they've seen what Yahweh has done.

Surprisingly, the people of Israel join him quickly and follow him down to the Jordan river.

It seems like they've learned from God's discipline and so they do what they weren't interested in doing in the introductions.

They block the path of the retreating Moabites at the place where the river can be crossed.

No one was allowed to cross the river.

They struck down ten thousand Moabites, although it may have been less since the Hebrew says that it was "ten contingents."

All of them were strong men though.

Moab became submissive to Israel on that day.

More literally, "Moab was subdued that day under the HAND of Israel."

Although, it's really the hand of God, isn't it?

When God was against them because they turned to other gods, then they were under Moab's hand.

Apostasy leads to bondage.

But when God turns the tables and sends a deliverer, he gives Moab into Ehud's hand and then Israel's.

And the land had peace for eighty years.

That's a long period of peace and rest for God's people – two full generations.

And so the cycle finishes at this point with the fifth and final step: "E" for ease.

Conclusion

This situation makes a good story, although of course, it's more than "just" a story since it actually happened.

It's got surprise, humour and irony.

But what exactly should we do with it?

This account gives us some insight into the hand of God.

The gracious and surprising hand of God.

Ehud's not a valiant military leader working in the open like Othniel.

In Judges 3, we see that he used this shady, left-handed assassin to deliver his people.

Ehud was a virtual unknown.

He flew under the radar and yet he's the one that God used to get the job done.

God's got a bit of a habit of working in ways that we don't expect.

Especially when it comes to delivering his people.

God saves using surprising delivers, just like he did with Moses the bloke who was scared of public speaking.

The hand of God often works in ways that we don't expect.

This passage points us Jesus, the great and unlikely deliverer that God would need to send to save his people once and for all.

Ehud brought peace for 80 years, but Jesus died to save people for eternity.

Yet, he was born into a humble stable.

When Jesus was growing up, it seems like no one really paid all that much attention to him.

He was just Joe the Carpenter's kid.

When he began his public ministry, the people from his hometown certainly didn't think much of him.

The religious leaders of Israel didn't recognise him as the Saviour.

Isaiah describes him like this:

Isaiah 53:2b NIV11 He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Like Ehud, Jesus achieved his victory alone.

He didn't get the nation coming with him.

Even his own disciples fell asleep instead of praying and then denied knowing him.

God's people sent him to the cross: the Israelite people sneered at him, the soldiers mocked him and one of the criminal sentenced to die with him hurled insults.

The cross didn't look like a glorious victory.

Jesus wasn't a Hollywood saviour who walks onto the scene with guns flexing and perfect hair.

Quite the opposite.

The son of God was killed in what looked like the most futile act – a god not even able to save himself.

Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul said that it looks foolish:

1 Corinthians 1:23–24 NIV11 ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The cross was anything but foolish.

It was the only way that a holy God could save sinful people and remain just.

What was the point of God dying on the cross?

The perfect son of God was dying as a substitute for his people.

The Lamb of God, the perfect calf, stepped in to take the punishment that sinful people deserve upon himself.

Jesus died so that God's wrath at sin could be satisfied.

And then hand of God raised him from the grave.

God raised Jesus back to life.

And he offers new life to anyone and everyone who puts their trust in him.

Salvation comes from the surprising hand of God.

It also points us beyond Jesus because God even uses faithless people whom he's given faith.

When Jesus was choosing a small group of men to be his closest friends and learners, he didn't choose kings.

He chose fishermen.

He chose Peter, a man who was rash and suffered from foot-in-mouth disease, to be his right-hand man.

John's gospel tells us that Nathanael – one of the disciples – met Jesus, he said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"³

There is only one Saviour – Jesus – but when it comes to taking the gospel to the world, he didn't leave the gospel message in the hands of extraordinary people.

He chose ordinary men.

God doesn't generally choose impressive people, he chooses to use people like you and me.

Paul writes to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 1:26 NIV11 ²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

What an encouragement that God uses ordinary people like you and I.

I don't know about you, but that surprises me.

Not many of us were considered wise or noble.

Some of us, perhaps, but most of us are just ordinary people who've been called to take out an extraordinary message.

God does this to show the magnificence of Christ.

He uses surprisingly ordinary people who point to an extraordinary Saviour.

We can't boast in ourselves, but we can boast in God's seemingly foolish Saviour.

Because his death, far from being foolish, is a great salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:28–29 NIV11 ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.

Praise God for his surprising salvation!

It doesn't come the way we might expect it.

God sends a servant king to be his saviour, dying on the cross so that we can be forgiven.

Because salvation comes from the surprising hand of God.

¹ Josh 6:26

² Cuellar-Partida, G., Tung, J.Y., Eriksson, N. et al. Genome-wide association study identifies 48 common genetic variants associated with handedness. *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 59–70 (2021).

³ John 1:46

The Surprising Hand of God

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Big Question: How does God save?

Big Idea: Salvation comes from the surprising hand of God.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you like and dislike about this part of Scripture?
2. What are some of the differences between Ehud and Othniel?
3. Why is it significant that Ehud was a left-handed Benjamite?
4. Do you think that Ehud is meant to be an example to be imitated?
5. What is King Eglon's role in the plans and purposes of God?
6. Why were the Israelites victorious under Ehud?
7. How is Jesus like Ehud? How's he NOT like Ehud?
8. In what way is the cross surprising?