

RUF Bible Study – Judges
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Judges 10-12 – Jephthah – Mercy and Vows

The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year.
Judges 10:6-8

Have you ever watched a movie and when it was over you didn't know what had happened? What did that movie mean? I felt that way after I watched *Babel*. Huh? What was that about?

The story of Jephthah is like that too. It's the toughest story to understand in this book, and I think one of the hardest in the Old Testament. It's the one I'd like to skip. But we can't. So we'll do our best to see what we can see – how could this apply to the gospel?²

Let's get straight to it.

The Set-Up – Everyone Agrees on This

The people of God are in trouble again. The worst as of yet. There were two briefly mentioned judges at the beginning of chapter 10 – Tola and Jair – but we don't know anything about them except Jair had thirty sons who rode thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities. They judged for a combined 45 years. Okay...

So we continue, and read our familiar refrain in 10:6, "*The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, the Ashtaroath...*" and the list goes on and on this time. Things have gotten even worse, furthering our downward spiral.

We'll return to the rest of chapter 10, but for now let's jump down to the end. The Ammonites are encamped in Gilead. The people of Israel cry out for a leader to fight against the marauders, and offer him the headship of the town.

There is someone who can do it. His name is Jephthah (one of the harder names of the Bible with all the aspirates). But he's not the all-time best guy. First, he's the son of a whore. His dad's name is Gilead, which is the name of the city, which is suspicious. I have a grad student friend whose name is Norman, and he lives in Norman, so this is certainly possible.

This is no put down. He is the son of a whore. He apparently was raised in Gilead's household. At least, he was until the legitimate sons kicked him out.

Jephthah fled the town and lived in Tob, where he started a life of organized crime. That may be going to far, but he gathered "worthless fellows" and became enough of a leader that people recognized him as a possibility to save Israel.

Notice that the Lord doesn't factor in to this point. We have been seeing how the Lord rose up judges to save Israel. But he didn't with Abimelech. And he didn't with either Tola or Jair. We don't know what that means, but it doesn't sound good.

The Ammonites attack Israel. The people are desperate, so they go find Jephthah in Tob and bring him back to Gilead. They start to haggle with him, trying to get him to lead the people. Jephthah pushes back, reminding them that he hasn't been treated well there. He negotiates to the point where he is now the leader of Gilead, which means he has gotten a position over the very family that had hated him. Victory!

But the real victory is yet to come. Jephthah begins to talk to the Ammonites, trying to stave off an attack. His speech to the Ammonite king is truly amazing in its historicity, theology and savvy. He recounts God's work for his people, and makes an application that the Ammonites really don't want to do this. He mentions a god named Chemosh, which was a Moabite god. He's either mixed up, or the gods were blending together, or he's taking an intentional jab at the Ammonites by importing to them already-defeated gods.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Judges from Block, Wilcock, Redeemer Pres, Davis, Cundall/Morris, Jordan, and listened to sermons from Brandon Barrett, Shaynor Newseome, and Pete Hatton. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Since this isn't a technical commentary, I will not be able to offer full reasons for every opinion. I would recommend you consult textual commentaries if you're interested in the debate on this passage.

To be honest, this all sounds pretty good. Jephthah knows his stuff. He is conversant in the history of God's working with his people, and he uses words well. This long speech puts this outcast ruffian in a positive light. *But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent him.* So there would be a fight.

The Spirit of the Lord comes on Jephthah. This phrase doesn't mean Jephthah became a Christian. We want to believe it does, and we've been taught to believe it does. But it means that God used Jephthah in a special way that day. The Spirit of the Lord can come on people and have them do all sorts of things. We wouldn't know it unless we were told it by the Scriptures, or I suppose unless it were a miracle. It's not like Jephthah started flying or glowing or shooting lasers out of his fingers. He did something awesome. He was about to win the war. We read of his victory in 11:32-33, which concludes, *So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.* Hooray for Jephthah!

And then.

And then something happened. Jephthah took a vow. This seems to me to be the point of the narrative, but I don't know what it means. We'll cover this in the two possibilities below, so hold it for another short while.

If we skip ahead past the vow to chapter 12, we read of Jephthah's conflict with the Ephraimites. This tribe has come up before with Gideon in chapter 8. They're the tribe that's full of themselves. They want more and more. They want credit and glory. So they buck up against this rogue leader with threats of violence.

Jephthah isn't intimidated. He fights against them, and his men rout them. 42,000 Ephraimites fall, which means they weren't all they said they were. This is where we get the semi-famous Shibboleth story. Since these were all Israelites, it was tough to tell who was who. So they came up with a dialect drawl test. The Ephraimites couldn't say "Shibboleth." They would say "Sibboleth" without the sh sound. And they'd be caught in their tracks.

You can learn to say words like other people. In the drama department here at OU, there is at least one class just on dialects. It's fun to sit with them when they're working on their Irish accent or Scottish brogue. And we all might be able to mimic certain people. But when forced to do something you just can't do on demand, you might be sunk. Words did them in. Jephthah was a master at using words to trap people.

The sad part of this story is the church fighting each other. Gilead had handled the Ephraimites with diplomacy. Jephthah used words in order to wipe them out. God's people aren't fighting the outsiders any more. They are fighting themselves.

Have you ever had a foot fungus? I think I got one from the locker room. It itched like crazy. I would sit in the coffee shop, take off my shoe and scratch it while I talked with people. That seemed to be slight public faux pas, so I went to the doctor and started applying foot cream. I also bought some flip-flops to wear in the locker room.

It occurred to me the other day that the locker room surely gets cleaned now and then. But my flip-flops had never been cleaned. So wasn't it possible that I was giving myself the fungus? If I put on the cream and then put on the shoes, wasn't I thwarting my own efforts?

God's people have the fungus. They got it from the outside, but it's not infecting them on the inside. They're no longer fighting the enemies. They are the enemies. This is how bad things have gotten. They need help.

Jephthah's Vow – Theory One

The Minority View

So the big question is what is the deal with Jephthah's vow. This takes up a good chunk of chapter 11, and we have to wonder what it all means.

Let me present the minority vow view first. In this view, Jephthah is offering up someone out of his house as a forever servant of the tabernacle. This would be similar to Hannah dedicating Samuel to the service of the Lord in the first chapter of 1 Samuel, which is only a few books of the Bible away from our story.

Jephthah would have known the Lord's history and his ways, as per his speech to the Ammonites, which we have discussed. The Spirit of the Lord has overcome him; this doesn't only modify his fight with the enemy, but also his vow to the Lord.

So Jephthah thinks a servant will come out of the house when he makes this vow. His vow is an offering to the Lord. Burnt offerings can also be sacrificed to God without being consumed. They can be dedicated to God. We might make a further analogy to Romans 12:1, *Therefore offer your bodies as living sacrifices to God...* God wants all of us sacrificed to him. Not literal human sacrifices, but dedicating our whole lives to him. This would be symbolic by giving of your assets as a sacrificial offering to God.

But Jephthah doesn't expect his daughter to walk out. He is undone when she comes out to greet him for his victory. Behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and dancing. She is so happy her dad is the judging victor. But he's not. He tears his clothes in mourning. His vow has turned back on him.

In this view Jephthah is an honest, God-fearing man. He cannot go back on his vow, nor should he. It is a good vow, though perhaps rashly taken. His unnamed daughter is also heroic, in that she willingly sacrifices her future family life in order to give a life of service to the Lord and his tabernacle.

She asks for two months in order to mourn her virginity. This doesn't mean she desperately wanted to have sex (although she may have), but is a picture for the children and husband she will not longer have. This is one of the reasons for

this view. Why would she be mourning her virginity and not her life? Because, this view purports, she wasn't about to lose her life. She wasn't going to die. She would live, but she would never take a man to have and to hold from this day forth until death does she part. She would be devoted to a different Husband.

According to this view, the tragedy is in Jephthah's vow to lose his daughter. Like Abimelech, Jephthah wanted to create a dynasty. He needed his daughter to bear him grandchildren so he could hand over the throne of Israel to them. Without her around, he could not create the legacy he wanted. But he was faithful and gave up the thing that was dearest to him. A man of words was trapped by his own words to God. God took away his idols using the very thing he thought he was the best at – words.

We should take great care with our vows. We should choose our words and alliances carefully.

And we should consider our ambitions. God will often thwart them so we will give him all the glory he is due.

Jephthah's Vow – Theory Two

The Majority View

Most people think Jephthah's vow was much more sinister, vile and problematic than the minority view. And the just basic reading of the text seems to look like something different. Our plain reading can be, and often is, wrong. But we can't just adopt a theory because it seems cool or unconventional.

In the majority view, Jephthah vows to offer whomever comes out of the house as a human sacrifice. He again thinks it will be a servant (some say he thought it would be an animal), and is shocked when it is his daughter. But he goes through with it.

This view takes a dim view of Jephthah's supposed heroics. It says he was a pagan. He did know the ways of Yahweh, but he was also affected by the Canaanite, Moabite and Ammonite gods just like all of Israel was. So he would have thought, to cover his bases, that he should not only work for the Lord but the Baal gods as well. Those religions included literal human sacrifices, something expressly prohibited by Yahweh.

So we have the worst of the worst. Jephthah is the bizzarro Abraham of Genesis 22. Abraham offered up Isaac as per the wishes of God himself, and Isaac was spared. Jephthah offers his daughter to a Baal god on his own initiative and goes through with the human sacrifice. God is silent. He spares no one.

Things have gotten so bad here that the judges of Israel are offering up his own daughter to a cult god in order to appease its wrath. We have degenerated about as far as we can go, again all to get ahead. Commentator Block writes of the irony: "Abimelech had sacrificed his Israelite half-brothers at the altar of his own ambition so he could rule over his Canaanite half-brothers. Jephthah did one better – he sacrificed his own daughter and with her himself that he might rule over a tribe of his Israelite half-brothers."³

Is that too far for you? Do you think this is impossible?

First let me remind you that hundreds and thousands of people have "sacrificed" people for the "good" of programs and agendas. I was playing soccer with some kids in Berlin a few summers ago. A fountain stood in the middle of the park, and I asked the man we were with about it. The Nazis had built it as a public beautification project. I asked him what it was. It was a statue to Baal. I'm not kidding. It had four corners. On each corner was a woman holding something, something to be sacrificed for the good of the people to the god. One woman had grain, another fish, another an animal and another – a baby. We're talking the 1940s here, not 3000 years ago. The Nazis continued this sacrifice for the good of their race. People followed orders.

In one of the seasons of 24, there is a bad president named Charles Logan. At one point, he wants to kill the Russian president so badly that he is willing to kill his wife along with him because she is in the car with him for the strike. Why? A sacrifice for the good of the country.

How far are we willing to go? What is the life of a human worth? What are you willing to give up in order to get what you want? I doubt any of you would ever actually kill your child. But you might swallow him or her up in your ambition to raise an athlete or scholar. Perhaps some of your parents offered you up on some sacrificial altar for their goals and dreams, not yours. It happens all the time.

In this view, the lesson is that God uses bad people. We want to figure everything out. Judges presses our morality quotient. We want to know who is good and who is bad and have them separated and sorted. But God says no. He says he will use screwed up people. He will accomplish his purposes even through the rankest of evils. We have trouble with that. I do. Hebrews 11 names Jephthah as a man of faith. I might need to rethink my categories of what faith is in order to accommodate this information. Jephthah as a man who displayed faith? When was that?

It's honestly troubling. I try not to be surprised by sin, but I am. I was this very week. People do all sorts of things. Bad things. Darkness lies in our hearts. It resides in the hearts of our heroes and pastors too. We should pray for real the Lord's Prayer – lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Jephthah was trying to use the gods for his own purposes. He thought there would be a pay off if he gave enough of a sacrifice. But those gods are demanding. They will never stop. They will take your soul.

³ Block, 378

The Gospel?

This is a discouraging passage then. We have no real hope here. What shall we do?

I think we have to go to chapter 10, which gives us hope in the gospel. Chapter 10 says that it's really bad. The good news is honest with the bad. The gods of the people around them have enslaved God's people. But now they're enslaved by *all of them: The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him.*

They worshipped the whole lot. And the people of the gods they were worshipping enslaved them. Do you see that idolatry leads to enslavement? Idolatry leads to slavery. Then, once enslaved, the slaves were lead to further idolatry. "Despite their pain and misery Israel continues to worship the same idols that have let them down and brought them trouble."⁴ We might call this the Biblical Stockholm Syndrome. You've heard of this. There are people who are kidnapped and held hostage. Over time they develop such a bond with their captors that they start to empathize with them. They start to love them. And they don't want to be let go. They love and agree with their slavery.

God shows us that is what is happening to his people. They start to worship other gods, and those gods enslave them.

If you worship money or sex or grades or popularity or success – it will swallow you up and enslave you. That slavery will lead to even more idolatry and you'll be caught in a cycle of destruction. It may look good, successful and beautiful, but it will lead to death.

What has to happen is something bad. Things have to overwhelm you so you will cry out for help. That's what the Israelites did. They whored after other gods time and time again, but they knew they could always call God on his cell phone, and he'd answer. He'd come down, beat up the other gods and take her home and clean her up.

She'd wander out again to sleep with someone else. Get in trouble. Get into something over her head. But she had God's number.

So she'd call. And God was angry, like he had been before. *So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. (10:7).*

Later in chapter 10, we read that this time he said something different. He said, *Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? 12 The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. 13 Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. 14 Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.*

So God sold them, and he rebuked them sarcastically. God has given his people over to their sin before, but this time he is so angry he tells them to cry out to the ones they really care about.

God is hurt. He has had enough. He cares so much for his bride, and he's so hurt she's whoring around, and he's been so patient. Call Bill if you love him so much. Why won't he help you? Call Johnny. Let them save you.

Being forsake like this is tough, even for God. Sure God is big, powerful and gracious. But he is also a person. He has feelings, and he has had enough. He says to his people, "I will save you no more."

Wow. That is serious.

Friends, do not take this lightly. God heard their cries for help, but he turned away.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks this question: What is repentance unto life? And it gives this answer: Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

This answer comes from many places in the Bible, but one of those is from 2 Corinthians 7:10: *For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.*

There is a worldly grief, or worldly sorrow. Worldly grief is being more worried about getting caught than you are that you have offended God. It is wanting rescue from harm more than wanting God's love. It is confessing sin to God not because you know you know that you need His forgiveness, but because you don't want to suffer the consequences. It is acknowledging sin, but wanting to hold on to it. It is wanting to go to heaven, not because God is there, but because you want to avoid hell. It is the fear of hell and fear of suffering the consequences of your sin is not evidence that you love God. This is why scaring people into heaven will never work.⁵

Worldly sorrow goes this way, "I want you *if* you give me X." When we say that, we reveal that X is our real, functioning God. We have to have X.⁶

But there is a godly grief, or godly sorrow. This grief is knowing whom you have offended with your sin.

⁴ *Living in a Pluralistic Society*, 66

⁵ Pete Hatton

⁶ *Living in a Pluralistic Society*, 69

It is being full of sorrow over not having holiness. It is being grieved over the fact of what the hymn says you are “prone to wander. Prone to leave the God you love.” It is grieving over the fact that when you sin you are turning away from the One who died for you in order to find satisfaction in something else. It is grieving over the fact that when you sin – you are saying to God – you are not good enough. It is when you see how evil your sin really is you begin to hate it, and you don’t want to continue to sin against God’s love and mercy.

Godly sorrow says, I want you regardless of X, Y, or Z. We show then that God is our true God.⁷

It is repentance that leads to life. Because you love God and grieve how you have offended him, you endeavor after new obedience.

You should memorize this answer: Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

Do you turn from your sin with grief and hatred? Do you turn from it to God?

It sounds like Israel did. Our text says, “*We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.*” 16 *So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel.*

They got to the bottom of themselves. There is something of repentance and relationship when you say, “I don’t care what you do with me. I just want to have you. Do with me what you will.” That is a change of heart. That is what God is looking for. That you would want him so much that you have to have him or nothing at all. They wanted deliverance to be sure, but they wanted God’s will to be done with them. They couldn’t stand to be ignored. So they put away the foreign gods. That is the first time we’ve read of that.

And God answered them. We have to be careful we don’t put in stone the progression of: First, they repented; Then, he responded. We have seen time and time again that God came to his people *before* they repented. He cannot be forced to respond, even by our repentance. That was what they tried the first time. But God does promise to hear his people. He loves his people.

So we have this dilemma again. On the one hand, God’s promises and blessing look conditional. He will only bless his people if they love and serve him. Only if we live up to Biblical principles can we expect to live the good life and have God’s favor.

On the other hand, God’s promises and blessing seem unconditional. God accepts us even when we sin.⁸

What is the answer? Yes. It’s both. If you live only on one side or the other, you are in danger. If we only think of God’s conditionality, we forget about the love, graciousness and forgiveness of a loving God. If we only think of God’s unconditionality, we forget about the justice and holiness of a righteous God. There is a tension here.

This tension is only relieved in the life of Christ. He was where justice and mercy meet. The tension comes to fruition there. Look to the cross.

Do not presume upon the grace of God. Repent and believe the gospel. If you are caught in a sin, then flee to the cross. If you are proud and arrogant in your sin, then do not tarry till you’re better. Repent and believe. You need to get rid of your idols. If you don’t, then you are keeping them around, sort of like insurance in case this whole God thing doesn’t work out.

Repentance means you are brought low. That you confess it all. That you want God no matter what he does with and for you. God may use things in your life to bring you to this point. If so, he is gracious and loving to you.

We are seeing the writer of Judges point to the need for a good and godly king. His point is show how everyone doing what is right in their own eyes is going the wrong way. You may be there too. You may be taking your sexuality in your own hands; the God of the Bible and his sex ethic can’t be right. He can’t be trusted. You may be taking charge of your career. Why would you submit your plans to the God of the Bible who asks you to pursue serving others? Scrap that. You may have other parts of your life where you’re in command. You are the king. You are the Lord of your Suburb. Your domain.

But that will lead to slavery for you. Your agenda will trap you. Squeeze you. You need a king. Jesus is that king. He is the only wise ruler, the loving Suffering Servant who uses his power to give you the life he wants for you, the good life. There has not been a king like this. *Here might I stay and sing, No story so divine; Never was love, dear King! Never was grief like Thine. This is my Friend, in Whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.*

Jephthah is confusing. But God is after your heart. He is the king there, as well as everywhere.

⁷ *Living in a Pluralistic Society*, 69

⁸ Thoughts from *Living in a Pluralistic Society*, 68

My Song is Love Unknown, Samuel Crossman

*My song is love unknown, My Savior's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown, That they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake My Lord should take, frail flesh and die?*

*He came from His blest throne Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none The longed for Christ would know:
But O! my Friend, my Friend indeed, Who at my need His life did spend.*

*Sometimes they strew His way, And His sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day Hosannas to their King:
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath, And for His death they thirst and cry.*

*Why, what hath my Lord done? What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run, He gave the blind their sight,
Sweet injuries! Yet they at these Themselves displease, and 'gainst Him rise.*

*They rise and needs will have My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they saved, The Prince of life they slay,
Yet cheerful He to suffering goes, That He His foes from thence might free.*

*In life, no house, no home My Lord on earth might have;
In death no friendly tomb But what a stranger gave.
What may I say? Heav'n was His home; But mine the tomb wherein He lay.*

*Here might I stay and sing, No story so divine;
Never was love, dear King! Never was grief like Thine.
This is my Friend, in Whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.*