

Mr Average and Mr Strange

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[0 : 00] Let's pray as we sit. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Well, we're back to Judges this morning.

And we've got a very exciting passage to look at. Not just the bit you've already read, but we're going to be looking at the story of Ehud as well. And I want to look first at the story of Ehud, sorry, of Othniel, because that's the pattern, I think, for being a judge.

That's what happens time and again as we go through Judges. We see certain things repeat, and we see them particularly well put together in the story of Othniel.

So let's start at verse 7. The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.

[1 : 07] So what is the evil that the Israelites do? Well, they had idols.

And that's fine and clear. It's not fine to have idols. But it's clear to us as to what that means in one sense. But we don't tend to have idols of that sort.

We don't tend to have stone and wooden ones. I guess for us that idols are anything we love more than God. One book said that idolatry is centering one's life on the values of the world and of assuming that in practice those values are more important and valid than the Lord.

I want to put up on the screen now some words of a hymn that we sometimes sing at this time of year. Jesus calls us over the tumult.

St. Andrew's Day coming up this week. Verse 2 talks about St. Andrew responding. But the reason I put the words up is because it's actually that third verse that struck me.

[2 : 22] Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store. From each idol that would keep us saying, Christian, love me more.

Or if we go on to the next verse, which broadens it from the love of money. In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease, still he calls in cares and pleasures, Christian, love me more than these.

In the evening we've been looking at the rich fool a few weeks ago. Now there's nothing wrong with barns or pension planning, but he made an idol of a luxurious retirement.

I'm sure this is a good moment for a plug for our Life Explored course coming up after Christmas in the evening. We've been thinking about idolatry and how to avoid it on Sunday evenings.

But it's interesting to look at how they got to the position that they were serving other gods. Well it was by forgetting the Lord their God.

[3 : 42] And I guess the opposite of forgetting is remembering. If we want to avoid forgetting the Lord, then we keep remembering.

We keep remembering what he's like. We keep remembering what he's done. We have to keep doing that again and again. For as the hymn says, I forget so soon.

The early dew of morning has passed away at noon. It involves reminding one another. It's been pointed out that one of the great things about a growth group, a home group, is that if I turn up feeling negative when I go to the group, sure I shouldn't, but if I do, there's always someone there who's excited by God's word, who says, have you seen what it says?

And so, I remember, and I'm excited. Or we remember when we come to the table later this morning. We remember what Jesus has done for us.

I don't go through this in too much detail, because I've got lots of verses. I'm still on the first verse. So, but that's the sin of Israel, doing evil.

[5 : 02] And then the next, the rest of that, in the next verse it says, the anger of the Lord burned against Israel. Isn't that striking? I'm not sure I should find it as striking as I did.

I guess we all know that sin has consequences. We think of the effect of drinking too much. If you drink too much alcohol, it has obvious short-term and long-term bad effects.

But, when we look round, I think I'm more aware of, that seems like a sort of cause and effect thing, in a simple sort of way. This says, it's much more specific.

It says, the anger of the Lord burned against them. Now, I'm not going to get myself into no end of trouble this morning, by picking out things in church and state, where we can say that we're experiencing the Lord's anger.

That would be a very unwise thing to do from a pulpit. But think about it. Think of examples for yourself where you think that might be happening. And the importance about this passage is it enables us to know that Israel experienced God's anger as a result of sin.

[6 : 20] And that anger was expressed in oppression by Cushion Rishathayim, which means Cushion of the two wickednesses.

And he was king of Aram Naharayim, which means Aram of the two rivers, which is Upper Mesopotamia. So, Cushion the doubly wicked, king of double waters.

We don't even know whether this is more of a sort of nickname he's been given, that he's actually either through changing the name slightly to mock him, or they've added vowel pointing, which gives it a certain mockery.

The one thing that these, that the poor oppressed people can do is laugh at Cushion Rishathayim. And my third D, did evil, divine anger, is de profundis.

I couldn't get another D in English, so we had to have a Latin one. But it's the first words of Psalm 130. Out of the depths I have cried unto thee, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice.

[7 : 41] The Israelites' response to their situation was to cry out. Now, the word doesn't necessarily mean that they repented. I think, where it means that, usually the repentance is expressed by another word.

It's simply a cry of distress and agony from the situation of suffering under the hand of Cushion Rishathayim. But even that cry out of that situation was enough for our gracious God to respond.

For he is in control, not Cushion, the double wicked. And when they cried out to the Lord, verse 9, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel, son of Kenaz.

Now, we only know a limited amount about Othniel, but we do know he was from the top draw, as it were, when it came to the Israelite community.

He's Caleb's nephew. A bit like sort of John Stott's nephew or something like that, perhaps we'd want to say. He's someone right from the inner group.

[8 : 56] And God equipped Othniel, gave him the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord came on him, so he became Israel's judge and went to war. And deliverance was won.

The Lord gave Cushion Rishathayim into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. Deliverance was won. God's deliverance led to peace and rest more than four times as long as the trouble had been.

So the land had peace for 40 years. At our preaching group, when I was going through my outline with the other members of the preaching group, Roz made the very helpful point that maybe it's the micro-cycles of the remembering on your daily and weekly and monthly and yearly basis that prevents the macro-cycles that seems to occur in judges where, you know, on a much longer time scale, they drift away and then they come back again.

If we keep remembering those micro-cycles, then that holds us to God and avoids us doing evil and getting into the trouble that they got into.

But I love the fact that the land had peace. We long for peace, don't we? And we should pray for it. Pray for kings and all in authority that you may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

[10 : 44] But I want just to leave that pattern with you now. It's on the notice sheet. I had to call it Days of Rest again. Struggle with my Ds this time.

Also, it's a hymn tune, isn't it? Day of Rest. And so, that's the pattern. I want to now look at how it works. That pattern works out rather differently in the second story that we've got to look at this morning.

And I'm going to read each bit in turn, the story of Ehud. So first, I'll read verses 12 to 14. 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. Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel and they took possession of the city of Palms.

The Israelites were subject to Eglon, king of Moab, for 18 years. And each feature of this Ehud story contains something that's unexpected.

[11 : 52] There's some subtle difference from the story that we've had before. I mean, this was an unexpected misery. I mean, Cushon Rishathayim was a genuine big guy.

He was the king of upper Mesopotamia. Now, Eglon was quite different. He was the king of Moab. And Moab wasn't part of the promised land.

In many ways, Moab was a bit negligible compared with Mesopotamia. Do you remember how when the Israelites came into the promised land, Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel.

And Eglon was, well, he was uninspiring. We'll find later on that he was described as very fat, which was a, if you're going to lead your people into battle, was certainly a disadvantage.

we'll discover that he was stupid. But, although it was an unexpected misery to find yourself under the hand of Moab, it was a real misery.

[13 : 06] Israel's sin had again led to oppression, this time for 18 years. But then, God's deliverance came from an unexpected quarter.

verse 15. Again, the Israelites cried out to the Lord and he gave them a deliverer, Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gerah, the Benjaminite.

The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon, king of Moab. Now, Eglon is quite different from Othniel. Eglon, sorry, Ehud is quite different from Othniel.

He's a Benjaminite. He comes from the tribe that had failed to drive the Jebusites out of Jerusalem. But the main thing we're told about Ehud is that he's left-handed.

Now, literally, it says he's bound or restricted as to his right hand. The difficulty is it's a very rare word.

[14 : 13] It only seems to appear twice in total. Once, it means closed as in a pit closing its mouth. Sorry, his right hand could have been closed.

It's not impossible. But the only other time it's used of 700 people all restricted as to their right hand, which makes you think they were probably just left-handed rather than disabled.

But we really can't be sure. Even if it only does mean left-handed, then I think certainly in the Bible context of that day we have to say that left-handed was not positive.

Think how right-handedness is used in the Bible. At the Lord's right hand are pleasures forevermore, Psalm 16. It's at the Lord's right hand that his chosen one sits, Psalm 110.

With his right hand the Lord destroys his enemy, Exodus 15, 6. Or you don't have to go back to the Bible to think about right- and left-handedness.

[15 : 18] Think of the Latin words. They are dexter and sinister. Dexter is the word from which we get dexterous. Ambidexterous means that both your hands are essentially right hands so they're both good ones.

Sinister well just doesn't sound great does it for a start. A bend sinister is a sort of thing on one's coat of arms that goes across in a left-handed sort of way and means that you're illegitimate.

So left-handedness wasn't considered to be a great feature. So even if he wasn't disabled he had a tough start in life. Let's put it like that. And he doesn't go off on an exciting mission like Othniel goes the Holy Spirit falls on him he becomes Israel's judge he goes off to war.

Not so our friend Ehud. His is an unexpected mission. He takes tribute to Moab. I wonder if he was chosen for this mission because he was a bit unthreatening especially if he was in fact his hand was in some way right hand was closed up or whatever it was.

He was somehow unthreatening to other people. He was the ideal person to go. Maybe he wasn't that valuable. If he hadn't come back well we've only lost Ehud. Wouldn't matter so much.

[16 : 44] One little detail is that the Hebrew doesn't say that Israel sent tribute by him. It says it sent tribute by his hand. I don't know the hand that he could use or the hand that he couldn't use.

It doesn't say. Just by his hand. So off goes Ehud the unexpected man with the unexpected mission to go and see the unexpected misery.

And I'll read the story starting from chapter verse 16. Now Ehud had made a double edged sword about a cubit long which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing.

He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab who was a very fat man. After Ehud had presented the tribute he sent on their way those who had carried it.

But on reaching the stone images near Gilgal he himself went back to Eglon and said your majesty I have a secret message for you. The king said to his attendants leave us and they all left.

[17 : 50] Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his palace and said I have a message from God for you. As the king rose from his seat Ehud reached with his left hand drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.

Even the handle sank in after the blade and his bowels discharged. Ehud did not pull the sword out and the fat closed in over it.

So Ehud had made a special sword. He'd concealed it on the side where you wouldn't expect swords to be concealed. We don't live in a culture where most people have got secret swords but obviously there it was the fact you had one on the other side no one would know it was going to be a sword there.

And he takes the tribute. Then they go back to the special stones good question as to why in fact there are stone images near Gilgal but there we are it's not covered in the passage so we don't need to worry about that.

And then he goes back with a secret message. Well message is one possible translation. The word is *davar* *davar* it means message means word can just mean thing.

[19:13] and there's a lovely confusion here isn't there? Poor Eglon thinks it's going to be a message and that's the way it's being started but in fact it's just a secret thing and it turns out to be a sword.

And foolish Eglon sends his carefully chosen the troops that he's surrounded by he sends them away because he's not worried about Ehud it's only Ehud it'll all be fine we can just have a chat but the thing or message turns out to be a pointed message or pointed thing more accurately and Eglon is so fat that the sword goes in and gets lost effectively he's not able to take it away because it's gone lost inside Eglon then and the story has an exciting ending too we'll move on from the unexpected message to the unexpected means of escape then Ehud went out into the porch he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them 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 they 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 while they waited

Ehud got away he passed by the stone images and escaped to Sarah he wasn't that wonderful he can't really have planned this unless he was awfully good with secret swords because I think the point is this this is a bit vulgar really but the sword goes in and the extrament comes out where it comes out there are at least two options there the one the NIV has and the other obvious option with the sword itself but that creates the smell I think which is what gives Ehud his chance because there's an unattractive smell and these servants assume he's just going to the loo and they don't like to go in they just wait outside as you know if you've ever waited you've probably waited outside a loo and you don't like to bang on the door do you you just assume well especially when it's the king in there you certainly don't want to bang and say you're coming out soon

I think we could go too far with this but you've got the point there's a lot of waiting and while they wait well Ehud got away and they waited to the point of embarrassment but he's got past the dodgy stones and he's all the way out to Sowa and the unexpected and presumably unplanned means of escape but that provides him with the unexpected mandate now at this late stage Ehud is acknowledged so at verse 27 when 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 follow me he ordered for the Lord has given Moab your enemy into your hands so they followed him down and took possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab they allowed no one to cross over at that time they struck down about 10,000 Moabites all vigorous and strong not one escaped now we're not told that the spirit came upon him in the same way as it was described for Othniel but Ehud's success in the palace is his mandate and victory is won only one comment on this section is that description of the

Moabites they were described as all vigorous and strong is that a contrast with Ehud we don't know Ehud if he was slightly disabled well maybe there's a contrast there in God's power he overcomes so let's bring this together and try and bring it to ourselves and bring it a bit further up to date when there are some things that are the same in both stories in both cases they do evil and in the same way in both cases we see the divine anger in both cases they cry to the Lord out of the depths in each case we see God's willingness to respond to his people's cry such as God's grace rest and in the end in both cases we see there are days or years of rest but there is a difference between the two stories not just in their length but in one case there are big differences between the trials that

[24 : 30] God sends but above all in the deliverer first one he chooses the likely Ophnio in the second one he chooses the unlikely Ehud I want one cross reference this morning which you don't need to look up but I'm going to go across to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 27 26 I'll start at brothers and sisters think of what you wear when you were called not many of you were wise by human standards not many were influential not many were of noble birth but God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him it's because of him that you are in Christ

Jesus who has become for us wisdom from God that is our righteousness holiness and redemption the story about Ehud tells us that you don't have to have a father who is a bishop you don't have to come from the top drawer like Othniel you may be an Ehud someone who was thought perhaps to be dispensable but still be used I came across this poem in a secular context the other day and I put it up on the screen because I really liked it it's a poem about Clement Attlee I'm not going to get involved in whether he was the greatest Labour Prime Minister of the last century but he probably was and I really liked it few thought he was even a starter there were those who thought themselves smarter but he ended PM

CH and OM an Earl and a Knight of the Garter God could take you know he didn't come out of the top drawer like Churchill but exciting things could happen through him I don't want to over spiritualize that it was just nice to take an example of the way that people can be used who come from different backgrounds and different places but I want to come back to the things of God and as we shall learn again as Christmas approaches God works in unexpected ways his son is born in a little village in Palestine and laid in a manger he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him despised and rejected by men and you see neither Othniel nor Ehud was an entirely adequate savior they did a great thing for God they made a difference in their generation but they died and when they'd gone well all the troubles came back but Jesus is the eternal savior he's the one who saves us for time and for eternity he's the one who doesn't need who won't we don't need another savior we have just the one who's done everything for us and that's what we celebrate as we go through judges we think about Jesus the deliverer the savior and on this advent sunday we don't only think of Jesus as the despised and rejected one because that's not the whole truth although it's an exciting one one day just as unexpectedly to the world he will come in splendor that's what we look forward to on advent sunday we look forward to his return we look forward to the complete deliverance we look forward to rest in its fullness we look forward to heaven through the

Lord Jesus Christ let's pray Lord Jesus your word can be it's both serious and funny we thank you that you speak to us through it we thank you that you save through Othniel's and through Ehud's and we pray that you would use us in your purposes today we thank you for Jesus the Savior and I'm going to end with the prayer book call it for today Almighty God give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light now in the time of this mortal life in which thy son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility that in the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead we may rise to the life immortal through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the

Holy Ghost now and ever Amen Amen