

Jephthah: The rejected one redeems

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[0 : 00] All righty, good morning. Okay, if you haven't brought a Bible, there's some Bibles that look like this at the back, but we're going to be following through from Judges 10, where we had the reading from this morning.

So Judges 10, verse 6 and following. So if you don't have a Bible, please go and grab one. If you have never owned a Bible, then grab one of those Bibles and take it as our gift to you. We'd love you to have a Bible.

Not only that, but come and chat with me after, and I'd love to sit with you and read through the Bible at your leisure. So yeah, there we go. Okay, so Judges chapter 6.

It's an interesting story this week. Judges takes us to a whole new level. We're halfway through the Judges and the cycle, the Judges cycle, it seems like the wheels are falling off.

Certainly the cycle's showing itself to be a downward spiral more than a cycle round and round back to the same place again. And this particular account actually brings us face to face with the problem of evil.

[1 : 18] Now when I say the word evil, I'm sure you have perhaps, or perhaps you have people in mind who you think you can attach that tag to. What Judges is going to push you to do though is attach it to yourself and start to understand a little bit more about who you are in relation to God and why we so much need someone far better than Jephthah to rescue us.

See, the problem of evil, actually it became a very clear thing to me when I was a child. See, I was a child with two brothers and a sister and in a family of four kids, you very quickly begin to realise that not everything that the people around you do is actually in your best interests.

Not everything they do. Now I wouldn't call it pure evil when my brother or sister picked the biggest piece of cake for dessert. But I got the sense, whoa, you know, something's going on here.

Something's not quite right. And what I'm going to suggest to you is that we actually see the problem of evil in the people around us. We see it very clearly when we're looking at the folk around us. We struggle to see it when we're looking at ourselves.

Man, and for many people, what I want to suggest to you as well is that the goodness of God is hard to see, even though pretty much everyone in our society actually has a very clear vision of the badness in the people around them.

[2 : 45] So we struggle to see the goodness of God, but we have a real handle on what it looks like, what badness looks like in the world around us. Now we have different explanations for it. I understand that.

Some people blame the things that come out that could be tagged as evil. They blame them on their upbringing, the circumstances, or perhaps just the need for survival.

And if you have a concept of the world that actually doesn't have a God in it at all, then really that's what's driving us, isn't it? Survival. Me promoting myself in the world. Passing on my genes and so on.

But at the end of the day, whatever it comes down to in your mind, it's still individuals making choices. Individuals making choices for good or for ill for the people around them.

As I've said, Jephthah is halfway through the book of Judges and halfway through the book, God wants us to see something. Turns out, the story of Jephthah is a mirror.

[3 : 51] It's one that shows us what we are really like. And one that shows us at the same time how good our God is. I'm going to go through a few points as I speak.

Unconvincing repentance will be the first thing that I raise. And then I'll look through to the unlikely judge. And then, man, and then we'll actually look at the action of that judge at the very ends.

The unbelievable, incomprehensible vow that he makes. But let's start with the unconvincing repentance. Because what we're going to see in this first section, the section that Beth read out to us, is the judge's cycle repeating itself.

The usual repetition of the judge's cycle. Way back in the first week, I explained this cycle. It shows us the pattern to each of the stories. And sure enough, the pattern continues here.

After a 45-year period of peace under Tola and then Jer, we read in the first verses of chapter 10, the people abandon God again. In chapter 10, verse 6, and this is the first stage in that judge's cycle, abandoning God.

[5 : 04] In chapter 10, verse 6, we read this. The people again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. But even as we read those words, they're familiar words from the judge's cycle, this was no ordinary rebellion.

It was an epic rebellion. A seven-fold rebellion. If we read on, we read that they served the Baals, 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, seven.

And they forsook the Lord and did not serve him. If you're not familiar, the number seven tends to either, well, it tends to be used in, particularly in the Old Testament and then in Revelation, as a number four perfection or completeness.

So when we see seven different ways that the people of Israel actually rebelled against God, we're seeing epic rebellion.

They abandoned God and they took up idols from literally every single direction that they could have looked in. So if you saw the geographical map of Israel and you considered all the different countries around, you point your finger in any direction, and that was where they were drawing their idols and their idolatry from, their religion from.

[6 : 29] Syria and Sidon to the north. Moab to the south. The Ammonites to the, which way is east? That's west, isn't it? East. And the Philistines to the west. They looked in every direction apart from God.

And the nature of their worship? We need to understand what's going on there too, because the nature of their worship was this. It degenerated into child sacrifice, self-harm, and temple prostitutes.

Epic rebellion. The book of Judges isn't just a history lesson though. It's a mirror. It's a mirror into their hearts. They saw these nations.

They thought these nations had something better to offer. So they embraced their gods and their ways in the hope of getting that better. Whatever it took to get what they wanted, that was what was in the hearts of the Israelites.

They abandoned God. Then they were punished by God, unsurprisingly, really. God followed through with a consequence. It's actually a surprising consequence too.

[7 : 40] You see, God gave them over to the nations that they so admired. The Ammonites in particular, they crushed Israel and oppressed them for 18 years. And they were one of the nations that they drew gods from.

God used the people that Israelites envied to punish them. It's so often the first outcome of sin in our lives, isn't it? To suffer in pursuit of the sin that we're delving into.

So often God uses that. Even in Romans 1, you can actually see that unfolding. God giving people over to their sin. But after 18 years, finally, Israel eventually cries out to the Lord for help.

This is the next stage in the cycle. Abandon God. Punished by God. They cry for help. And in verse 10, we read their first attempt at this.

We have sinned against you because we have forsaken our God. Now, I've got to say, this is an unconvincing attempt at forgiveness. And I'll tell you why. They diagnose a problem, okay, that's good. But they haven't changed at all.

[8 : 50] They still have their idols and their false gods. And the Lord calls them on that. And it's a really interesting way that he calls them on it. He basically says, no. They cry for help and God says, no.

As I've said, the judges cycle, it kind of sets us a pattern to follow as we go through the narrative. It provides a theological framework for the narrative. But every now and then, there's a tweak to that narrative, that cycle.

Every now and then, the framework is changed. And it's meant to highlight something important. Here is one of those places. Israel cries out for help. And God says, no. Their character is evident in their sevenfold rebellion. The first thing the Lord does is to demonstrate his character.

In verse 11, the Lord says this. Seven again.

[10:00] Seven again. They oppressed you and you cried out to me and I saved you from their hands. He answers them with his evidence of his sevenfold faithfulness.

The completely unfaithful people of God are appealing to the completely faithful God. Hold up the mirror to your life and it will show you clearly.

The same mirror shows up God's character and he's perfect. Faithful. And that's why what God says here is even more shocking. They cry out for rescue and God says no.

Verse 13 and 14, he says this. You have forsaken me and served other gods. Therefore, I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen. Let them save you in this, basically this time, in your time of distress.

Israel is appealing to the God that they have cast out. They have made God an exile in the land that he gave them. Why should God answer?

[11:07] So the people have another go at repenting. They put away the idols this time and they return to worshipping Yahweh, their covenant God. And in response, God became impatient, we read, with Israel's suffering.

And he decided he would send a rescuer in the end. That's what we can glean from these verses. But it's an unusual word, isn't it, to use? Impatient. It implies that God has reached his limit.

That God is fed up with Israel's suffering. That God is over the whole judge's cycle himself. Perhaps that God is going to act in a way that will end the cycle once and for all.

But for now, at least, Israel know that a rescuer is coming. And he is an unlikely judge. That rescuer is Jephthah. In chapter 11, verse 1, we read, Jephthah is a Gileadite, a mighty warrior.

But he was a son of a prostitute. Now, he's an unlikely choice because he's an outcast. Although he does have skills. But just think through. And as I'm speaking, just read through that passage.

[12:19] And look at how it reflects the position that God was in. The God who had been rejected by his people chose a saviour who had been rejected by his people.

Jephthah is an outcast. He's the illegitimate son of a prostitute. Israel is descended into sin.

Jephthah was a child of that time. He was a child of sin.

And as an illegitimate child, Jephthah had no inheritance in Israel. He'd been driven out by the legitimate sons of his father. And he lives in exile in Tob, a land called Tob, which ironically means good.

Even though he's surrounded by a bunch of no good men. Either way, though, he lives as an outcast from God's people. Perhaps his choice is meant to be ironic.

So I said he represents the until recently outcast God. So Jephthah's an outcast. But he has skills. Jephthah is a mighty warrior.

[13:23] He's a man that the fighting men are drawn to. He's the man for this kind of trouble. But fighting isn't his only skill. And we see that very quickly. You see, Jephthah is a clever negotiator.

First with the leaders of Gilead. Because the elders actually approached Jephthah with a bad offer. They offer leadership of the army. The army that had lost to the Ammonites for 18 years straight.

Now, if Jephthah's going to take that risk for them, the people who kicked him out, he wants more reward than what they're offering him.

So he successfully negotiates to be their ruler beyond this war. If, that is. If he's successful in battle. So firstly, he negotiates the position to basically almost be the king of the people, the ruler of the people.

And the second time we see his negotiating skills is with the king of Ammon. You see, then Jephthah turns his negotiating skills. Once he's got his position and he's got everything locked down, they've made their vows before the Lord at Mishpah.

[14:31] Everything's, you know, it's like a contract has been signed. Then Jephthah actually turns his negotiating skills on the king of the Ammonites. In chapter 11, verse 4 and 5, we discover that the Ammonites have already gathered their troops.

They are already on the march into Gilead. The war has begun. So Jephthah begins negotiation with the king. It would have taken several days for these messages to pass, you know, between

Jephthah and the Ammonites.

It's not like email, Facebook message or anything like that. It would have taken several days for these messages to pass backwards and forwards. Messages that stalled the Ammonites' progress. Messages that undermined the Ammonites' rights to invade. And messages that reminded the people of Israel all the time of the faithfulness of their God throughout the past.

Jephthah just lists one time after another, after another, after another of how God has provided them with the lands. Messages that remind the people of Israel of the faithfulness of their God.

[15:38] So we paraphrase chapter 11, verses 12 to 20, he basically says this. Why are you fighting against us? The Ammonite king responds, because you fought us 300 years ago and stole our lands.

Jephthah, no we didn't. We respected your borders. We only fought the Ammonites because they attacked us and our God gave us victory there. Why don't you keep the land your God's given you? And we'll keep the land our God has given us.

You guys are the ones that are in the wrong. And if you continue with your invasion, our God will judge you. And all the time while this conversation is taking place, it appears that, if you look at verse 29, it appears that Jephthah is traveling through the tribes of Manasseh and Gilead.

Verse 29 says this. Then the spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead. And from Mizpah of Gilead, he passed on to the Ammonites.

The Hebrew word that's represented by then in that verse, the very beginning, is kind of a loose term. It's like a linking term, but it doesn't necessarily mean sequential order. So what Jephthah is doing here is he's basically stalling for time while he gathers his own army.

[16:57] He creates this time using diplomatic cleverness and then he uses this time to gather the troops. And throughout Jephthah's exchanges, he shows great confidence in what God can do.

This confidence in God is being breathed through the people that Jephthah is gathering to himself. The message? Well, trust the Lord to rescue you.

The message to the people of Israel? This is one of those times when God will rescue you.

Everything just looks so, so positive up until this point.

Jephthah is appointed. He's following the plan. He's following a great plan. His army is gathered together. In all of this, you'd think things were going really well.

Perhaps, finally, we've got a bit of a change here in terms of the way that these judges turn out. I mean, the spirit of the Lord is on Jephthah for the task. The army is assembled.

[18:04] Everything is going according to plan. But Jephthah is a man who is about to risk everything. And up until this point, he's a man who's had to trust in his own wits and abilities to survive.

Jephthah is a man who understands God's power. But he struggles to accept God's grace. The freedom with which God will rescue his people.

So he turns his negotiating skills toward God. He makes a bargain, or attempts to make a bargain, in an attempt to ensure the outcome of the battle.

Why would this God rescue this people through him? There wasn't enough certainty there for him.

So Jephthah, in verse 30, we read, Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

The spirit of the Lord was upon him. The Lord himself, he knew, was the decider of the outcome. But it's just so often not enough. Jephthah wanted a deal of his own to rely on.

[19:27] He wanted to be able to guarantee God's support in this venture. So he offered God anything. Whatever comes out of the doors of my house.

That's effectively writing God a blank check. He knew what he was doing. It's clear what he was saying. Whatever is a general term. It could mean the pet dog.

It could mean his wife. Turns out it meant his daughter. But whatever it was, Jephthah was willing to sacrifice it for his ends.

The Lord himself is the decider. He is a good God. He's proven it time and time again. But so often, it's not enough for us.

We want more than God's goodness. We want his support for our plans, our goals, our desires. So easy to drift back into a religious approach to God.

[20 : 35] A legalistic approach to God. A rule-based approach to God. To earning his favour. In verse 34, Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah.

And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dancers. She was his only child. Beside her, he had neither son nor daughter. The outcast, with no inheritance in the land, now lost, the only person that he would, of the next generation would actually be able to carry on his name in some way.

And he was heartbroken. But even in his heartbreak, you notice the language he uses. It was her fault. My daughter, what have you done? It was her fault.

But he was heartbroken. He was heartbroken. But he still did it. In verse 39, we read, Now he's sending his daughter away, yeah, for two months, to mourn the fact that she was going to die a virgin.

But when she comes back, he does exactly what he vowed. He sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering to the Lord. Now, let's be clear.

[21 : 55] This was offensive to God on so many levels, it's not funny. But in Jephthah's mind, he couldn't go back. His way of relating to God was through religion.

He'd given his word to God. He'd made a bargain. He had to fulfill his bargain. God wasn't calling him to hold to his bargain. Jephthah was calling himself to hold to his bargain because that's the way his world worked.

And that's the way relating to God worked for him. And this is what religion does to you. You see, if you believe that you'll earn God's favor, you earn God's favor through what you do, then, frankly, you will sacrifice family, friendships, values, even God-given principles to try and secure God's favor.

You probably won't even realize that you're doing it. You probably believe, even, that you're being godly in how you're doing it, just like Jephthah did. And you do it to try and ensure that you can get what you can only get through Christ.

Do I do this? All the time. When I get frustrated, short-tempered, angry with somebody else's faults, why am I surprised when you're not perfect?

[23 : 16] Unless we're all pretending that we all are perfect. Why should I be surprised when you have flaws and faults? Why in the world should that promote me to get angry?

How does God respond to us in our flaws and faults? But love us and forgive us and draw us to himself. When I gossip, when I gossip about and slander a person, why do I tear them down? Because I'm trying to build myself up. And frankly, when there's not much to build up, perhaps the easiest way to deal with, to do it, is to start to bring the people around you down.

Do I do this? All the time. An attitude to the world and to life that says we relate to God by our works.

An attitude that, I mean, as you know, I've been a pastor in a Baptist church before this. This is an independent church. It kind of grew out of the Reformed Baptist movement. And let me tell you this.

[24 : 29] The Reformed Baptist movement has a reputation for upholding the doctrines of grace in the most ungracious way possible. We have a, you know, the Reformed Baptist church has, we're independent, don't get me wrong, this is not our, not who we are now, not how we identify ourselves.

as we identify ourselves as a Bible-believing church. Now let me tell you that our roots come from a context that is now, that is perceived as graceless in pursuit of doctrine.

how can we do that? How can we hold on to something so beautiful as a doctrine of grace and end up being such mongrels to each other?

Because friends, I think we can actually understand the doctrines of grace and see the doctrines of grace as beautiful and yet want to secure something for ourselves that's not there for us to earn.

This man who sacrificed his only daughter, he was that kind of man. He was serving God. He was God's chosen rescuer for that time.

[25 : 52] And do you know what? Because of the kind of God who chose him, even this man who sacrificed his only daughter made it to the Hebrews 11 Hall of Fame.

In Hebrews chapter 11 we get a list of people, a great cloud of witnesses who just, and Bo's already read a verse from this passage. Great cloud. I'd encourage you to read this list of people who acted by faith.

The amazing thing is in verse 32, Jephthah, is listed in this list of people of faith. This man. Why?

Well, if we're even asking that question, we're still thinking in that legalistic, religion-based way. You see, he's not chosen as the man of faith because he was perfect.

He was chosen because the God who chose him was perfect. He did trust in God. Don't get me wrong. Jephthah did trust in God.

[27 : 05] He was far from perfect in his character, but his character was not the basis of his relationship with God. It was God's character that made up for Jephthah's lack.

Now, Jephthah's in that list because he trusted in God. He trusted in God and went to battle to rescue the people of Israel. Now, remember this.

Jephthah also recognized the problem that he tried to shore up with a ridiculous, such a tragic vow. He saw the problem of the evil in his own heart.

He saw the lack that he had and the lack of leverage he had to get God to do what he wanted. But he struggled to see the character of that God, the heart of that God who so desired to rescue him. Jephthah only saw this rescue plan from afar. In Jesus, we see it up close. The perfect judge who would save us from ourselves by giving himself in our place.

[28 : 16] man, you and I are no different in this. We are imperfect people who God has committed himself to. Imperfect people that God will choose to use, not because we're better than the people around us.

We are people that God will use because of who he is and not because of who we are. Friends, the story of Jephthah is meant to show us the problem of our hearts and the solution of God's.

The story of Jephthah is meant to remind us again that we are children of grace. Let me pray.

Father God, time and time again we read your word and it keeps coming back to Jesus, keeps pointing us to the necessity of Jesus' death on our behalf.

And yet, Lord, we're so far from our way of thinking that we struggle to live that way. We know it, the truth of it, we know the beauty of it, but we struggle to live that way.

So help us, Lord. Help us not just to see grace as the beautiful doctrine that it is, to see your love for us as immeasurable as it is, but Lord, to reflect it in how we live toward each other, to so delight in it and bask in it that it just comes out of our every pore in how we love one another in this church and in our wider community.

[30 : 02] Lord, help us to be children of grace. Amen.