

Trouble with a Promise

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of September 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Trouble with a Promise and is based on Judges chapter 11. I find it helpful if you have a Bible open before you at page 199.

And for those who are visiting today, we're in the sermons in the morning services at the moment looking at this book of Judges, which is one of the most unusual of the books in the Bible, full of odd characters who do some good and many odd and bad things.

And as you've heard from the readings today, this is no exception to that. Well, let's pray. God, our Father, you reveal yourself to us in the words of Scripture, even in these puzzling places like the book of Judges and like the story of Jephthah.

We pray this morning not only that you'll give us understanding, but also that we'll understand more about you so that our lives will better reflect you and your character in us.

[1 : 17] And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Next verse, same as the first, a little bit louder and a little bit worse. And that is again the case in this book of Judges for the case and the situation of ancient Israel.

For what we find in this book of Judges is the same sort of things happening each generation again and again and again. But each time they recur, it's a little bit worse than the first time or the time before.

It's a cycle of Israel committing idolatry, worshipping false gods and committing other sorts of evil activity. As a result of that, God is angry with them. He hands them over to their enemies who oppress them.

As a result of that, after some time, Israel cries out to God for help and God raises up a judge or deliverer who rescues them and brings them victory.

And then after a little time, that judge dies and Israel falls back into its bad habits and the cycle repeats itself only each time worse than the time before.

[2 : 22] And so that's what happens in chapter 10 verse 6 on page 199, which is in effect the beginning of this story of Jephthah. The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, worshipping the Baals, the Astartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines.

Thus they abandoned the Lord and did not worship Him. Now that long list of gods whom the Israelites worshipped makes it sound as though they tried to find every single god they could except the real god to worship Him.

And so they went after the gods of all the neighbouring surrounding countries. That's what that list is about. It's as G.K. Chesterton, the writer, said last century, when people give up believing in the real god, it's not that they believe nothing, but that it is they believe anything.

And that's the case here. Now, the Israelites, having abandoned the real god, now go after and believe any god. All the gods of these nations round about. And it lasted for 18 years.

And the punishment that God brought on them was oppression from their enemies. We might think that's a fairly harsh measure for God to take on people who commit idolatry.

[3 : 41] But idolatry is the worst sin, especially amongst the people of God. To go after a false god, another god, and worship those gods, rather than the god who is delivered and saved and provided for God's people, is the worst thing that people can do.

And the appropriate punishment is what God delivers here. If His people go after the gods of other nations, then what God does is let them be under those other nations.

And thus they are oppressed by them, we're told in verses 7 and 8, for 18 years. And to show just how bad the people of God had become, it took them 18 years before they cried out to the real God for help.

They endured oppression for all those years before finally in chapter 10, verse 10, they cry out to God saying, we have sinned against you because we have abandoned our God and have worshipped the Baals.

Now this is the pattern that we've seen in this book already. But in earlier parts of the book, in chapter 3 twice and the beginning of chapter 4, when the Israelites cried out to God for help, God raised up a judge and deliverer who brought them victory.

[4 : 56] But not so here. At least not immediately. And it was also, as we saw last week, not so the case with Gideon. When the Israelites last week cried out in chapter 6 for help, God sent a prophet who condemns them before He sent Gideon to rescue them.

And here, when they cry out to God for help, there's no immediate rescuer or deliverer on the scene from God, but rather God Himself now speaks.

That's how serious the situation has become for God's people. God Himself speaks. And His initial words are not particularly comforting to His people.

God says in verse 11 onwards, Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians, from the Amorites, from the Ammonites, and from the Philistines, the Sidonians also, and the Amalekites, and the Mayonites, who oppressed you?

And you cried to me, and I delivered you out of their hand? Yet you have abandoned me and worshipped other gods. Therefore, I will deliver you no more. And it looks as though that's the end of the matter.

[6 : 04] God is abandoning His people forever. He's no longer going to deliver them. You see, He's heard their cries before. Their shallow cries. God help us.

We're in a bit of a pickle here. Come to our rescue. Their shallow words. Their insincere words. And God's fed up with their song and dance routine that lacks sincerity in their cries for help.

But His rebuke in these verses prompts them to act by way of contrition and repentance. The Israelites respond in verse 15 and say, We have sinned.

Do to us whatever seems good to you, but deliver us this day. So they put away the foreign gods from among them and worshipped the Lord. And that is the sort of response God looks for from people.

Not just simple, insincere words of, God, I'm sorry, I'm in a bit of a mess. Help me. But words of repentance. Words that are turning away from what's been done wrong, turning to what is right, putting away, in this case, the old gods.

[7 : 14] That's what repentance means. It's not just simply saying sorry. It's actually turning away from the things that we do wrong, seeking not to do them again. Later in the New Testament, part of the Bible, Jesus encounters a man called Zacchaeus, who's a tax collector, who's defrauded lots of people.

When he responds to Jesus with repentance, he doesn't just say, Jesus, I'm sorry for what I've done, but he actually goes and makes restitution, repays the amounts that he's stolen, fourfold in his case.

And in the prayers of confession that we pray in church sometimes, we have a line along the lines of, we repent of our sins and turn away from them. That's what repentance means, to turn away from our sins, to do what is right, to change our behaviour and our patterns of life.

So finally, Israel has turned away from their idols, they've put them to one side, they've destroyed them or broken them or burned them. And now God's response, we're told at the end of verse 16, is that he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer.

Here we find the heart of God revealed. A God who is rightly jealous for the exclusive allegiance of his people. Just like a husband or wife ought to be rightly concerned for the exclusive allegiance of their spouse, so is God for us.

[8 : 39] And that is what we find here in the heart of God. He is jealous for the exclusive allegiance of his people and he's upset, angry when they go after other gods.

But also a God who is holy, who will punish sin appropriately. So if they go after the gods of the nations, God will hand them over to those nations for punishment.

But now we find too, the same God is a God who is moved to compassion when his people repent of their sins. See, imagine the tension that is in God's heart.

God who on the one hand knows that it is right to punish his people for their consistent rebellion, but on the other hand is moved to compassion and mercy to respond to them by raising up a rescuer. That is a tension that God has throughout the whole of the scriptures. Sometimes people caricature the Old and the New Testament saying, well, the Old is a God of wrath and anger, and in the New Testament we find a God who is merciful and loving and forgiving.

[9 : 43] But it's the same God in both Testaments and the same tension is in both Testaments. God who is holy on the one hand, but merciful on the other, moved to compassion to forgive.

It is a tension that we see consistently in the Old Testament as God keeps on with his rebellious, idolatrous people, and yet it is a tension that drives him in the New Testament to send his son to die on a cross for the sins of stubborn, rebellious, sinful people.

That's what God's like. A holy God, demanding our exclusive allegiance, but on the other hand, God who is moved to mercy and forgiveness when we repent of our sins.

For still, we haven't got to the point of raising up a judge. God is moved to compassion and the end of chapter 10 tells us about the threat of the Ammonites around about.

And when chapter 11 begins, there is no word of God raising up or calling forth a rescuer, but rather it's something that in the end happens through the people.

[10 : 51] Again, I think it shows a decline in the Israelite society through this book of Judges. And again, it's an unlikely rescuer. In fact, every rescuer in this book is an extremely unlikely character.

There's no one that you could look at and say, that's the sort of person we need to rescue the people of God. In this case, it's Jephthah. He's a son of a prostitute.

He's despised by his own family and clan so that the sons of his father's wife kick him out. Maybe they fear the threat of losing some inheritance to him. We're not sure.

And so Jephthah is abandoned, rejected, despised, sent away by his own family and goes off into neighbouring territory and joins a band of outlaws who go raiding in a place called Tob.

So here is Jephthah, who is one of the Tob raiders, away from his family and clan. But the situation for his tribe is dire.

[11 : 52] The Ammonites are a real threat. This tribal territory of Israel is on the eastern side of the Jordan River in what is modern day Jordan. So the tribe of Gilead was bordering the Ammonites and the Moabites in territory in what is modern day Jordan.

So it's a real threat to them. And clearly there is nobody in their own midst or hierarchy who is capable of leading this tribe and the people of Israel against the threat of the Ammonites.

And so they go and recall Jephthah, the despised, rejected son of a prostitute. And he comes to them and they say, they make an offer, they ask him in verse 6 to be their commander so that we might fight the Ammonites.

Now maybe Jephthah's got a reputation as a bit of a fighter amongst a band of outlaws who are raiders. The word for commander is strictly a military one. That is they want him purely to fight their battles for them.

That's all they want him to do. And Jephthah makes it clear that this is an unreasonable request. In effect, they owe him something. They've kicked him out of their society and now they want him to fight their battles.

[13 : 09] It doesn't seem a fair request. Jephthah's response in verse 7, Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father's house? So why do you come to me now when you're in trouble?

And the relationship between the tribe and Jephthah is exactly the relationship we see between Israel and God. Israel rejects God, goes after other gods but when they get in a bit of a pickle they go after God for help.

The same with the tribe of Gilead. They kick out Jephthah, they get into a pickle so they call for Jephthah for help. And I think we're meant to see the parallels between those groups of people. In response, the elders of the tribe sort of upped the offer to Jephthah. They say to him in verse 8, We have now turned back to you so that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites and become not just a commander but head over us, over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

So what now the leadership of the tribe is offering Jephthah is not just a position as the army commander to fight the battle, bring the victory and that's it. Goodbye. But rather they are now

offering him rule over their whole tribe.

[14 : 26] To be their head is the word that is used. And Jephthah probably doubts that he's heard it right. And so he says to them in verse 9, If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites and the Lord gives them over to you, to me, I will be your head.

That is, it's as though he can't believe what they're asking him or offering him. And they confirm it in verses 10 and 11. There's a little ceremony to confirm him as their head and so he's ready to go and lead them into battle.

Now in all the other cases where there is a judge brought to rescue the people of God, immediately they go off to battle in effect. But not so here. Jephthah is a smooth talker.

He's a man of words. He's already negotiated in effect with the elders of the tribe to become their head and now he negotiates with the enemy, with the Ammonites. And that's what happens in verses 12 through to 28.

Jephthah says to the Ammonites, What is there between you and me that you've come to me to fight against my land? He says, Why are you trying to pick a fight on us? He sent messengers over to ask them.

[15 : 39] And their answer comes back in verse 13, Because Israel, on coming from Egypt, took away my land from the Anand to the Jabbok and to the Jordan. Now therefore restore it peaceably. So it's a land dispute.

Not unlike the land disputes we see in our society today. In this sort of area between the Palestinians and the Israelis, even in our own country of course with land claims and disputes between different Aboriginal groups recently in Tasmania and Victoria and so on.

Jephthah's reply firstly sets the facts straight. They claim that Israel took their land when they came out of Egypt 300 years before under the leadership of Moses.

Jephthah says that's not the case. And so part of his long response in verses 14 onwards is to set the facts straight about what Israel did.

When they came out of Egypt towards the Promised Land they didn't fight and take land from the Ammonites and the Moabites. They skirted around their land. They had peace with them. However they did have some battles with a character called Sion, the king of Heshbon and another guy further north, Og, the king of Bashan.

[16 : 48] They fought them because they were attacked first. But it's not even Ammonite land. It's somebody else's land that they're fighting against. So firstly Jephthah sets the facts straight.

Secondly, he makes it clear to them that the victory that they had over those other nations was God's doing. That God had given them their land. And so he actually taunts them, the Ammonites, saying in effect, we've got land given to us by our God.

Why aren't you happy with the land that your God gives you? Now Jephthah, he is not really being politically correct, saying, well you've got a God and we've got a God and that's fine.

He's actually mocking their God who is weak and unable to give them the land that they're wanting to claim. But the God of Israel, Yahweh, Jehovah is his name, in our translation it's the word Lord with capital letters, is God who's given God's people substantial land.

And in effect what Jephthah is saying back to them is, our God is greater and better. You want to pick a fight on us? It's not just us you pick a fight on, it's God.

[17 : 59] And our God is great. And Jephthah reminds them of some earlier history from an earlier book in the Old Testament, the book of Numbers. He says to them in verse 25, now are you any better than King Balak, son of Zippor of Moab?

Did he ever enter into conflict with Israel or did he ever go to war with them? The answer is no, because God prevented him from doing so. The king then of Moab and Ammon combined was unable to take any land from the people of God because God prevented that from happening some hundreds of years before.

The next argument in Jephthah's negotiation comes in verse 26. He says, why are you picking a fight on us now? We've been in this land 300 years already. We're dealing here with about 1100 BC.

So if you thought we'd taken your land, why haven't you fought us earlier on? And then finally, Jephthah hands everything over to God to judge.

Verse 27, It is not I who sinned against you, but you are the one who does me wrong by declaring war on me. Let the Lord, that is Yahweh Jehovah, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, let him

who is judge decide today for the Israelites or for the Ammonites.

[19 : 18] They are the words of Jephthah's negotiation. He set the facts straight. He's making it clear that the Ammonites are picking a fight, not Israel, and it's a fight that they ought not to be picking.

He's made it clear that in the past, Israel's God has given them land and that he will protect them now. So they're picking not just on Israel, but on God. He's made it clear that Israel's been in this land 300 years, so they have a valid land claim themselves.

And he says, let God decide. And the Ammonites do not heed his words. Now in many respects, these words of Jephthah are a high point in this book.

For the first time, it looks as though we've got a really decent judge who acknowledges what God has done and acknowledges that God is capable of bringing victory to God's people. Here is a judge who is thoroughly God-directed in his words, unlike Gideon that we saw last week that was trying to claim glory for himself as well.

Well, sometimes diplomacy doesn't work. Pacifism only goes so far. And Jephthah's words fall on deaf ears and so they come to battle. As he goes to battle in verse 29, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him.

[20 : 34] So finally, we see that this is God's chosen rescuer or deliverer, or as the old word was, the word judge. And on his way to battle, he makes a vow.

The man who negotiated with the elders of his tribe to become their head, the man who negotiated unsuccessfully with the Ammonites to have peace, now negotiates with God.

He is driven by success. In a sense, he's consumed by wanting to ensure that he has victory in this battle that is coming. So he says to God in verse 30 and 31, If you will give me the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return victorious from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's to be offered up by me as a burnt offering, that is as a sacrifice.

One of my favourite musicals is the musical Oliver. It's coming to Melbourne soon and I'm going to see it. And there's a song in it, I think if I remember rightly, it's Nancy singing to Bill Sykes, I'll do anything for you dear, anything.

I'll give anything. I'll go anywhere for you dear. And in effect, that's the thrust of the vow that Jephthah makes here to God. He says, If you give me victory, I will give you anything by way of a sacrifice.

[22 : 05] And in effect, what it's reflecting here is Jephthah's goal or God is success in battle. In the end, success is what's driving him and it's success at any cost.

And by saying to God, whatever comes out of my door, I'll offer up as a sacrifice, is saying to God, God, you name your price, it's yours if victory comes my way.

Well, we know all too tragically the outcome of this stupid vow. It is a tragic price to pay because later on we know that it's his daughter that comes out of the house.

The battle itself is almost inconsequential. That's not the actual suspense of the story. Jephthah wins. We're told that in verses 32 and 33. It's passed over briefly and quickly.

The suspense lies in when he gets home, who or what is going to come out of the door of his house. We ought to be careful if we're going to make a bargain with God.

[23 : 12] Sometimes, and probably usually, those people who make rash vows or promises to God quickly ignore them. The people who are in dire situations, unemployment or in grief or in whatever circumstance and they pray to God and say, God, if you bring me out of this then look, I'll believe in you, I'll trust you, I'll become a Christian or whatever.

All too often when the situation is eased, completely ignore or forget their rash vow or promise. Let me say, that's a dangerous move. If you're going to make a vow to God, then you should expect to keep it.

Sometimes, of course, making a vow to God is quite life changing. Martin Luther, who was the great church reformer of the 16th century in Germany, in effect, bargained with God. He actually prayed to a saint, but in effect, bargaining with God, he said, in the middle of a thunderstorm, if you keep me alive, I'll become a monk.

Dangerous words. He was preserved in the thunderstorm, so he became a monk and having become a monk, became a teacher of the Bible and realised the false teaching of the then Catholic Church and led the Reformation in Germany.

More often than not, our vows and promises to God are perhaps rather foolish and certainly, in this case, unnecessary and tragic. There was no reason for Jephthah to make a vow.

[24 : 31] God had promised him victory and God would bring the victory. But Jephthah, who's consumed and driven by success, says to God, any price, it doesn't matter. I want victory and I'm prepared to make a sacrifice to get that victory.

We don't know what he expected would come out of his door. The word that's translated here, whoever, could also mean whatever, although it's hard to imagine an animal coming out to actually greet him like a goat or a sheep or something.

It may be that he thought it would be a person. It may be that he thought it would be an animal. It's probable that in the excitement and his desire for success, he just made a rash vow without really thinking.

But even worse, when his daughter came out, he kept the vow. Indeed, he blames her in effect because when she came out, we're told in verse 34 and clearly the writer is actually appalled by this situation.

Verse 34 is quite dramatic. Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. Behold his daughter. It's as though he's breathless with anguish because his daughter comes out of the house.

[25 : 40] And then we're told to add poignancy to this. She was his only child. He had no son or daughter except her. And then Jephthah's response is almost to blame her.

When he saw her come out, he said to her, Alas, my daughter, you have brought me very low. You have become the cause of great trouble to me. He's wrong. The cause of trouble was his stupid vow, not his daughter.

For I've opened my mouth to the Lord and I cannot take back my vow. Now here's a moral dilemma. He's made a vow that whatever comes out of his daughter meet him, he will sacrifice.

His daughter comes out. Should he go ahead with the vow and sacrifice his daughter or should he break the vow and spare her life? For Jephthah ought to have known, I'm sure, that the lesser of the two evils was to break the vow.

But having said that, he does understand rightly that vows ought to be kept. Our word ought to be secure. And if we make a promise, whether to God or to somebody else, we ought to keep that promise and not make a rash promise.

[26 : 52] And the reason why our words ought to be fulfilled and we ought to keep our word is because God is a God who keeps his word and his promise to us.

What God says, he does. Every promise he makes, he keeps. Every vow he makes, he keeps. And he expects us to do the same.

The situation here is that Jephthah should never have made the vow in the first place. But having made it and being faced with his moral dilemma, keep the vow to kill my daughter or break the vow to spare her life, I think he ought to have seen that he should have broken the vow to keep his daughter's life.

Well, here is the great leader come unstuck. In the early stages, it looked as though he would be the best of the leaders of Israel in this book. Finally, a good leader. He's credited God with victories in the past.

He acknowledges God where other leaders don't. But it all comes unstuck in his pursuit of success at any price. And we are meant to be appalled by the vow that he makes and the death of his daughter.

[28 : 06] So appalled was the writer of this that he can hardly bear saying that Jephthah killed his daughter. So verse 39 says that at the end of the two months she returned to her father who did with her according to the vow he had made.

As though the writer cannot quite bring himself or herself to say he sacrificed his daughter to God. God has no delight in sacrifices made to him other than in the sacrifice of ourselves as living sacrifices in service of him.

To obey God is better than sacrifice. We cannot buy God by offering him sacrifices other than ourselves in service of him.

Jephthah did not need to negotiate some enterprise bargaining scheme with God. Simply he ought to have obeyed. He didn't need to buy God or bargain with God to get victory for God had ensured him of victory already.

