

An Unlikely Deliverer

Devotional Reading: [Ecclesiastes 7:1–13](#)

Background Scripture: [Judges 3](#)

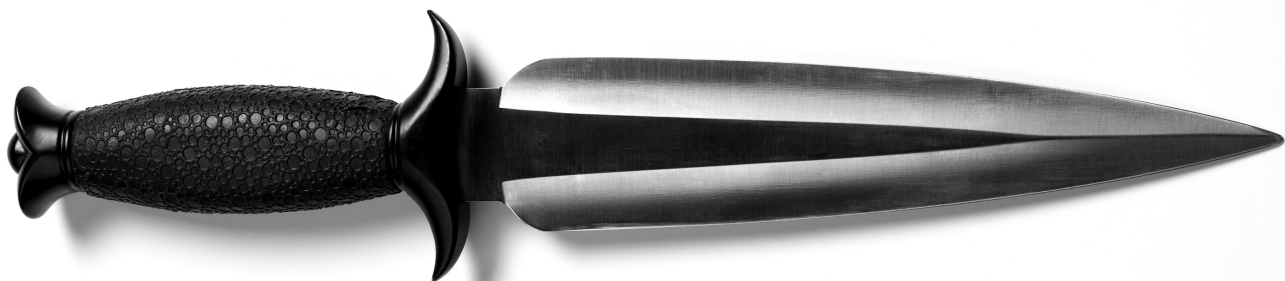
[Judges 3:15–23, 30](#)

¹⁵ 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. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. ¹⁶ Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a cubit long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. ¹⁷ He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man. ¹⁸ After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way those who had carried it. ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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, ²¹ Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly. ²² 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. ²³ Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

³⁰ That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.



Key Text

When the children of Israel cried unto the LORD, the LORD raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded.—Judges 3:15

Generations: From Canaan to Jerusalem

Unit 2: From Settled People to Judges

Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Ehud's role in liberating Israel.
2. Explain the role of judges in Israel's history and leadership.
3. Write a prayer asking God to deliver them from a difficult situation (or specific place of oppression).

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Surprising Solution
- B. Lesson Context: Literary
- C. Lesson Context: Historical

I. Public Tribute (Judges 3:15–18)

- A. Deliverer with a Mission (v. 15a)
- B. Delegate with a Weapon (vv. 15b–18)

Know Your Enemy

II. Private Message (Judges 3:19–23)

- A. Deceit (vv. 19–20)
- B. Dispensation (vv. 21–23)

III. Peace Regained (Judges 3:30)

Masterful Strategy

Conclusion

- A. Uniquely Equipped
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Ehud *Ee-hud*

Gera *Gear-ra* (G as in *get*)

Gilgal *Gil-gal* (G as in *get*)

Joab *Jo-ab*

Othniel *Oth-ni-el*

Reuben *Roo-ben*

Introduction

A. Surprising Solution

It was my last Sunday at the church I attended through college. It was the weekend of my graduation. The minister called me to the front of the church and announced my plans for further education at a seminary hundreds of miles away. What he didn't know was that although my departure date was imminent, I was stressed because I didn't know where I was going to live. The new university did not have on-campus housing set aside for seminary students, and I had only briefly visited the town before acceptance. I was unfamiliar with the area and had no connections.

After the church service, my friends and family said goodbye and wished me well. An older couple hung back and approached me at the very end. They were unknown to me and knew nothing about my plans before that day. The couple told me they used to live in a town not far from my future school, and they still owned a house there. They offered it to me on the spot as a place to live while I attended seminary. I was thoroughly surprised by God's method of provision!

God often prepares help for us long before we know what we need. Sometimes, that help shows up in unexpected ways or through unlikely people.

B. Lesson Context: Literary

When we hear the word *judges*, the first image that may come to mind is that of officials adjudicating legal disputes. But that was not their primary task in the book of Judges. Their recorded actions reveal that they were chiefly *deliverers* or (in an earthly sense) *saviors*. [Judges 2:16](#) reveals this meaning: "Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them." The book of Judges is largely a compilation of narratives depicting these valiant deliverers for the Israelites during times of oppression. The book begins with events just before Joshua's death. The parallel information in [Joshua 24:28–31](#) and [Judges 2:6–10](#) purposefully links the books chronologically.

C. Lesson Context: Historical

[Joshua 5:13–12:8](#) details the Israelites' military exploits in taking possession of the land that God

promised; this was in accordance with God's instructions in [Deuteronomy 20:16–17](#) (see [Lessons 3–4](#)). But even after the Israelites defeated thirty-one kings ([Joshua 12:24](#)), the Lord cautioned that there was much more to conquer ([Joshua 13:1–17](#)). The caution became an accusation in [Judges 1:1–2:3](#), as the narrative describes a mixture of success and failure. At a place called Bokim (meaning “weeping”), the angel of the Lord reminded the Israelites that their failure to finish the conquest amounted to disobedience ([Judges 2:2](#)).

The long-term result of the Israelites' disobedience was a repeated need—over more than three hundred years!—for strong leaders to be deliverers because of a cyclical pattern of sin. As noted in [Lesson 6](#), the resulting “sin cycles” were characterized by the four-stage sequence of *duplicity*, *disaster*, *distress*, and *deliverance* (see a fuller explanation in last week's Lesson Context).

The first recorded deliverer-judge was Othniel, who served forty years in that capacity ([Judges 3:7–11](#)). His time frame was perhaps 1373 to 1334 BC. But after his death, the Israelites needed another savior. The Israelites found themselves subjugated by King Eglon of Moab. With help from his neighboring allies, the Ammonites and Amalekites, King Eglon ruled over a portion of the territory of Benjamin and the region assigned to the tribe of Reuben. Eglon's base of power was “the City of Palms”—that is, Jericho (compare [Deuteronomy 34:3](#); [Judges 1:16](#)). We speculate that he set up court there to better keep an eye on the Israelites, whom he oppressed for eighteen years.

I. Public Tribute ([Judges 3:15–18](#))

A. Deliverer with a Mission (v. 15a)

15a. 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.

God is rescuing the *Israelites* through the efforts of a man named *Ehud* ([Judges 3:12–14](#)). He is the second recorded *deliverer* of God's people during the period of the judges, serving in that capacity from approximately 1319 to 1239 BC ([Judges 3:30](#)). Scholars consider him a “major” judge because his recorded account includes extensive details. The same Hebrew letters for Ehud's name are found in [Psalm 28:7](#), where the word is translated “praise.”

The Israelites are subject to oppression by the Moabites. The root of their oppression is the declaration in [Judges 3:12](#) that the Israelites “did evil.” Elsewhere, this phrase is followed by an identification of the evil as idolatry; therefore, it's reasonable to conclude that the sin here is the same (compare [Judges 2:11–13](#); [3:7](#); [10:6](#)). The fictitious gods the Israelites have been serving have not helped them. So, as a last resort, they cry out to *the Lord*, and he gives *them a deliverer*.

The text provides what may strike us as a peculiar detail about Ehud: he is *left-handed*. This detail is essential later in the account ([Judges 3:21](#), below). It's natural to think that this description refers to Ehud's dominant hand being his left. However, it could also mean his right hand is limited or disabled. Another possibility is that Ehud is a warrior purposefully trained to utilize his left hand for battle (compare [Judges 20:16](#)). Or it may be that Ehud is ambidextrous (compare [1 Chronicles 12:1–2](#)). For

the mission ahead, however, he will use his left hand for a specific reason (see below).

There is a certain irony here in that Ehud is also a *Benjamite* because the Hebrew name “Benjamin” means “son of my right hand.” In ancient Near Eastern culture, the right hand signifies a place of honor, trust, and authority (examples: [Psalms 45:9](#); [110:5](#); compare [Acts 7:55–56](#)). By contrast, being positioned at a person’s left hand could signify dishonor (example: [Matthew 25:41](#)). But neither of these meanings seems to be in view here.

Ehud’s left-handedness, paired with his identification as a member of the tribe of Benjamin, holds significance when considered in light of [Judges 20:13b–16](#) and [1 Chronicles 12:1–2](#) (noted above). The Benjamites’ capability of ambidextrous warfare gives them a significant advantage. Soldiers of the era typically held their shields in their left hand and their weapons in their right hand, making them vulnerable to opposing soldiers who did the opposite.

Unlike many other judges, the text gives no indication of God’s Spirit coming upon Ehud for empowerment (compare [Judges 3:10](#); [6:34](#); [11:29](#); [15:14](#)). Rather, Ehud’s divine commission flows from the gifts God has already given to him: valor, weaponry, skill, and cunning. These are all things Ehud has cultivated, which God puts to use at the right time.

What Do You Think?

Is it more common for God to empower someone suddenly for an immediate task or utilize previously honed skills?

Digging Deeper

Are there skills you sense God calling you to increase?

B. Delegate with a Weapon (vv. 15b–18)

15b. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab.

In the ancient Near East, subordinated people sent *tribute* to ruling powers. Israel’s purposeful present to *Eglon king of Moab* indicates Moab’s control over them. A typical tribute might be sent to appease ruling forces, but it also took the form of oppressive taxes of precious metals, grain, livestock, or unusual artifacts (examples: [2 Kings 16:7–8](#); [17:3–5](#); [2 Chronicles 17:11](#)). At worst, tribute could be demanded by those in power in the form of forced labor (example: [1 Kings 4:21](#)).

The territory of *Moab* is on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, near its southern end. As the first generation of Israelites who escaped from Egyptian bondage made their way toward the promised land, they were careful not to provoke the Moabites ([Deuteronomy 2:9](#)). Even so, [Numbers 22–25](#) record hostility and undue fraternization between the Moabites and God’s covenant people as the Israelites made their way to the Jordan River.

Know Your Enemy

“We have met the enemy, and they are ours!” declared Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry after his naval victory on Lake Erie in the War of 1812. A century and a half later, a 1970 Earth Day poster

restated his proclamation with a twist: “We have met the enemy, and he is us!”

Remembering when you were your own worst enemy is usually not too difficult. You spoke when you should have kept quiet. You didn’t speak up when necessary. You let emotions govern your response to a situation. The list is endless. But these examples raise a question: Should we try to forget or remember such failures?

One can make the case either way, and it is important to consider the terms and context carefully. The book of Judges reveals that the ancient Israelites were their own worst enemies because they did not remember and learn from their sinful past. They squirm under the consequences of their mistakes and call out to God. He often rescues them, but just a few verses later, they are depicted as falling back into the cycle of sin. The neighboring nations may oppress them, but God allows it because of their actions and decisions. Sometimes, the only person to blame is oneself. Are you in that camp?

—RLN

16. Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a cubit long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing.

Our modern concept of a *double-edged sword* might be more substantial than the blade Ehud carries. Older translations of Scripture, like the KJV, use the word “dagger” to describe the weapon. Perhaps to keep his mission and intent a secret, Ehud *made* the blade himself. A *cubit* translates to about eighteen inches. Scholars guess this length is probably a “short cubit,” closer to fourteen inches—the span from one’s elbow to the knuckle of a closed fist. Certainly, the knife’s size and shape fit Ehud’s frame so that he could carry it on his *thigh*.

Soldiers draw swords from across their bodies, typically reaching for the hilt with their dominant hand. The majority are right-handed. Therefore, they draw their swords from their left side. Royal guards might, thus, inspect only the left side. In any case, Ehud’s intent to hide the weapon is obvious.

17. He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man.

Traditionally, translators and scholars consider the description of *Eglon* to mean he is very obese. The word translated as *fat*, however, is sometimes a signal of health (example: [Psalm 73:4](#)). It can refer to plumpness (compare [Genesis 41:2](#)). But it also describes the excellent health given to Daniel and his friends after they ate only vegetables and drank water for days ([Daniel 1:15](#)). In Eglon’s case, the description follows the abundance and prosperity he enjoys as the reigning and oppressive king; he savors the plentiful life.

18. After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way those who had carried it.

Ehud travels with an entourage. The way Ehud arrived and now departs gives the visit an air of being official. He and his companions appear deferential. The group’s presence is also necessary to bring the entirety of their *tribute* to the king—assuming it is heavy enough to require a crew to carry it. Ehud and his retinue present the tribute to Eglon together. The reason Ehud then *sent* away his traveling companions is explained next.

What Do You Think?

Is it easier to follow through with obedience to the Lord in a group or as an individual? Why?

Digging Deeper

How does individual responsibility factor into the spiritual life?

II. Private Message

(Judges 3:19–23)

A. Deceit (vv. 19–20)

19. 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.

We get the impression that Ehud initially departs with his retinue but then appears to change his mind after traveling the short distance to *Gilgal*. There is more than one town named Gilgal in the Old Testament. One such town is about seventeen miles northwest of Jericho. That is the Gilgal of [1 Samuel 7:16](#) and [2 Kings 2:1](#), so it is not the one mentioned here.

The name *Gilgal* means something like “circle of stones.” It suggests this town is connected with nearby quarries and is a prominent landmark outside Jericho. In this location, such *stone images* would be erected in dedication to the cultural gods of the area (compare [Deuteronomy 7:5, 25; 12:3](#); [2 Kings 17:41](#); [2 Chronicles 34:3–4](#)). They would also be used as a memorial or monument and could stand as a boundary marker.

Since this particular Gilgal stands near Jericho ([Judges 3:13](#)), its location coincides with where the Israelites set up camp after crossing the Jordan ([Joshua 4:19](#); see [Lesson 2](#)). There, Joshua commanded God’s people to erect twelve stones from the Jordan River to memorialize their entrance into the promised land. The action was to help them remember that God brought them across on dry ground ([4:20–24](#)).

Regardless of the geographic marker’s significance, Ehud returns alone to the palace to accomplish his real mission. The tribute has established trust with Eglon, giving the impression that Ehud is a dutiful, subservient Israelite. Ehud uses that trust to obtain the king’s attention and earn a private audience. The idea of a *secret* entices the king. He sends his royal *attendants* away.

What Do You Think?

Why do secrets pique human interest? What is it about them that entices us?

Digging Deeper

Are secrets always bad? Consider these “secret” places of hiddenness in God ([Psalm 27:5](#); [31:20](#); [91:1](#); [139:15](#)).

20. 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,

The *upper room* is a private space for the *king*. Translated literally from the Hebrew, it means “roof-chamber of coolness.” It is a well-ventilated terrace built on a flat rooftop with many windows for

breezes. We don't know the time of year this meeting occurs, but the average daily temperature from late May through early October in modern Jericho exceeds 90°F. The chamber is separate from the king's main audience chamber on the ground level, making it an excellent place for a personal conversation. [Judges 3:24](#) implies that this room includes Eglon's chamber for toileting.

Ehud evokes Eglon's interest, and the king rises from *his seat*. Ehud uses a plural word for *God*, which may tempt Eglon to believe he will receive an oracle from "the gods." He is so interested in it that he stands up! Kings do not usually change their posture in the presence of underlings. His choice to rise is even more surprising, given his obesity. Ancient kings deeply desired knowledge of future events to maintain control.

What Do You Think?

What is the role of anticipation or expectation in delivering a message? What makes a message compelling?

Digging Deeper

How might your answer influence the delivery of the gospel through preaching? Evangelism?

B. Dispensation (vv. 21–23)

21. Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.

With the king moving toward him, *Ehud* takes full advantage of the situation and acts quickly. Ehud can lunge forward faster than the obese king can move backward. As with Joab's murder of Amasa ([2 Samuel 20:9–10](#)), the motion of his *left hand* draws no suspicion—at least, none in time for a suitable reaction.

22. 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.

On the nature of *the sword*, see the commentary on [Judges 3:16](#) above. Such weapons have three primary parts: a *handle*, a *blade*, and a cross guard to separate the handle from the blade. As the phrase *cross guard* implies, its function is to guard the user's hand from crossing into the sharp blade. In doing so, it also limits the penetration depth of the weapon. The fact that Ehud's *blade* enters Eglon's belly completely, handle and all, indicates that the sword lacks such a cross guard.

What Do You Think?

Ehud used cunning and strategy to defeat Eglon. Is strategy appropriate in our spiritual lives?

Digging Deeper

What role might strategy play in gaining maturity, defeating enemies, or trampling temptation?

23. Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

The details of Ehud's escape are not clear. The departure hinges on the meaning of the word *porch*,

but this is the only place in the Old Testament where this Hebrew word is used. Perhaps it is a roof exit. In any case, Ehud somehow leaves the king's chamber without raising an alarm and locks *the doors*. Because the doors are locked, the servants give the king privacy. As they wait, believing Eglon is using the restroom, Ehud flees ([Judges 3:24–26](#)).

III. Peace Regained ([Judges 3:30](#))

After Ehud flees from Jericho, he calls the Israelites to arms and leads them into battle ([Judges 3:26–29](#)). Ehud confidently asks Israel to follow him because he knows the loss of their king demoralizes the Moabites.

30. That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.

Like many judges who govern after Ehud, he assists God's people in subduing their enemies (compare [Judges 4:23](#); [8:28](#); [11:33](#)). The phrase *made subject* signifies bending the knee—the Moabites now submit to Israelite power and rule for the next *eighty years*. This period probably represents two generations and is the longest span of *peace* recorded in the book of Judges.

Masterful Strategy

During the Trojan War, the Greek leader Odysseus led his army in a shrewd and cunning maneuver. After a ten-year-long siege on the city of Troy, which brought little success, the Greeks concocted a new scheme. They built an enormous wooden horse, hid soldiers inside, and pretended to desert the war. The Greek army sailed away.

When the Trojans found the wooden horse, they believed it was abandoned. They dragged the giant equine into their city and declared victory. During the night, the hidden Greek soldiers emerged. They traveled to the city gates and opened them, enabling the rest of the Greek army to return and sack the city.

Victory often requires dexterous problem-solving and creativity. What is the role of acumen, shrewdness, and wise perception in the life of a modern believer (consider [Matthew 10:16](#))?

—BRT

Conclusion

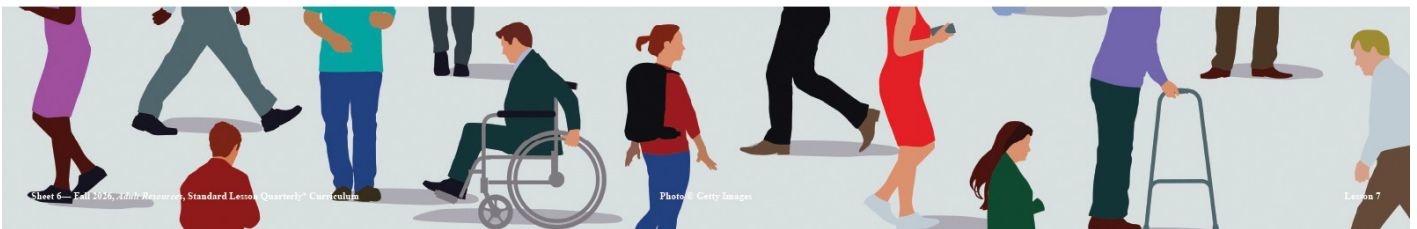
A. Uniquely Equipped

King Eglon fell to a single blow without struggle—the fatal stroke made by a man he failed to perceive as a threat. The secret “message” was a verdict of judgment executed by Israel's deliverer: the oppression of God's people was terminated. Although the Israelites once again had done evil in God's sight, when they cried to him in their misery, he faithfully answered ([Judges 3:12, 15](#)). Ehud's proficiency with his left hand especially positioned him in this situation. He faithfully honed his unique talents and bravely used them when God asked him to move on Israel's behalf.

Ehud's story, like all of Israel's judges, illustrates the cycle God's people repeated time and time again after the era of Joshua's leadership. Through the judges, God showcases his desire for partnership with humanity. Although God seeks, saves, empowers, and redeems, he often desires to employ people in the process. Sometimes he finds a willing person (example: [Isaiah 6:8](#)), sometimes he finds a reluctant person (example: [Exodus 4:13](#)), and sometimes he finds no one ([Ezekiel 22:30](#)).



God uses people you wouldn't expect.



Visual for [Lesson 7](#). Display this visual in a prominent place. Utilize it to assist in teaching this lesson's Thought to Remember.

There is a cliché in Christian circles that says, “God does not call the qualified; he qualifies the called.” Sometimes, God prepares people for work they will do long before they know the details. Ehud emerged to solve an eighteen-year-long subjugation. He planned diligently before acting boldly. Waiting upon the Lord is a fundamental exercise of faith, and it can take years before the Lord's solution arrives. In the meantime, we must keep the faith, follow the commands he gives, and trust the work he is doing.

B. Prayer

Father God, you are our rescuer and redeemer. Thank you for preserving your people despite

cycles of faithlessness. Thank you for hearing us when we cry out to you. Prepare us for devoted service to you and others. Hone our skills and talents so we will be ready when you call us to action. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God uses people you wouldn't expect.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Invite participants to think of a fictional story—from a book, play, or movie—in which an oppressive ruler or villain is killed. Ask them to summarize the plot. (Examples: *The Wizard of Oz*; *The Lion King*; *Sleeping Beauty*; *Star Wars*; *Macbeth*; *The Manchurian Candidate*; and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) As time allows, have learners share a variety of plots, noting their similarities.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Oppressors and Deliverers” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have small groups of three or four work together to complete as indicated. Then invite groups to share their conclusions with the whole class.

Transition into Bible study by saying, “We enjoy heroic stories in which evil is destroyed and oppressed people are set free. In today’s lesson, consider the villain and deliverer symbolically. What might they represent for the nation of Israel and in our lives?”

Into the Word

Divide the class in half, designating one half as **Group Ehud** and the other half as **Group Eglon**. After a volunteer reads [Judges 3:15–18](#) aloud, invite each group to list all the details they know about their character and his appearance. (Advise **Group Eglon** to also consider verses [12–14](#).) Ask the following question for in-group discussion: What qualities might they assume about their character, based on the information provided? (Examples: Eglon was overindulgent with food, and Ehud was smart and strategic.) When they finish compiling their lists, invite groups to share their information.

Pass out pens and index cards. Ask a volunteer to read [Judges 3:19–22](#) aloud. Instruct participants to find a partner and transcribe what they think God’s message was for Eglon. Call the class together and ask pairs to share their answers. Work as a large group to compose one common statement. Write the statement on the board. Discuss: How does this message fit with Ehud’s role as a judge?

Ask a volunteer to read [Judges 3:23, 30](#) aloud. Return participants to their groups and ask them to

discuss the following:

Group Eglon. Read verses [24–26](#). How did Ehud ensure the success of the assassination?

Group Ehud. Read verses [27–29](#). How did Ehud lead the Israelites to defeat their enemies?

After calling time, bring the groups back together to talk about the conclusion—that the land had peace for eighty years. As a large group, discuss what this peaceful period looked like for the Israelites: 1—How might their strength and energy be spent? 2—How might their relationships change with one another, God, and other nations? 3—How might a new generation who only knows peace and freedom think and behave?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Before and After” exercise from the activity page. Have participants complete it in pairs before discussing their conclusions in small groups.

Into Life

Conduct a whole-class reflection session. Ask participants to consider: “When we turn away from God and lean into sinful tendencies, what sort of things oppress us?” Write the group’s responses on the board. (*Potential answers:* fear, worry, anxiety, depression, envy, resentment, unforgiveness) Say, “Think of King Eglon as a symbol of these tendencies, growing bigger and more settled in your heart, keeping you captive and helplessly oppressed.”

Then invite participants to choose a partner. Ask partners to share about a difficult situation or place of oppression they are facing or have faced in the past. As time allows, distribute pens and index cards. Ask participants to write a prayer to God, describing their oppression and asking God to deliver them from it. Encourage partners to pray over one another before closing class time.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(October 18—An Unlikely Deliverer\)](#)
