

Have you ever been to the cinema and sat through a film for an hour and a half/two hours and you come out thinking, ‘Well, it got me out of the house, killed some time, something to do,’?

Or have you ever come out thinking ‘Nice story-line, good acting, kept me entertained, but I don’t know what it was all **about**,’?

Or have you ever read a **book** and when you get to the end think, ‘Lovely story, really played with my emotions, but now let’s get back to **reality**,’?

Have you ever had any of those thoughts when you’ve read from the **Bible**? You’ve sat down for a few moments, and spent some time reading from the Bible and you come away thinking, ‘Well, killed some time, entertaining, nice story, played with my emotions, but now let’s get back to **real** life.’ Ever felt like **that**? If we’re honest, I’d suggest that we’ve **all** known times like this. We’ve found it a good **story**, but no **more** than that.

We have to beware of these feelings because, as we read in Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy, ‘*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*’ And this is what we should **always** be thinking when we come to the Bible, because it’s the word of **God**, and it contains all we need to equip us for every good work and to make us fit for a relationship with him. So if we read any of God’s word **without** thinking God is teaching me, or rebuking me, or correcting me, or training me for righteousness, we run the risk of missing out on something really important. We can’t afford to think, ‘That was an entertaining story,’ and that’s **it**.

So we come to tonight’s passage, and what we have to **avoid** is thinking that this is only included in the Bible because it’s good **entertainment**, and that it doesn’t have anything deeper to say to us. In fact it’s a story that you may not even **find** entertaining. You may experience **different** emotions as we read this; some will find it **horrible**, distasteful; some will wonder why it’s in the Bible at **all**. I trust the Lord will use His word to teach, rebuke, correct and train us in righteousness even through this passage, so we can love and serve him **better**.

Turn with me to the book of Judges, 3:12, where we meet a man called Ehud.

We need firstly to look at the setting and background to this story, otherwise it **will** just be telling a story. So, you'll remember that the people of Israel have moved into the land that God promised their ancestors, and this is recorded in the **previous** book, the book of Joshua. The land was divided up between the twelve tribes, under the leadership of Joshua.

In Judges 2:8 we read that Joshua died at the age of 110, and gradually the whole of his generation died, let's read from chapter 2:10-13, to set the scene and put our passage into context.

So there we **have** it. Joshua died, his generation died, and the knowledge of what God had **done** for them seemed to die **with** them. They forgot their God, and went and ran after the gods of the **original** inhabitants of the land. And as we read this book of Judges, we realise it's a very **sad** book, because we find one sentence repeated over and over again: *'The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.'* No matter **how** God saved them from disaster, 12 times are recorded here that God stepped in, **despite** that, we read continually, *'The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.'* And they seem to get **worse** the longer the book goes on, until at the **end** of the book in chapter 21:25 we read *'everyone did as he saw fit.'* No rules, no following the Lord - *'everyone did as he saw fit.'*

And my first point is **this** – **do not tolerate**. Do not tolerate.

In what way did the Israelites do **evil** in the eyes of the Lord? Well, if you remember, when God **gave** them the land, he commanded them to drive out the inhabitants of the land. But time and again they failed to **do** this. God says in Deuteronomy chapter 7 that Israel is to drive out the nations; he says, *'Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you.'*

Surprise, surprise! What do you think happened? What God told them **not** to do, that's exactly what happened. They allowed the foreign peoples to remain in the land. They **did** turn away from God. They **did** run after other gods, precisely because they didn't drive out the people as God had **told** them to. They tolerated other **gods**. They tolerated **sin**. God doesn't tolerate other gods: God cannot tolerate sin. So neither should his people. God commands his people to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul and body. 2

God's people must **not** tolerate sin. Israel in the Old Testament tolerated sin, they didn't drive it out. But we **also** read of it in one of the **New** Testament churches. Look at Revelation chapter 3, where one of the apostles, John, the disciple that Jesus loved, receives a revelation from Jesus who asks him to write letters to 7 churches in what is present-day Turkey. In chapter 3:20, he writes, *'Nevertheless, I have this **against** you: You **tolerate** [you **tolerate**] that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she **misleads** my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.'* We see the same thing happening in the New Testament church – they tolerate sin and other gods.

I have this against you: you tolerate. Why is the church so **ineffectual** in our own day in this country? I suggest it's because the church today tolerates what it **shouldn't**. The church **tolerates** the world saying the word of God needs to change to keep up with the times; the church tolerates practices it shouldn't, just because people want to do what they see fit. The church **tolerates**, and Jesus says *'I have this against you: you tolerate ...'*

Why does the head of the BBC say it's OK to mock **Christianity**, and to present blasphemy on TV, and to **ridicule** Jesus? Why? Because the church today **tolerates** it. The church puts **up** with it. The church doesn't put up a fight. We tolerate sin and other gods, and Jesus holds this against the church.

But **we're** OK, aren't we? We're a good evangelical church. We know what we stand for. **We** don't tolerate other gods. We know our God. We know the Bible.

Let's not kid ourselves. Let's be honest. This is where each of us needs to see whether we're being **rebuked** here. This is an extremely challenging message from the people of Israel. Are **we** tolerating any sin in our lives? Are we failing to allow the Lord to drive out any sin from **our** lives? Are we trying to hold on to something which we know is **stopping** us from Jesus being Lord of our whole life?

Are we trying to convince ourselves that it doesn't matter, because on most things we're fully given over to the Lord – just this **one** thing won't matter, surely. Listen to what Jesus says in Mark chapter 9: 'If your hand, or your foot or your eye causes you to sin, cut it off, pluck it out' – it's that serious in God's eyes; he says 'it's better to enter life maimed, crippled or **blind** than to be thrown into hell.' Do **you** take sin that seriously? Or do you **tolerate** it? 3

We can't afford to tolerate anything which is evil in the Lord's eyes. Anything which turns us away from God must **not** be tolerated. How is it with **us**? How is it with **you**? How is it with **me**?

Jesus says, *'I have this against you: you tolerate ...'* Do not tolerate.

Let's come then to the story of Ehud. Ehud is the second 'judge', and by this we're not to think of a man in a black gown and a moth-eaten wig. The term 'judge' refers to leaders of God's people, used by **God** to deliver them.

The Israelites tolerated other gods and sin and God allowed Eglon, God gave Eglon power to attack and seize control of the Israelites. The Moabites take the City of Palms, which is Jericho, which **strategically** was the first major city the Israelites captured when they moved into the Promised Land. And they rule there for 18 years.

Verse 15 of Judges 3 says, *'Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer – Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite.'*

A seemingly normal sentence: the people of God cry out for **help**, and God gives them a deliverer. Straight forward. Or **is** it? We're going to see that a number of unexpected things come **together** here to make this story not as straight forward as it **seems**.

Let's look at Ehud himself – **an unexpected deliverer**. A sinister man.

Charlie Chaplin, Barak Obama, Julius Caesar, Princes Charles and William, Lewis Carrol, HG Wells, Michelangelo (the artist, not the turtle!), Paul McCartney, Marilyn Monroe, John McEnroe and Kermit the frog, to mention a few. All these, and many others, of course, are or were left-handed. And today we don't bat an eyelid. It's nothing **strange** for anyone today to be left-handed. My brother Barry's left-handed, and there's nothing strange about **him**, well ...

But in days gone by, being left-handed was a **handicap**, to say the least. Our English word '**sinister**' comes from Latin and it means left-handed; dexter is the Latin for right, and we get **dextrous** from it – much more positive connotations.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in this country, during the witch trials, being left-handed was a sure sign of being a witch, devil or evildoer, and the definition of sinister is ‘suggesting or threatening evil’.

So a left-handed deliverer? Totally unexpected, if not even strange.

**Ironically** he’s a descendant of Benjamin, which means ‘son of the right-hand’. And in the Bible we often see the significance of the right hand – God uses his right hand to destroy his enemies: Exodus 15:6 *‘Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand shattered the enemy.’* Psalm 16:11, *‘You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.’* Peter says in the New Testament, salvation is *‘by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.’* 1 Peter 3:22.

So a left-handed deliverer? Not what the Israelites would be **expecting**. Or the **Moabites**. Ehud couldn’t use his right hand, so Eglon wouldn’t have seen him as a **security** risk. He was the perfect choice to bring tributes to the Moabite king, because he wouldn’t have been regarded as a **threat** to this king who’d held power over them for 18 years. He has no problem gaining a private audience with the king, all the king’s attendants are sent away in verse 19, because a left-handed man poses no **threat**.

When we arrive at Gatwick airport, we can expect to go through all sorts of checks, passport, baggage scans, even body search and body scan now. But the Moabites didn’t even **bother** with Ehud, it seems, no body search for weapons, because he was left-**handed**. They didn’t even **think** to check his right thigh, because normal assassins would have the weapon strapped to their **left** thigh.

So Ehud is able to deliver an important message from God to Eglon in verses 21 and 22. The message that he **delivered** was certainly unexpected, as he plunged the dagger he’d made into Eglon. He got the point of that message! Some people have **spiritualized** this saying that the dagger represents the word of God which is sharper than any two-edged sword. I’m sure Eglon would say that the dagger certainly was a real one! Beware of over-spiritualization. This is an account of God delivering his people from a very real enemy.

Ehud is able to make his **escape** because Eglon’s men hadn’t expected anything untoward happening by a left-handed man, so when they find the door

locked on their return in verse 24, they just think Eglon is probably going to the **toilet**, and don't want to disturb him. **Nobody** expected this. Not even the Israelites – they'd all gone **home** in verse 18, only Ehud came back to Eglon.

Ehud was an unexpected deliverer. And this should give us **encouragement**. Because if God has a job that needs doing, he may well choose **you**. **You** may not expect it. **Nobody** may expect it. But God can use and **does** use whoever he wants to do a work for him. He won't use the proud and the boastful, he won't use the rich and arrogant, he won't use those who seek glory for themselves. He'll use those who will give glory to **him**. Are you one of those people? Could you do an unexpected work for God? You **could**, yes.

God gave Israel a deliverer, but he was an unexpected deliverer. But **deliverance** itself was **certain**, it **was** expected. **Expected deliverance**.

This story is recorded to show that God's deliverance is **certain**, it **can** be expected. We're not to focus on the **method** here - we can't hold Ehud up as an example of what we should do - but we focus on the certainty, the **fact** that God delivered his people when they cried **out** to him. It's not to teach us **how** God will deliver his people, but that he certainly **will** deliver his people when they cry out.

In Psalm 91:15 God is speaking and says: *'He [the man of God] will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.'* This is **God** speaking. This is God promising **deliverance** to those who call to him.

And that's what we see in Judges 3, verse 15, the people turn from their evil-doing and cry out to God, and God gives them a **deliverer** in the form of Ehud. And we see this repeated throughout the book of Judges, that when God's people turn back to **God**, he **hears** them and **delivers** them from their trouble. They knew what they had to do – stop tolerating other gods and sin, turn to God in repentance and seek forgiveness, and with their hearts right before God, he would deliver them. And now?

Well, God's promise is God's **promise**. He will **never** go back on a promise. He will **always** fulfil his promises. Today and forever. This is our God – he is a **delivering** God; he's a **saving** God; he's a **rescuing** God. He won't turn **anyone** away who cries out to him with a heart that seeks his forgiveness, that wants to **know** him, that wants to **love** him.

If we come to him with this spirit, he's promised to **deliver** us. In Judges 3 he delivers his people from a very real enemy in the Moabites; **today** he delivers people from the very real enemies of sin, the world, the flesh and the devil – all of which would rob us of a wonderful relationship with **God**. God wants to restore our relationship with him, by delivering us from **everything** that would destroy us. Cry out to him in times of trouble – God says *'I will deliver him.'* **Promise. Certain. Fact.** Jesus died and rose again to guarantee our salvation. **Expect** deliverance.

So we read in our story of Ehud, that he gathered troops in Ephraim and he says in verse 28, *'Follow me, ... for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands.'* It's only **now** that Ehud takes on a leadership role, up until now he was a most **unlikely** leader, but now they follow him and defeat Moab, and made them subject. And the story ends with the land knowing peace for eighty years under Ehud. But the sad thing is, **the deliverance is only temporary**, my next point.

Look down to verse 1 of the next chapter, *'After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord.'* Will they ever **learn**? Do they have a death wish? While Ehud was there leading them in the ways of the Lord they experienced **peace** in the land – why give that up? Are they **stupid**? This is the tragedy of the story of Israel in the book of Judges, whenever we read that each of these judges, these deliverers, these leaders **dies**, soon after we read that the people return to doing evil in the eyes of the Lord. So **sad**.

The state of **man** is so sad. No left-handed deliverer can change the state of the human **heart**. Nothing **Ehud** did could change the hearts of Israel. They couldn't be delivered from the sin and idols in their hearts. And so no matter what Ehud achieved for them in securing **peace** for them, it was never going to be anything more than a **temporary** deliverance, because in their **hearts** they were opposed to God – they continued to be attracted by other gods and sinful ways.

The New Testament throws light on this condition. Paul talks about us being 'under sin', he says the human heart is **bound** and held in the clutches of sin. Men and women are in the **power** of sin. We've been **blinded** to God. We've gone **astray**, we've chosen our own way instead of God's. And deliverance from **this** condition is what we need more than any other. We need to be freed from **this** enemy, otherwise any rescue from any **other** trouble will be only temporary.

We'll only know deliverance from our troubles in **this** life. We need a **permanent** solution, not a temporary one.

Those of us who've been following the Explore Bible notes will remember that a little while ago we were looking at the book of **Ruth**. And you'll remember that she was a Moabitess who lived at this same stage of history. **She** came to live in Israel and accepted their God as **her** God. Through **her** was to come the permanent solution for all man's problems. **A once and for all deliverance.**

If you read the genealogy in Matthew 1, you'll find **Ruth** mentioned in verse 5, and one of her descendants was Jesus. Jesus is the one and only, totally **sufficient** deliverer, because only **he** has done something to deal with our **real** problem – the sin in our hearts. All **other** solutions are like putting a sticking plaster on our hearts, only temporary and **ultimately** useless. They won't do the job.

Ehud could bring deliverance from the Moabites, but not a **lasting** solution. Israel sinned again. Only **Jesus** can bring forgiveness for our sins. Only **he** can deliver us from the power of sin. Only **he** can bring a permanent solution to the problems of the sinful heart, not just for this life, but for **eternity**.

Peter writes, *'For Christ died for sins **once for all**, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.'* 1 Peter 3:18. **This** is the permanent, totally **adequate**, totally **sufficient** deliverance from the fundamental problem we **all** face. Jesus loved us, gave himself for us, sacrificed himself once and for all, that we might know God.

The great tragedy for the Israelite people under **Ehud** was that they went **on** sinning. The great tragedy for man **now** is if we don't call out to God for **deliverance**.

We come back to our first point: don't tolerate sin and other gods – that is **anything** that takes us away from God – because he's promised to hear us and **deliver** us when we cry out to him in repentance and faith, because he's provided a great **Deliverer**, a **Saviour** to help us in our times of trouble.

Is there anything you need to do **now**? Do you need to know more of this Deliverer working in your **life**? He's there ready to hear your cry. God says, **'I will deliver you.'**