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Judith Saves Her People

Judith 8:1–13:20 · Harvest · Adults

Judith is a book about what to do when the people in charge have given up.

Context: the book is set during a campaign by Holofernes, general of Nebuchadnezzar, who is called king of the Assyrians here, though historically he ruled Babylon after Nineveh had fallen. Many Catholic scholars read Judith as an inspired story that uses history freely to teach trust in God under persecution; the Church has not defined its literary form (CCC 110). Holofernes destroys shrines so that the nations will worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god (Jdt 3:8). He besieges Bethulia, a hill town guarding the way to Jerusalem, and seizes its springs. After thirty-four days the leaders promise to surrender if God does not act within five days.

Judith, a widow of more than three years, devout, wealthy and respected, calls the elders in and tells them they have no business setting God a deadline: he can save whenever he wills, and their part is to trust, pray and lead. She lies prostrate in sackcloth and prays at the hour of the evening incense in Jerusalem. Then she dresses in her finest clothes, goes to the Assyrian camp with her maid, and tells Holofernes she has deserted her people. She keeps God's food laws and prays every night. On the fourth night Holofernes lies drunk after a banquet; Judith prays for strength and beheads him with his

own sword. She returns to Bethulia with the proof, insisting that God kept her from any defilement (13:16), and the Assyrian army flees (Jdt 14–15).

The Church's reading: Judith is among the holy women who kept Israel's hope alive and prepared for Mary, women God chose, though they seemed powerless, to show his faithfulness (CCC 64; 489). On her deception, St. Thomas Aquinas says she is praised not for lying but for her desire to save her people at the risk of her life (Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3); the Church teaches that a good end does not make a bad means good (CCC 1753). The killing itself is told as God's deliverance of a besieged people through a widow who seemed powerless (Jdt 9:10–11; 13:14–15), not as a model for private violence; the Church reads it in light of its teaching on legitimate defense and on avoiding war (CCC 2265, 2307–2309).

For adult life:

Don't put God on a deadline. Most adults have bargained, at least silently: if God doesn't fix this by a certain date, we're done. Judith calls that what it is, an attempt to manage God, and invites us back to trust.

Pray before you act. Judith's long prayer (Jdt 9) comes before any plan is carried out. In work, family and leadership, the order matters.

Widowhood and single life are vocations, not waiting rooms. Judith runs her household, leads her town, and later, the book says, never remarries (16:22). St. Jane Frances de Chantal, widowed young with four children, went on to found the Visitation order with St. Francis de Sales.

Ends and means. In business, politics and family conflict, a good cause tempts us to cut corners. Aquinas's distinction is worth keeping: courage and faith can be praised while a tactic is not.

A real-life step: the next time you catch yourself giving God an ultimatum, turn it into an honest prayer about your weakness, and leave the timing to him. Then ask how you might support a widow or a single parent you know.

Song of praise · Judith 16:1–25

Judith's hymn (Jdt 16) echoes Miriam's song, linking her deliverance to the Exodus. Its heart is reverence: the one who fears the Lord is great. She then dedicates the spoils to God in Jerusalem and lives quietly the rest of her life.

> **Church teaching note**
> Church teaching: Judith among the holy women who kept Israel's hope alive and prepared for Mary (CCC 64, 489); the end does not justify the means (CCC 1753); legitimate defense and avoiding war (CCC 2265, 2307–2309), read as context for the book's account, not as making Judith a general model; literary forms (CCC 110). St. Thomas Aquinas on Judith: Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3. Judith 14–16 (the Assyrian flight; she never remarried, 16:22) are cross-references outside the retold passage. St. Jane Frances de Chantal is offered as a saint who lived widowhood as a vocation.

Talk about it

1. Have you ever given God a deadline? What happened to your faith when it passed?
2. Judith prayed long before she acted. What decision in front of you needs prayer first?
3. When are you tempted to let a good cause justify a bad tactic?
4. Catholic connection: read CCC 1753. How does it help us read Judith's story honestly?

Key verse: Jdt 9:11. Look it up in your Bible.