

October 11th, 2015 by Samir Massouh

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 October 2015

Preacher: Samir Massouh

[0 : 00] Good morning. You may be seated. This is time for our children to go to your Sunday school classes and learn about the Lord. May God bless you as you go to Sunday school.

The last several weeks we have been looking at the question, can God use me? Is there really a place for me? Can I be used? And so we have looked at various people who are in some ways oddballs.

They don't exactly fit a typical group of people. We saw that Ehud was a left-handed judge in a society dominated by right-handed people.

Deborah was a woman in a society dominated by men. Again, Gideon is mostly a coward who needs constantly to be assured that he's okay, that God is going to be with him.

And he keeps requesting for signs that God would assure him. And today we look at Jephthah in Judges chapter 11 and 12.

[1 : 23] Jephthah is a very interesting judge. There are two judges that I think are extremely interesting. Jephthah happens to be one of them.

The life of Jephthah is in chapters 11 and 12. And it is looking at two incidents. But the two incidents are connected with each other.

So they're not just two separate, unrelated incidents. There is an overarching theme which we will see. So let's begin first by looking at Jephthah. And let's turn in your Bibles, please, to the book of Judges chapter 11.

If you look at your bulletin, you will also see that on the back I try to help you follow what I'm trying to say. So Jephthah, in verse 1, Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior.

His father was Gilead. His mother was a prostitute. His mother was a prostitute. Gilead's wife, Gilead's legitimate wife, also bore him sons.

[2 : 36] And when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. You're not going to get any inheritance in our family, they said, because you are the son of another woman.

So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tov, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him.

The problem with Jephthah is many. First of all, his mother is a prostitute. So he is clearly an outsider in Israel.

He would never be treated with honor or dignity or respect or anything like that. Socially, he's an outcast.

So he has no family. And his half-brothers, who have the same father but don't have the same mother, drove him away.

[3 : 39] You're not going to get any inheritance in our family. And so he left to the land of Tov. Jephthah has no family, no country, and no future.

When we look at that incident, it echoes some things. When we think about brothers getting rid of their brother, perhaps you might recall Genesis and the story of Joseph.

But in the case of Joseph, it's not because he was illegitimate. In the case of Joseph, it was because his brothers were jealous of him. They suspected he's going to be the leader in the family, and they didn't want him to be.

And so they got rid of him. So Joseph is expelled by his family and sold as a slave to Egypt.

And unless God had intervened, that would have been the end of Joseph, a slave unknown somewhere in Egypt with no record and nothing. But God intervened. So Joseph reminds us of that situation.

[4 : 53] But so does David. What we have in David is something similar to this. Saul is jealous of this young man who is becoming popular with the masses.

And so David marries Saul's daughter. But as Saul's jealousy increases, David's life is in danger. He becomes a fugitive. And about 400 people join him in his fugitive. So this is starting to echo the life of David. But just as Joseph ended on a great note, and David ended on a great note, Jephthah does not.

And we'll have to figure out why. When they seem to be on the same path, heading in the same direction, Jephthah is not. In any case, Jephthah is expelled from his country.

And he is a vagabond. He is like Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest. And Israel is in danger.

[6 : 05] They want a leader. They want a leader to help them. So they come to him, not because they love him, not because they care about him, but because they need him as a warrior. And he doesn't trust them.

And so he makes them take an oath. That is the first oath. That is a preview of other things to happen. And so, in any case, they said, you know, if you lead us, we'll make you the leader and the commander.

And Jephthah doesn't believe them, doesn't trust them, but he decides to do it. Because Israel is at war, this brings us to the second issue.

But before we go to the second issue, I want you to think about that. What happens to people who feel that their family doesn't love them, that they're not accepted?

I hope none of you has experienced that. I really hope so. I hope you all come from healthy families where your parents love you, where they cherish you, where they esteem you, where they would do anything for you.

[7 : 18] I really hope that that is the case. And, of course, rejection goes in various degrees. Rejection is not just one event. It's a spectrum.

I can speak from my own life. We grew up in an average family in Lebanon. We are not, by any stretch of the imagination, wealthy.

We are actually fairly poor. And my father became convinced that the way to come out of poverty is through education. And so he wanted to make sure that all of us went to good schools, got a good education, and were able to improve our state in life.

For that reason, and because in education I was extremely competitive and could compete very hard and do very, very well in college and in school, I was sent to America to get a Western education, which is a lot better than Middle Eastern education, and hopefully that would open doors. My father wanted me to be a medical doctor. There are 14 cousins of us. Eight are medical doctors.

[8 : 43] And my father thought that I was the smartest of them all, but that's, of course, only his opinion. My uncle wouldn't agree with him. So he wanted me to worship, to study medicine.

His daily urging was, become a doctor, make a lot of money. Become a doctor, make a lot of money.

In many ways, money was my father's God. In many ways, that was. And so he thought, if I come to America, I'd become a doctor, I'd make a lot of money.

And I'm sure I would have. I have two cousins who are doctors, and both of them, either one of them, makes four times more than I make as a professor.

Four times. Sometimes I think to myself, why didn't I listen to my father? You know, I wouldn't be driving Toyotas, I'd be driving Rose Voices.

[9 : 48] I wouldn't be living in Kenosha, I'd be living in Beverly Hills. So when my father found out that I'm interested in questions about truth and reality and wanted to major in philosophy, he was really, really disappointed in me.

He thought I was wasting my time and wasting my life and wasting my talents, asking questions, what's ultimate reality? How do we know what we know?

And all these fascinating questions in epistemology. After I became a Christian and decided that God was calling me to be a professor, he was even more disappointed in me.

His advice to me was, become a doctor, make as much money as you can, and then tithe to the church. And that's all your relationship with God.

My relationship with God would have been reduced to tithing. You know, I write God a check and our account is fulfilled.

[11 : 06] He couldn't understand that I would desire God in a more deeper way than that. But God has his own sense of humor.

When my father was 70 years old, he became very sick. For the first time in his life he had ever been sick. The nurse that took care of him was a Christian. And what I had failed for about 20 years to do, she succeeded. She led him to the Lord at the age of 70. I remember when he was on his deathbed, he said to me, Samir, I'm sorry, I never told you I loved you.

And that was true. I don't remember ever once being told that he loved me. So, I am not sold into slavery into Egypt, but I think I know a little bit about rejection.

And I think for that reason I esteem my heavenly father a lot more than if I had wonderful uncles and aunts. And then that maybe God's love wouldn't mean that much to me.

[12:19] But it means a lot to me. Because God loves me at a time that I didn't think anybody else in our family did. So, Jephthah is in a similar but far worse situation.

He has no position of honor. His mother is a prostitute. He's in exile from his country. And he has no future. But he does have a daughter.

He does have one daughter. No sons. Just one daughter. So, he wants to go to battle. And he takes a vow. And the vow is rather stupid.

So, look at chapter 11, verse 29. Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh. Passed through Mizpah of Gilead.

And from there he advanced against the Ammonites. Ammonites would be modern day Jordan. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. If you give the Ammonites into my hands.

[13:27] If I have victory. Whatever comes out of the door of my house. To meet me. When I return in triumph. From the Ammonites. Will be the Lord's.

And I will sacrifice it. As a burn offering. Whoever first comes out. Do dogs know how to come out. And greet you when you've had victory. Do dogs know that. I wonder. Whether he was thinking about a human being. Or whether he was just saying.

You know, whoever comes out, comes out. But he makes this foolish vow. Whoever comes out first. Will be offered as a sacrifice. He does have the victory.

And his daughter comes out. So, he has no family. He has no country. He has no future. He does have a daughter.

[14:25] And guess what he has just finished doing? Putting himself in a situation to lose his daughter. The problem here is that this is a vow.

And it is a foolish vow. Nobody should make these kinds of vows. But there are vows in the scriptures. And maybe we should look at a couple of those vows. Just to figure out whether we as Christians should make vows.

Or whether we should avoid it like a plague. Take a look at Genesis chapter 28. This is an interesting passage. I'll keep you up thinking about it.

Genesis 28. Look at Genesis 28 verses 20 through 22.

So, chapter 28 verses 20 through 22. Then Jacob made a vow saying, If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey.

[15:33] And I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear. So that I may return safely to my father's house. Then the Lord will be my God.

If God does these things for me, he will be my God. I want you to just to think for a minute. And I'm not going to give you the answer.

Is he pledging or is he bargaining? Think about it. Is he making a deal with God?

Or is he pledging? It depends on, I suppose, how you choose to interpret it. A much more nobler vow is in 1 Samuel chapter 9.

That is the vow of Hannah. So, in 1 Samuel chapter 9. 1 Samuel chapter 9.

[16:37] 1 Samuel chapter 9. 1, 9. Once they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the chair by the doorpost of the Lord's temple.

In bitterness of soul, Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow saying, O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.

And no razor will ever be used on his head. It's obvious that Jacob is asking God for things for himself.

Here she is asking for things for herself. But she's not going to keep the child and benefit and enjoy him, etc. She's going to give him back to God. But it is a vow.

We have another stupid vow. King Saul. 1 Samuel 14. He is having victory.

[17:55] They are in a battle. And in 1 Samuel 14, 24. 1 Samuel 14, 24.

Now the men of Israel were in distress that day because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies.

So none of the troops tasted food. So they are fighting hard and they're not eating because Saul made a vow that they wouldn't eat until the victory came.

And so here they were, tired, exhausted, fatigued, fighting hard, but they can't eat. His own son had not heard about that.

He wasn't aware that such a vow had been made and so he finds honey and he eats it. And his father wants to kill him. Even though he didn't know about the vow, but Saul was going to kill Jonathan.

[19:11] And then of course, another vow is in Mark chapter 6, verse 22.

It is the vow of Herod Antipas. When Salome danced in front before him, he gave her that foolish vow, I'll give you anything you want up to half of my kingdom.

And she said, give me the head of John the Baptist. And he didn't want to, but he had made a vow in front of his officers and didn't want to embarrass himself.

So there are vows, and some of them good and some of them awful. Some result in the better and some result in the worse.

How are we to think of Japheth's vow? Let me suggest a couple options. Turn to Micah chapter 6, verse 6.

[20:22] Micah 6, 6 is a very important passage. It really is extremely important. In many, many Jewish circles, it is considered the summary of the ethical statements of the Old Testament.

Jesus quotes it and calls two of the commandments the most important. You can see that in Matthew 23, 23. But in Micah chapter 6, verse 8, Micah knows that he has sinned against God and he's asking himself, what does God want me to do?

How do I know that I have done enough? Let's say in an outburst of anger you insulted your wife and then you want to be reconciled with her.

What's enough? Chocolate? Flowers? Chocolate and flowers? Chocolate, flowers, and eating out?

How do you know that you've done enough? So Micah is thinking about something similar in Micah 6, 6. With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?

[21:41] Shall I come before him with burnt offerings? With a calf one year old? A calf one year old would be more expensive than burnt offerings. Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams?

Ten thousand rivers of oil? And then he's thinking, what's the most expensive thing I've got? My child. Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He is contemplating, maybe I should sacrifice my own child. Of course, had he done that, he would have compounded the situation with murder on top of whatever else he had done.

And then he receives the answer, he has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk with your God.

So, maybe, maybe Jephthah is the kind of person who is so sensitive that he is willing to admit to anything you accuse him of.

[22:55] That whether he did it or not, he's willing to admit it. Part of the plot of Brother Skarmazov.

Or, maybe, he is thinking, my sin is so big, little sin, little punishment, medium-sized sin, medium-sized punishment, big sin, big punishment, humongous sin, humongous punishment, therefore, the life of my son.

I don't know. We're not told what was going on in Jephthah's mind. And I don't know whether he was bargaining with God or not.

But in any case, he makes the vow. You need to realize, first of all, that if he wanted to keep his vow, no priest in Israel would allow him.

human sacrifices would not have been permitted in Israel. Maybe he would have to take her alone to his own altar and kill her there.

But to take her to a priest and ask the priest to offer her as a sacrifice would be completely forbidden. The second thing I want you to know that the worst king in Israel is Ahaz.

[24:24] And Ahaz's sin is that he embraced the worship of Assyrian gods. And Assyrian gods is idolatry.

I mean, it is bad enough because it's idolatry. But what is worse about Assyrian gods is that you offered humans. So the darkest moment in Israel's history was Ahaz sacrificing his own sons, as 2 Chronicles records, sacrificing his own sons to the Assyrian gods.

So I don't think he would have been able to sacrifice her legitimately. Maybe illegitimately, yes, but not legitimately.

And the third thing is that there is something very interesting going on. She realizes that he took an oath and that he had taken an oath before God and so she says, in fact, give me some time so I can go to the mountains.

And he does give her some time, but the interesting thing that that passage says is that she was mourning her virginity.

[25 : 49] She was sad because she wasn't going to have children. I would have thought she would have been sad for the loss of her life.

I would have thought that she would be mourning that she is going to die in a month from now rather than to say sad, I'll never have children in my life.

I suspect, although we do not have any evidence, the text is very ambiguous, I suspect what happened is that, like Hannah, he had to dedicate her to the service of God in the tabernacle and what's so bad about that is that you could never marry and since he is the son of a prostitute and he doesn't have any sons, what has happened to his family line?

That's the end. But in any case, what we have here is a man who makes a very foolish vow who should know better than to make vows like that.

But there is another problem and the problem is in Judges chapter 12, his other problem.

[27 : 14] Look at chapter 12. Perhaps the first three verses.

The men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you?

We're going to burn down your house over your head. What is happening is that he went to war without asking them to come with him?

The dictum of war is what? To the victor belongs the spoils. Those who fight in battle get to take the spoils of war. So if you didn't fight in the battle, guess what you don't get to get?

The spoils of war. So they're asking him, they're upset with him, why didn't you take us with you?

This way we would get something as well. You deprived us of an opportunity to make some wealth here.

[28 : 14] and he answers them by saying, well, you didn't help me, et cetera, et cetera. And then take a look at the end of verse 6, toward the end of the 6.

42,000 Ephraimites were killed at that time. Because of his harsh answer, Israel went into a civil war.

and in that civil war, between him and his allies and them, because of that civil war, 42,000 people were killed.

That many were hurt because of the way he handled that situation. the irony of it is chapter 8.

So take a look at chapter 8. The same situation, the same exact situation, but with a different judge.

Now, the Ephraimites asked Gideon, why have you treated us like this?

[29 : 30] Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian? You know, you didn't take us with you to war, we didn't make any profit. So, just as they were challenging Jephthah later on, they're challenging Gideon right now.

Why didn't you call us when we went to fight Midian? And they criticized him sharply. But he answered them, what have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezar?

I'd have to explain that. God gave Ghorab and Ziv, the Midianite leaders, into your hands? What was I able to do compared to you?

At this, their resentment against him subsided. to put it in simple English, they said, why didn't you take us to war?

Don't you realize that we lost benefits, et cetera, et cetera? And he says, what did I accomplish?

So, I defeated them. But look at my accomplishments.

[30 : 40] My accomplishments compared to you is like nothing. You could accomplish more in coma than I could accomplish in 10 years.

I can't even begin to compare to you. I can't even start to look at myself and yours. You are that much better.

You're that much skilled. You're that much everything. And so, they relented. And the resentment was gone.

So, one answer resulted in resentment but it was averted. Another answer resulted in a civil war that took 42,000 voices.

Maybe the point is Proverbs 15, verse 1. Please take a look at Proverbs 15, verse 1. A gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger.

[32 : 11] Verse 18, a hot tempered man stirs up dissension but a patient man calms a quarrel.

Jephthah never became a second David or a first David because of the ways he used words. In one case, he takes a foolish vow.

in another case, he stirs up wrath and anger and civil war. We all, all of us, should listen seriously to Proverbs 15, 1.

A gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger. I am sure that in this church some will agree with the elders, some will disagree with elders, et cetera, et cetera.

It doesn't matter what you think. I mean, it does matter, of course it matters, but what I mean, it doesn't matter in relationship to this. We need to be gentle and kind with each other.

[33 : 24] We need to use gentle words and kindness rather than harsh words. James talks about the power of the tongue. He compares it to the rudder of a ship.

The ship is huge and it takes the winds to move it, but it's the rudder that directs its direction. You push it this way, the ship turns like this, you push it that way, the ship takes like that.

It's a simple rudder that directs the whole ship. The tongue is also compared to matches. They start fire and they can burn down whole forests.

Those of us who lived in California or are keeping up with the news in California know of the fires taking place in California. Tongues can change direction of things.

Tongues can burn whole forests. So I would encourage all of us to opt for a gentle answer rather than a harsh word.

[34 : 30] Let's try not to start a fire. Let's try to be kind and gracious. Not to end up with a civil war but to deal in a kind way that you can move resentment.

One last thing you should look at you should notice in Jephthah's narrative is this with every judge it says the land had rest after his victory.

No rest is mentioned here. No rest. A civil war it's one thing if you attack Egyptians it's one thing if you attack the Greeks or the Phoenicians or the Amorites but when you attack your own family and you cause a civil war that's another story.

Let's have a word of prayer. Thank you father that you use people who are not accepted in society people who are seen as illegitimate as inferior as having no position or no right to anything thank you that that's not how you deal with us.

none of us was saved because we're good. None of us was saved because we're noble. None of us was saved because we deserved it.

[36 : 11] We were all saved because your grace extended to us and reached us. We have no business boasting about anything we have accomplished. We have accomplished nothing.

It is your grace and your Holy Spirit that works in our lives. And so we are grateful for that. We thank you that it is not on the basis of merits but it is on the basis of your enormous generosity and love.

So we are filled with gratitude for your salvation. I pray Father for this congregation that even as we learn to love you and to continue to grow in loving you we would also be able to continue to grow and loving and caring about each other whether we agree or don't agree whether we see things the same way or not whether we are Republicans or Democrats whether we are Europeans or Asians or Arabs I pray I pray rather than the example of Jephthah we would follow the example of Gideon and so we commit ourselves to you Lord Father in Jesus name Amen Amen Amen Thank you.