The cycle of despair

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: 16 March 2014

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0:00] Well, let's turn, friends, in our Bibles to the book of Judges, chapter 3, and you'll find this on page 202, 202, in our hardback Bibles.

Judges, chapter 3. Last week, we reached chapter 3, verse 6, and I want to read the rest of this chapter this week. So, Judges 3, verses 7 to 31, and you'll see that this passage covers the period of Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, three of the 12 judges that are mentioned in the book of Judges. So, Judges, chapter 3, verse 7. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.
Therefore, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cush and Rishatham, king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cush and Rishatham eight years.
But when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel who saved them, Othniel, the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.
[1:20] The spirit of the Lord was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord gave Cush and Rishatham, king of Mesopotamia, into his hand, and his hand prevailed over Cush and Rishatham.

So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel, the son of Kenaz, died. 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, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites and went and defeated Israel.
And they took possession of the city of Palms. Now that is Jericho, another name for Jericho. So they crossed the water and got a foothold in Israel. And the people of Israel served Eglon, the king of Moab, eighteen years.
Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gerah, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.
[2:27] The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon, the king of Moab. And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length, and he bounded on his right thigh under his clothes.

And he presented the tribute to Eglon, king of Moab. Now, Eglon was a very fat man. And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute.
But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, I have a secret message for you, O king. And the king commanded, Silence!
And all his attendants went out from his presence. And 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.
And he, the king, arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly.
[3:41] And the dung came out. Then Ehud went out into the porch and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them. When he had gone, the servants came.

And when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, Surely the king is 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 and opened them, and there lay their lord, dead on the floor. Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Sarah.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. And the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. And he said to them, Follow after me, for the Lord has given your enemies, the Moabites, into your hand.
So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and did not allow anyone to pass over. And they killed at that time about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men, not a man escaped.
[4:54] So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel, and the land had rest for eighty years. After him was Shamgar, the son of Anath, who killed six hundred of the Philistines with an ox goad.

And he also saved Israel. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and we thank God for it. Amen. Over the last couple of weeks, we have been, so to speak, practicing our golf swing.
But today, we're in a position to drive properly up the fairway. What I really mean is that the first section of the book of Judges, up to chapter 3, verse 6, is really an introduction and a preparation, designed to map out the ground that we're about to explore.
But the action really gets underway at chapter 3, verses 7 to 11, where we meet the first of the actual judges, Othniel, who is raised up by God to rescue the people of Israel from a fierce oppressor.
Now, let's bear this in mind as we begin to meet these judges. Each of these judges is, in a small way, a forerunner of the Lord Jesus.
[6:13] You might say a savior with a small s. And each of these strong rulers, like Cush and Rishatham, who oppress and subjugate the people of Israel, is, in a small way, a figure rather like Satan.

So what happens again and again in the book of Judges is a small reflection of the defeat of Satan and the rescue of God's people achieved finally by the real savior, the Lord Jesus.
Now, this is not to say that the book of Judges is just an allegory. It certainly is not. It's history, not just allegory, not just a series of stories designed to parallel the person and work of Christ.
No, these things really happened. But as we read these colorful accounts of faith and courage, let's remember that they're in the Bible, not simply to teach us history, but also to help us to understand the decisive achievement of the Lord Jesus more clearly.
These judges did good things, and they brought relief and help to the people of God. But their achievements were limited and temporary. Look, for example, at verse 11 here in Judges 3.
[7:22] It's temporary. So the land had rest for 40 years, and then Othniel, the son of Kenaz, died. Well, you might say people generally do die.

But what if God should provide a rescuer in the end who didn't die? Or who, if he did die, were to rise again and break the power of death? So do you see what I mean about the achievements of these judges being limited and temporary?
A judge and rescuer was finally to come, whose achievements would be limitless and eternal. So do keep him, the Lord Jesus, in the back of your mind, because he is the ultimate answer to all the questions and problems raised by the book of Judges.
But now, friends, prepare, please, to be depressed, because we have to get our minds around what can only be described as a cycle of despair.
I'm calling this sermon the cycle of despair. There's a cyclical pattern in the book of Judges which underlies the whole book. It's a depressing, repetitive pattern which shapes the book, and we won't grasp what is going on in the book of Judges until we see this pattern.
[8:34] Now, it's a cycle or pattern that comes in five parts or five stages. So here they are. First, apostasy. The people of Israel abandon the Lord and start to serve the Baals.

Secondly, in response to this, there's punishment or chastisement. And God gives the Israelites into the power of some Gentile oppressor. Thirdly, a cry of pain rises up from Israel to God.
This is unbearable, O Lord. Rescue us. Fourth, deliverance comes in the form of a judge or savior who saves the Israelites from the power of their oppressor.
And fifth, peace. Peace reigns. For a while, the Israelites enjoy a period of political security and serenity. And then the cycle is repeated, and the Israelites turn again to the Baals, and they begin to serve them.
Now, I do promise you, friends, there will be an antidepressant before the end of the sermon. So look forward to that. But I've got to depress you a little bit further and rub your nose in it so that you

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

can really see what's going on.
[9:39] Have a look back first to chapter 2, verse 11. This is where the map is still being laid out before we actually meet the judges, when the author is telling us the pattern.

So chapter 2, verse 11. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. They abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt.
They went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and they bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.
Now chapter 3, verse 7. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord, their God, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.
Sometimes she's Ashtaroth, sometimes Ashtaroth. She varies a little bit. Chapter 3, verse 12. After Othniel. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.
[10:37] And the Lord strengthened Eglon, the king of Moab, against Israel. Chapter 4, verse 1. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died.

Chapter 6, verse 1. Are you getting the pattern? The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.
Gideon was the one who was raised up to save them from that one. Chapter 10, verse 6. Am I boring you? 10, 6.
The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served not only the Baals and the Ashtaroth, but the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines.
Every god they could find. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him. 13, 1. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for 40 years.
[11:38] Now, all of those verses mark the beginning, the first point in the cycle. But if we turn back now to Othniel, chapter 3, verse 7, we'll see in those five verses, verses 7 to 11, the whole cycle, all five parts of it within just those few verses.

Let me show you. Verse 7, apostasy. They forgot the Lord and served the Baals. Secondly, verse 8, punishment or chastisement. The Lord was angry with them for abandoning him, and he sold them, he gave them over to the hand of Cush and Rishatham, the Gentile king of Mesopotamia.
And they served him for eight long years. Thirdly, verse 9, a cry of pain goes up to the Lord. Lord, this is intolerable. Help us.
Fourthly, deliverance. Still, verse 9, the Lord raises up for them a deliverer, Othniel, nephew of the famous Caleb, and he defeats Cush and Rishatham in battle.
And fifth, verse 11, 40 years of peace follow. So the account of this very first judge, Othniel, contains in just a short space, only five verses, the full cycle, all five parts of this depressing pattern that gets repeated over and again, until we reach the account of Samson, who is the last of the judges.
[13:02] Now, let's not move on until we have noticed one or two interesting details in the story of Othniel. First of all, have a look at the name of this Mesopotamian king, Kushan Hingamy Thingamy.

I don't read Hebrew, but I've discovered that in the Hebrew text, the spelling is literally Kushan of double wickedness. And the word translated there, Mesopotamia, is literally Aram Naharayim, which means Aram of double rivers.
So this particular oppressor is double wicked from double rivers. And that is probably a barbed nickname created by the Israelites so as to convey their hatred and frustration at being under the heel of this particular tyrant.
In 1945, if Britain had been defeated by the Third Reich, and if we'd become a subjugated corner of the German Empire, I guess our grandparents and our great-grandparents might have invented some rather unflattering nicknames for Herr Hitler.
They wouldn't have spoken of him as our benign benefactor from Berlin, would they? They'd have called him an English language equivalent of Kushan Rishathane. Now, there's something very earthy about the Bible.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

[14:21] There's rough humor in it. We're going to find more rough humor in a moment in the story of Ehud. Now, let's turn to verse 9. This is where the people of Israel cry out to the Lord to help them.

Now, I'm sure many of you will remember that lovely American pastor and preacher, Ralph Davis, who was here with us. He's got a bit of a southern accent, hasn't he, Ralph? He was here with us just over 12 months ago. Now, Ralph, as you may remember, is a real expert in the Hebrew.
And in his commentary on the book of Judges, he focuses for a moment on this word, this verb, translated cried out. And he says this. Most of the commentaries on the book of Judges assume that crying out to the Lord means crying out in repentance and turning back to him in real faith and conversion.
But, says Ralph, I've studied this verb in every place that it occurs in the Old Testament, throughout the book of Judges and in many other places, over 60 references in all.
And, he says, that is simply not what it means. There is no element of repentance and faith in it. It does not signify a change of heart. It simply means a cry of distress and anguish.
[15:34] The sort of cry that a non-Christian of today might make in a situation of distress. God, if there is a God, get me out of this mess. Yes, certainly a heartfelt cry, but not made of the stuff of repentance.

Now, surely Ralph Davis' reading of that verb is borne out by what happens in the book of Judges. Because if that repentance had been real, if it had been repentance, the cycle of despair would not have had to be endlessly repeated.
We'd have got to verse 12, and we would have read, And the people of Israel were strengthened in their faith, and they turned their backs on all their idols. But there's no sign of them turning their backs on the bales.
So, their cry to the Lord expresses despair and pain, but not repentance. And we can only marvel at how gracious the Lord was in sending them a deliverer in response to a cry of that kind.
Now, of course, underlying God's kindness is the covenant. Just turn back for a moment to chapter 2, verse 18. The second half of the verse.
[16:44] 2, 18. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning, because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. It's like the end of Exodus chapter 2, where the Lord looks down and is moved to pity when he hears his people groaning.

But, look at 2, 19. But whenever the judge died, whichever judge it was died, they turned back, and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them, and bowing down to them.
They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. You see, there's no repentance there. Oh dear, it is so depressing, isn't it? Makes you want to eat a large slice of chocolate cake. Just to keep your spirits up. If I could clap and people could come in with cakes a hand around now, it would just make everyone feel better, wouldn't it? All right, we'll leave Othniel.
But let's get this pattern firmly in our minds, because it will help us to understand the book of Judges. Apostasy, oppression, cry of despair, a deliverer comes to rescue, peace for a period, and then apostasy again.
[17:51] Now we'll come on to Ehud and Eglon in just a moment, but can we look briefly first at Shamgar in verse 31?

Because I think Shamgar is in danger of going unnoticed. But I want us to notice him simply because the Lord notices him and honors him by giving him half an inch here of Bible space. Actually, there are two half inches of Bible space and recognition given to Shamgar. If you turn over to chapter 5, verse 6, you'll see his second half inch. So 5, 6, this is part of Deborah's song.
In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned and travelers kept to the byways. A country is in a bad state of lawlessness if you can't travel by the main roads.
It means there are bandits and roadblocks and highwaymen everywhere. Now turning back to chapter 3, verse 31, clearly it was the Philistines this time. It was different Gentile nations, but it was the Philistines who were oppressing the Israelites in Shamgar's day.
[18:57] And I guess you would not have wanted to be one of those 600 Philistines, would you, that met him. An ox goad was a sharp, long, pointed spike of iron mounted on the end of a long stick.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

You can imagine it, can't you? Thrust, thrust. Thrust, 598, 599, 600. Now we'll return to the question of violence, because the question of violence is raised a little bit later when we think of Ehud and his short sword.
But Shamgar is commended here in verse 31 for his victory over the Philistines. That verse is not just a statement of fact, it's a statement of approval and commendation.
Through the death of those 600, Israel was saved by Shamgar. Now there are actually 12 judges in the whole of the book of Judges.
Six of them are known as the minor judges, and Shamgar is one of those. The others are Tola and Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.
[20:03] They all get about one or two verses only. They're not household names. And yet they too are recorded and honored by God. Every name in the Old Testament is to be savored, including all those names in the books of Chronicles.

If God records all those names in the book of books, let's read them lovingly, and let's honor every one of them. So we have six minor judges, and then we have six major judges who are in this order, Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.
Well, let's turn now to the story of Ehud at chapter 3, verse 12. The five-point cycle is repeated again. So verse 12, apostasy.
Verse 12 still, the Lord provides and strengthens an oppressor, the king of Moab. Verse 15, you'll see the cry of despair goes up. Despair but not repentance.
Then a deliverer, Ehud, is raised up by the Lord, who rescues Israel, not only by killing the king of Moab, but by a subsequent big military victory, recorded in verses 27 to 29.
[21:11] And then finally, there's a period of peace. This time, 80 years of peace. Now here's a question. Why does the author of the book of Judges go into all this detail in the story of Ehud?

I mean, couldn't he have saved his readers a bit of time by being much briefer? Well, the reason for all this detail is that the writer is telling us a very exciting story of Daring Do.
It's a cross, really, between Boyzone Annual and a James Bond book by Ian Fleming. Now, I know that there are unsavory aspects to James Bond's character, particularly his relationships with women.
But just to leave that on one side, surely the reason why James Bond is so popular is that he represents a kind of British toughness and patriotism that is determined to beat the arch enemy.
And the typical Bond story comes to a climax when James Bond is locked in mortal combat with the big baddie, fighting him, let's say, a hundred stories up on the roof of a skyscraper in New York City, or perhaps dangling off the end of a rope that's coming out of the belly of a helicopter and the grim fight between the two men.
[22:26] They wrestle each other, don't they? And it goes this way and it goes that way. James Bond is just about at his last gasp. Oh, I'm hurting myself. And then he gives a great final push, doesn't he?

And the arch enemy with a cry of despair drops to his death hundreds of feet below. And we leave the cinema thinking right has triumphed and evil has got its comeuppance.
Now, this story here is told really in very much that way. And that's why all these details, including the rather unsavory ones, are included. A bland, featureless account wouldn't create the same sense of tension and excitement at all.
But the original Hebrew audience, just think of them, those who first read this story or perhaps heard it read out loud to them gathering in a community hall a bit like this, they would have jumped up and cheered when they got to verse 25.
And the reader says that the mighty Eglon is lying dead on the floor. It's like the end of the James Bond film and the British audience cry out, true blue grit, true Brit grit.
[23:35] And here, the Hebrew audience, I guess, would cry out, true blue Jew, Ehud the Magnificent. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord for Ehud. That's the feeling of it. And every detail in the story plays its part and adds to the excitement and the tension.

So let's look at these details and we'll start gently. The thrills and spills will come in five minutes' time, but we'll start gently with some observations about geography. Eglon, as verse 12 tells us, was the king of Moab.
Now just think geography of the Holy Land for a moment. You've got the Sea of Galilee up in the north here, north of Israel. You've got about 50 or 60 miles of the River Jordan running southwards

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

into the Dead Sea.
And all that land on the west side, on the left-hand side, is Canaan, the kingdom of Israel. And on the right-hand side of the Dead Sea is Gentile territory, and that's where Moab was, a small kingdom on the right-hand side of the Dead Sea, part of what is now called the state of Jordan.
Now verse 13 tells us that King Eglon of Moab supplemented his own army with soldiers from the Ammonites and the Amalekites. And they lived just to his north, again still on the eastern side of the River Jordan.
[24:49] So they were close to Moab. But this enemy army managed to cross the River Jordan into Israelite territory because verse 13 tells us that they took Jericho, the city of Palms.

So they had arrived from Gentile territory to the east of the Jordan, and they'd gained a foothold there in the land of Canaan by capturing Jericho on the West Bank. It would be rather like, perhaps several hundred years ago, the Danes coming across the North Sea and capturing Dundee and St. Andrews and setting up a garrison there to threaten all of Scotland from their foothold.
And verse 14 tells us that having obtained this base for operations in Jericho, Eglon was then able to exercise a stranglehold on Israel for 18 long years.
And it's clear from verse 15 that he forced the Israelites to pay him an annual tribute, which would have consisted perhaps of money, but certainly of goods, the produce of the fertile land of Israel, donkey loads of figs and olive oil, wine and dates and raisins.
You can imagine how gutted an Israelite farmer might feel year after year at having to send a very significant portion of his annual harvest off to the already overfed king of Moab and his pestilential army.
[26:14] There would have been great resentment there and frustration and anger felt on the West Bank. So, verse 15, eventually, they cried their cry of despair to the Lord and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gerah, of the tribe of Benjamin, who was, very significantly, as we shall see, a left-handed man.

Now, there's more to that phrase left-handed than meets the eye. I happen to be left-handed and my guess would be, just raise your hand if you're left-handed.
I was thinking it would be 10%. No, it's not that. No, it's very few of us here. Remarkable. Okay. Anyway, left-handedness, it's a common thing, as we know, and it doesn't disable us in any way, does it?
You can be left-handed and live a normal life, so I've discovered. But it seems, it seems that Ehud was left-handed in a rather different way because apparently the Hebrew of verse 15 literally reads that he was unable to use his right hand and that suggests he perhaps looks something like this, that his right hand was in some way disabled or paralyzed.
Now, we'll come back to that. Now, verse 16, Ehud was clearly a man of leadership qualities and he'd been delegated to take the annual tribute to King Eglon. And I'm sure we're meant to understand that Eglon at this time was not in the land of Moab.
[27:45] He wasn't at home. He was in Jericho, which he'd captured. But between the time that Ehud was asked to convey the tribute and the time when he actually took it to the king, he had an idea and he set himself a task.

He went to the local blacksmith, he bought himself a piece of iron, and during the evenings when other Israelites were washing their dishes and putting their children to bed, Ehud went quietly to his back kitchen, lit the fire, and fashioned for himself a short sword.
Now, it was only a cubit in length. A cubit is the distance between your fingertips and your elbow. So a short sword, 18 inches or so, and a few inches of that would have been the handle.
So the blade itself was probably only 13 or 14 inches long, not much more than a big dagger. But Ehud had fashioned this with great care because he was designing it for a great exploit.
And we read that it had two edges, a double-edged sword, and you can be sure that he made those edges as sharp as a razor, sharp enough to shave the face of a prop forward.
[29:02] And when the day of the tribute presentation to the king came, he put on his heaviest and baggiest clothes, and very carefully he strapped on this brand new blade to his right thigh.

Now a sword as small as that would never be seen under baggy clothes. It's a bit like James Bond slipping a lightweight pistol into a shoulder holster under his dinner jacket.
You just wouldn't know it was there. So, verse 17, he comes to Eglon at his Jericho residence with the group of assistants who are carrying all the produce.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

And he respectfully presents all this tribute to the king. And when he's finished the presentation, verse 18, he sends his fellow Israelites away. And he also departed himself briefly.
But having gone a little distance, just to Gilgal, which is only just down the road, he turned back and paid the king a second visit. And he said to him, I have a message for you, O king.
[30:05] It's a secret. So the king cried out to his chattering servants, Silence! Silence! And they all left the room. Now you might say, wasn't that a bit of a security risk?

Shouldn't the king at least have kept a couple of strong men with him? Well, yes, it would have been with anybody else, but not with a fellow like this, with a crippled right arm.
What possible danger could there be from a skinny little Hebrew with a withered right hand? So, verse 20, Ehud approached the king as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber in his penthouse suite.
And he said to him, I have a message from God for you. And the king arose from his seat, perhaps out of reverence for the fact that God was about to speak to him.
Now when you're a very, very big man, as Eglon was, I guess it can take a bit of puffing and panting and a few seconds before you finally manage to stand up from your seat upright.
[31:07] But Ehud used those few seconds to good effect. He smuggled his muscular, powerful left hand under his clothing. He took the sword from his right thigh and thrusted home so deep that the 14-inch blade and the 4-inch handle went right in and disappeared out of sight.

And the author adds at the end of verse 22 that the dung came out, the king's excrement, came out. Now some translations are a little bit squeamish at this point and they say that the sword came out through the back.
But again, Ralph Davis assures me that the Hebrew word does mean excrement. And that explains something in the next paragraph. So verse 23, Ehud leaves the great corpse on the floor, he slips out of the doors, quietly turns the key in the lock and melts away.
Meanwhile, King Eglon's servants have finished their cup of tea down in the servant's kitchen and they come back in verse 24 and they find the doors to the king's roof chamber locked.
And clearly, they're not expecting that. And they think, he must be on the toilet. Probably because they smell a nasty smell explained by the final sentence of verse 22.
[32:24] So of course, they just wait there politely. Five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes. What are we going to do, boys? We've got to go in there.

He's probably unwell. So they get hold of a key, they gingerly open the door, they walk in. Now notice the drama of the last few words of verse 25.
There lay their lord, dead, on the floor. Now that's the high point of the story for Ehud. And it's the low point of the story for Eglon. At this point, the tale begins to move much more swiftly, but it's still a tale of human courage and divine grace.
Ehud shows a clean pair of heels. He gets up into the hill country of Ephraim, right in the heart of Israel's territory, and he sounds the trumpet. That's the call to arms.
It's a bit like those days, centuries ago, when a highland chief, when attacked by somebody else, would send the word out to all his men to come and gather around. So everyone would drop what they were doing and put on their plaid and their dirk and so on and get ready for battle, rally to the call.
[33:33] Now this is what happens in verse 27. And the people then go down, and it was downhill, with Ehud from the hill country down into the valley towards the river Jordan. And notice Ehud's words in verse 28.

Follow me, for the Lord has given your enemies, the Moabites, into your hand. He instinctively recognizes that it's the Lord and not himself who is giving them the victory.
So they rush down, they seize the fords of the Jordan, and the Moabites in Jericho, realizing that their king is dead, come streaming out of Jericho, which is a few miles west of the river.
They head for the river and for the safety of their homeland on the other side. But the Israelites have got there first, and they cut them down. And notice the scale of the victory in verse 29.
10,000 Moabites are killed, all of them strong, fit men, not a single one escaped. So it was an overwhelming victory, and it led to 80 years of peace and security, which is a long time for any nation to enjoy rest from warfare.
[34:41] Well, let me comment on two aspects of this story before we wind down. The first is that it's told in a very earthy way. We're not spared the gruesome details.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

The author forces us to think of this bloated huge man and the sword going into his belly and the excrement coming out. And we might think, oh, but please, please, couldn't the story have been told us a little bit more delicately?
The modern reader, after all, is a very sensitive little soul and can't cope with too much realism. Well, let me ask, who wrote this book like this? It was the Lord, wasn't it?
It's his work. Yes, a man set down the words with ink on parchment, but all scripture is breathed out by God himself, as the apostle Paul teaches us, so we can be sure that the Lord wants us to think about these horrible episodes.
Reading the Bible is not like having a holiday on Paradise Island. One reason why the Bible is so interesting is simply that it's so earthy. We're dealing here with human life in the raw, and we know that God is dealing with human life in the raw as he deals with us.
[35:54] One reason why great writers outside the Bible are great writers is precisely that they deal with the reality of human life at all levels. Shakespeare, think of him, an absolute master at understanding and portraying human life in all its subtle colors.

Try Walter Scott, I'd never read a word of Scott until I came to Scotland and I thought this is part of my education. Walter Scott, it's not without good reason that there's that huge monument built to him in the center of Edinburgh.
He deserves every square inch of it. His accounts of human nature are masterly. And the Bible, God's own book, is in a different category of literature.
It's by itself. It leaves Shakespeare and Scott standing. Of course it's so earthy. Now it's not crude and it's not coarse. You might say there's quite a fine line between coarseness and earthiness but the Bible never transgresses that line.
Christians who expect the Bible to be sanitized may end up rather sanitized themselves, unable and unwilling to engage with the tougher realities of human life and how God deals with us.
[37:03] So let's welcome the rough earthiness of the Bible and enjoy it. Coarseness, no. But earthiness and reality, yes indeed. Now this leads me to the second thing and that's the question, is there gratuitous violence in the Bible?

Certainly there's violence but is it unnecessary? Violence, as we know, is often portrayed on the television and in films and we have surely a rather ambiguous relationship to it.
So for example, when we're watching rugby, did anybody watch any rugby yesterday? Yes, I did too. When you're watching, I'm afraid the sweet chariot didn't swing quite low enough, did it?
Oh dear. But anyway, when we're watching rugby, we can feel, I feel, a sense of thrill when a player brings off a really bone-crunching tackle. You know the sort when a man's running this direction at top speed and he's met by another man in this direction who drives him back five yards and then puts him to the ground.
It's a terrific moment, isn't it? I hate to see somebody hurt. I hate to see somebody stretch it off the field. But there's something very satisfying about a tackle that brings a very big man down to the ground very rapidly.
[38:18] And yet, we are sickened by the violence that intends to maim people and to kill people. We're sickened by domestic violence. We're unbearably sickened by terrorism and by the horrors of warfare.

Do you remember how it's expressed in Genesis chapter 6 just before God sends the flood and rescues Noah? Genesis 6, 11 reads, Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and the earth was filled with violence.
We can be quite sure that God hates the violence that maims and murders. It was one of the main reasons why he brought the deluge to the earth. But you can't get away from the fact that the story of Ehud and Eglon celebrates the violent death of this oppressor.
The way that the author tells us about this short sword and the stabbing is clearly intended to make the reader cry out in triumph that this horrible tyrant is now lying dead on the floor.
So let me try to summarize the Bible's view on this question in terms of two basic strands of teaching. First, God hates the sins of violence and murder.
[39:33] Murder arises out of hatred and jealousy and greed and frustration. The sixth of the Ten Commandments says, you shall not murder. We know that God hates murder. But secondly, God is committed to the final downfall of all who oppose him and oppose his people.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13

King Eglon of Moab is an opposer of God and of God's people. Ehud's killing of Eglon is not portrayed here as murder but as an expression of God's righteous care for his people.
Ehud is not a murderer. He's a savior. So God hates murder but he's committed to the final downfall of those who oppose him and his people.
Now just think of how this plays out in the life of Jesus. Is Jesus the savior? Yes. Of course he is. Is Jesus the destroyer?
Yes. The destroyer in the end of all that opposes him. In Psalm 2 we sang a version of it earlier. The rulers of the earth band together so as to throw off what they think is the constricting authority of God.
[40:50] But God laughs at their feeble opposition. He holds them in derision and he tells the world that he will answer their rebellion by sending his son who in the end and I quote here will break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

Well think of the way the apostle Paul describes the final triumph of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15. Then comes the end when Christ delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power for he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.
Jesus the saviour is Jesus the destroyer and until we have understood that we have not understood him. Now this story of Ehud and Eglon is a picture of the God who saves and the God who destroys.
Ehud saves the people of God and destroys the oppressor of the people of God. Let me finish with a few words about Jesus. In a strange way Jesus himself is like a left-handed saviour.
There's Ehud with his useless right hand. He would have looked small and weak no doubt contemptible in the eyes of King Eglon. Just as our Lord Jesus looked contemptible in the eyes of those who met him in Jerusalem.
[42:20] He wasn't a proper rabbi. He hadn't been to the right schools. He came from the one-horse town of Nazareth. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? In the words of the prophet Isaiah he had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not.
But this man was the saviour and he is the saviour of all who bow down to him and cling to him with thankful and trusting hearts. And more than that he is the one who broke the cycle of despair that comes again and again in the book of Judges.
Nobody else could do it but he has done it. Think of that cycle. Apostasy. Abandoning God. Have you done that? We all have. Surely.
Secondly, oppression. Has God allowed you to be oppressed and harassed by the enemy of souls? We've all been in his grip. Third, have you cried out to God in pain and frustration?
[43:36] Of course you have. Fourth, has God sent a saviour to rescue you? Yes. And a better one than Ehud. Fifth, so where are you now?

Have you trusted that rescuer? If you have, he has brought you peace. Peace with God and reconciliation. And has this rescuer died like Ehud?
Well, yes, he did die. But on the third day afterwards, he was raised up gloriously and eternally. So the cycle of despair has been decisively broken.
So if you belong to Jesus Christ, you belong to the one who lives forever and you are eternally safe in his caring hands. Let's pray together.
dear God, our Father, we rejoice that you have sent us a wonderful saviour and equally we rejoice in the Bible's assurance that in the end his triumph over all the enemies that oppose him and oppose his beloved people is assured.
[44:58] So our dear Father, give us, all of us, a deep sense of assurance as we continue to trust your Son and we thank you so much that nothing can resist him, nothing can triumph over him.

He indeed holds the keys to death and Hades and has triumphed. So we give you our thanks and praise and ask you to help us to abound in the work of the Lord knowing that our labour is not in vain.
We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-09 21:56:13