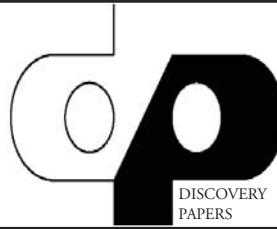


THE SWORD OF GOD

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 3:12-30
4th Message
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How do you feel about being sliced open? I suppose it depends on who's doing the slicing. If a thief were to slice you open with a knife in order to do you harm, you would not welcome such a prospect. If, on the other hand, a surgeon were to slice you open to remove a malignant tumor, you'd welcome his scalpel.

In Judges 3:12-20, God raises up a leader, Ehud, who fashions a sword to accomplish his purposes. Today, God still employs a sword, albeit an entirely different kind of sword. He slices open human hearts and lays them bare before his eyes. So, how do you feel about having your heart sliced open? If it's God who's doing the slicing, perhaps it's something we should welcome. Seen in light of the entire biblical story, the story of Ehud may just open our hearts to God.

The narrator, it seems, is having a little fun with the story of Ehud in order to illustrate God's power over those who oppose both him and his people. The pagan king, Eglon, comes off as a comical figure—a sort of buffoon. When you read the story of Ehud, though, you might not know whether to be offended, to laugh out loud, or to get sick. Many would consider the visuals it creates more suitable for a gross-out video game than for holy writ. Parental guidance is advised.

Stunning reversal

Judges 3:12-14:

¹²Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. ¹³Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. ¹⁴The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.

The Israelites' conquest of the Promised Land began with the stunning and miraculous sacking of Jericho, also known as the City of Palms, under the leadership of Joshua (Deuteronomy 34:3, Judges 1:16). When Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, the walls came a-tumblin' down, as the

old children's song goes. The Lord had commissioned and empowered his people to take possession of the land. After the days of Othniel, though, the Israelites again did evil in the eyes of the Lord, worshiping other gods. Therefore, in a stunning reversal, the Lord empowers not a leader of Israel but Eglon of Moab, a pagan king, who along with his allies attacks Israel and takes possession of Jericho. The signal victory of the conquest comes undone. This is not the way it's supposed to be.

Secret agent man

Judges 3:15:

¹⁵Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab.

The Israelites, suffering for eighteen years under the rule of Eglon, cry out to the Lord for deliverance, and the Lord responds, but in a curious way. He raises up not a knight in shining armor, as he did when he raised up Othniel in the previous sequence, but Ehud, a left-handed man. In the scriptures, the right hand often symbolizes strength and power. The Lord himself is pictured as rescuing his people with his strong right hand. It is also a matter of interest that Ehud hails from the tribe of Benjamin, the name of which means "Son of the Right Hand." We therefore would expect the Lord, if he were to survey the tribe of Benjamin for a deliverer, to turn up a right-handed man. How, pray tell, will this left-handed man from the Son of the Right Hand save the Israelites? The story of wrong-handed Ehud is not nearly as straightforward as that of the squeaky-clean Othniel. If Othniel fits the role of the knight in shining armor, Ehud comes off more like a devious secret agent.

The fatted calf

Judges 3:16-17:

¹⁶Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped

to his right thigh under his clothing. ¹⁷He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man.

The narrator writes in tantalizing detail. Ehud, the left-handed man, straps a short, double-edged sword to his right thigh and conceals it under his clothing. And Eglon? His name means “Calf.” He’s also obese. A fatted calf perhaps, ready for slaughter? Ehud and his associates present a tribute to their overlord. Will Ehud strike? No. Too many people around. The chances for success are slim, the chances for escape even slimmer.

A message from God

Judges 3:18-20a:

¹⁸After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it. ¹⁹At the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” The king said, “Quiet!” And all his attendants left him. ^{20a}Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, “I have a message from God for you.”

Ehud departs, sends his associates on their way, and then returns. “For what reason?” Eglon must wonder. The return of Ehud intrigues the king. “What else will he give me? Why didn’t he give it to me earlier? Oh, a secret message? This could be good.” Leaders often crave intelligence, especially the secret intel hidden from others. It helps them make decisions. It can also feed their egos. Ehud baits the hook, and Eglon bites. The king clears the room. Ehud’s sword escapes the notice of Eglon’s bumbling bodyguards. Did they fail to search him? Was their search only cursory? Did they not stop to think that some people in this world are left-handed and that a left-handed man might strap a sword to his right thigh instead of his left? Now Ehud, the left-handed secret agent, is alone with Eglon, the fatted calf. And now, as Ehud approaches Eglon, it’s not just a secret message but also a “message from God.”

The next part of the narrative is not for the faint of heart.

Ehud delivers the message

Judges 3:20b-22:

^{20b}As the king rose from his seat, ²¹Ehud

reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly. ²²Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it.

A secret message from God? Eglon can’t resist. Eglon rises, exposing his belly.

If the Book of Judges were a movie, this part would be in slow motion. Ehud reaches for the sword with (what else?) his left hand and draws it from (where else?) his right thigh. Remember, the sword is double-edged, perfectly forged for a single, quick thrust. Ehud strikes, and Eglon’s fat engulfs the sword. Ehud doesn’t remove the weapon after burying it in Eglon’s belly. How could he? Eglon’s belly has swallowed it whole, handle and all. Literally, when Ehud struck, Eglon’s “refuse came out.” That secret message that Ehud had for Eglon, the message from God? As James Bond might put it, Eglon got the point.

As cool as they come

Judges 3:23-26:

²³Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them. ²⁴After 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 house.” ²⁵They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead. ²⁶While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.

Now, for Ehud’s escape. The secret agent, of course, thinks of everything. He’s as cool as they come. Ehud simply goes out to the porch (he’s not said to be rushing), shuts the doors and locks them (no sense of urgency is conveyed), and he leaves (he’s not said to be fleeing).

Eglon’s body must have hit the ground with an enormous thud that rattled the summer palace; even so, his fall escapes the notice of his dimwitted servants. They wonder what’s taking him so long. They notice that the doors are locked, but they’re afraid to barge in on the king. They speculate that he’s relieving himself. No, you don’t want to interrupt the king when he’s, uh, doing some business. So they wait. Finally, they unlock the doors to

behold their lord reduced to a heap of fat and excrement. By the time they come upon the king's body, his assassin is long gone, having fled to safety, past even the idols, which formed a boundary marker. The fatted calf has been slaughtered.

Ehud rallies Israel

Judges 3:27-30:

27When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them.

²⁸“Follow me,” he ordered, “for the LORD has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands.” So they followed him down and, taking possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab, they allowed no one to cross over. ²⁹At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not a man escaped. ³⁰That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.

Ehud is not content simply with the death of Moab's leader; he also craves the defeat of all Moab. So the secret agent transforms himself into an inspiring general. James Bond becomes Stonewall Jackson. Ehud says the death of the wicked king is the sign the Israelites, pushed to the hills by their oppressors, have been waiting for. So he rallies the troops and leads them into battle with words reminiscent of the days of Joshua, when the conquest began (Joshua 1:1-9). Although the narrator noted that the Lord had raised up Ehud, the Lord receives no further mention in the narrative until Ehud's rallying cry: “follow me, for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy into your hands.” In the story of Ehud, in contrast to the story of Othniel, the Lord is in the background. His name is noted only at the beginning and the end of the story, first in giving Moab power over the Israelites and finally in giving Moab into the hands of the Israelites.

Following General Ehud, the Israelites take possession of the fords of the Jordan River in order to cut off the Moabites' path of retreat. The portly Eglon may have been a comical figure, but the ten thousand Moabites whom the Israelites engaged present a stiffer challenge: they are “all vigorous and strong.” Nevertheless, all of them fall. The one Israelite who had killed the king of Moab escaped with ease, but not one of ten thousand Moabites escape. Indeed, the Lord gives Moab into the hands of Israel. The

Israelites, who had been subject to the Moabites, make the Moabites subject to them.

Greater than Ehud

The Israelites gave ground to their enemies, losing Jericho, the City of Palms, the first city they had conquered in the Promised Land. When God created the world, he conquered chaos and placed the first humans in a garden. Like the Israelites who followed them, however, the first humans gave ground to their enemy—in that case, Satan—and lost the garden, and all creation along with it. Ever since, God has been in the process of regaining creation for humans. He chose the nation of Israel to play the central role in his plan to rescue creation, and the men and women who populate it, from the clutches of evil. Along the way, he used the likes of Ehud and his double-edged sword.

Ehud's victory, impressive though it was, was incomplete and short-lived. He won back some ground, but not the whole world, and when he died, “the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord” (Judges 4:1). Israel—and the world—needed something greater than Ehud or any of the judges. It needed something—yea, someone—even greater than David, her greatest king. Indeed, the scriptures held out hope for someone greater. The people commonly called him the Messiah, but the prophet Isaiah called him the Servant of the Lord.

In the book of Isaiah, the Servant, centuries before his birth, spoke of his relationship with God: “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, / in the shadow of his hand he hid me” (Isaiah 49:2). He would be hidden, not against the thigh of a leader of Israel, but in the shadow of God's hand. The Servant would defeat evil not with a weapon, like Ehud, but with his word. It makes sense, doesn't it? When God spoke, he created the heavens and the earth. When his Servant speaks, he rescues the heavens and the earth. What does the Servant say? Most succinctly, he says this: “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Jesus, the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, then commissioned his followers to spread the message that the healing, loving rule of God was being established in and through his work. The gospel is the not-so-secret message of God.

Listening to the gospel

That message, the gospel message: How does it work? The writer of Hebrews answers: “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and

marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). The word of God in this verse is not the scriptures in general or any particular scripture but the gospel message, which is, of course, the central message of the scriptures. The message of the gospel, in contrast to Ehud’s sword, lives and acts. Unlike Ehud’s sword, it doesn’t penetrate human skin. No, it’s much sharper than that: it slices through the inner workings of human hearts. Our response to the gospel exposes whether we want God or not.

This sounds like a frightening process, being sliced open and having one’s heart exposed. Yet it is a necessary one. How many of us truly know our own hearts? If the gospel exposes our hearts as resistant to God, at least we’re aware of reality. Now we know that the former pretense—that our hearts were in good shape—was, in fact, a hoax we played on ourselves. As we open our hearts to the gospel, we receive God’s love and forgiveness, which softens our hearts toward him.

We need to hear the gospel not once but thousands of times, and from different voices and places, lest we become complacent and jaded. The scriptures reveal the gospel through different stories, psalms, and letters—even through obscure passages from the Old Testament, such as Judges 3:12-30, where you never thought you’d find the gospel. We also encounter hints of the gospel in literature, art, films, and music, for example. One wing in the auditorium of our church features the work of artists in our congregation, and the other wing features photographs that represent our efforts to bring the gospel to the world. Our artists and photographers help us listen to or, in this case, behold the gospel.

I slogged through Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s three major works, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, because I thought that I might find the gospel in them. Then, I stumbled across a jewel of a book called *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, which presents selected passages from his novels that particularly illustrate the gospel.

One such passage is “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor,” which is told by one of Dostoyevsky’s characters, Ivan Karamazov, in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In Ivan’s story, an old priest is the inquisitor, and the prisoner is Jesus. The priest, angry with Jesus for being the wrong kind of Savior, blisters him with accusations, but the prisoner remains strangely silent:

“When the Inquisitor ceased speaking, he waited some time for his Prisoner to answer him; His silence weighed down upon him. He saw that

the Prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face and evidently not wishing to reply. The old man longed for Him to say something, however bitter and terrible. But He suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless, aged lips. That was all his answer. The old man shuddered. His lips moved. He went to the door, opened it, and said to Him: ‘Go, and come no more—come not at all, never, never!’ And he let Him out into the dark alleys of the town. The Prisoner went away.”

“And the old man?”

“The kiss glows in his heart, but the old man adheres to his idea.”¹

In the story, Jesus’ response to the priest functions like a sword. His kiss slices open the priest’s heart and even, we gather, softens it a bit. As the gospel comes to us continuously and variously, in stories such as Dostoyevsky’s, it slices open and softens our hearts. Listen to it, and it will change you.

If hearing the gospel exposes and softens our hearts, the next step is to share the gospel with others.

Sharing the gospel

Paul commands us to take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17). The word of God, in this verse as in Hebrews 4:12, is the gospel message. As God changes us with the gospel, he puts the sword in our hands. Like Ehud, we advance God’s purposes with a sword—albeit an entirely different kind of sword. The gospel is the not-so-secret message of God.

In contrast to Ehud, who concealed his sword against his thigh, we hide the word, and even treasure it, in our hearts (Psalm 119:11). After hearing all of what was said about her child, by both humans and angels, and after observing him as a boy, Mary, the mother of Jesus, “treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). Like Mary, we treasure the gospel in our hearts so that we might deliver “a message from God” when given the opportunity. In that the word is the sword of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit leads us to share the gospel, in the right times and in the right ways, and to make the message effective, slicing open hearts and softening hearts.

To share the gospel, what we need, perhaps, more than anything else, is boldness. Let’s face it, we’re chicken.

After urging the Ephesians to take up the sword of the Spirit, Paul asked them, “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given to me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should” (Ephesians 6:19-20). Perhaps, then, we don’t need to muster boldness; perhaps we need to pray for boldness, both for ourselves and for others. Of course, it takes a certain boldness to pray for boldness—to be willing to expose yourself to others by sharing the gospel.

Sometimes, I feel like the world’s worst evangelist. Recently, though, I began praying for an opportunity to share the gospel with a particular person and, true to my prayers, the opportunity presented itself. I’m not sure how I recognized the opportunity; I just knew that if I waited any longer, the opportunity would pass. Ehud knew that the time had come to draw the sword, and I knew that the time had come to open my mouth. I shared the gospel as simply and clearly as I knew how, and I also shared what it meant to me personally. I asked the listener if he was interested. He said no. And that was pretty much that. The gospel did its work, though: it exposed his heart. And who knows, perhaps like the priest who rejected Jesus in Dostoyevsky’s story, the kiss glows in his heart.

Whether or not someone turns to Christ when we share the gospel, we can still be confident that the larger war is being won. One small sword, the sword of Ehud, felled a wicked ruler. Martin Luther writes of Satan, the wickedest ruler of all:

The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.”²

One little word, the message of the gospel, the sword of the Spirit, fells the evil one. Those of us who believe and share the gospel are, in the words of Paul, “more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37). When you share the gospel, you are declaring that the whole world belongs to Jesus, its true Lord.

Let the surgeon operate

Ehud was not content with one victory, nor should we be. God is winning back all the ground that was lost in the fall of humanity. He who created the universe by his word

will win it back by his word. In fact, he will re-create it in such a way that it, and we who populate it, will never be lost again. Satan, death, and those whose names are not written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire. On that day, Paul says, “God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares” (Romans 2:16).

As we move toward that day, the book of Revelation, echoing Isaiah, gives us this image of Jesus: “In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword” (Revelation 1:16). Jesus, the Lord of the world, will win the war for the world by the power of the gospel, which testifies to his death, resurrection, ascension, and lordship. Indeed, the gospel is a sharp, double-edged sword: the sword of God.

Hear the gospel, the story and announcement of God’s love for the world, his love for you. Listen to it, and it will open your heart. Let the surgeon operate. Let God slice you open. If you wait for the post-mortem, it may be too late. After listening to the gospel, pray for boldness to share what you’ve heard with someone else. Think of one individual you would like to share the gospel; then pray for boldness to share the gospel with him or her. Take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, which penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

NOTES

¹The Hutterian Brethren, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky* (Rifton, New York: Plough Publishing House, 1988), 37.

²Martin Luther, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* (1529).