

What's in a Vow?

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[0:00] Our friends, let me pray. Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have said that your word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

You said that it is able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Please enable me today to speak your word faithfully from your word, which is in Scripture.

Please cause that word to do what you have promised it will. And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen. Friends, this morning I'd like you to listen to some sample sentences and I want you to think about what they mean.

Here is the first one. I rode a black horse in red pyjamas. Think about it again. I rode a black horse in red pyjamas.

Now try this one. Foreigners are hunting dogs. Let's try it again. Think about it. Let your mind just dwell on it.

[1:12] Foreigners are hunting dogs. Or here's a newspaper headline. Passerby helps dog bite victim. Again, passerby helps dog bite victim.

Now each of these statements are examples of ambiguity. Now the examples I've given you could be accidental. Nevertheless, they do what ambiguity does, don't they? They create alternate views for us.

Ambiguity is very common in literature. But my own view is that we contemporary people find ambiguity somewhat difficult. You see, we're shaped by a view of science that is probably incorrect but nevertheless is dominant.

That is, we think in the end that everything can be explained. We love, therefore, to know certainties and we hate the unknown, the inexplicable. We want closure. We want one meaning, one interpretation, one right, one wrong, one outcome.

But friends, let me tell you, life isn't that straightforward. Life is filled with ambiguities. But let me tell you more. Let me tell you that my experience of Hebrew writers is that they appear to not hate ambiguity but delight in it.

[2:20] They like us, like to engage us, you see. They like us to enter into the drama of what they're saying and to make us make decisions, to help us enter into the life of their works.

Friends, if this is true about Hebrew writing in general, it is most definitely true about the passage in Judges 11 that we have just read. It is brimming with ambiguity, full of questions.

Let me show you. Let me tell you just some of the questions I have about this passage. Questions that are not really answered up front for me. There's some of the questions that have gone around and around in my head this week.

Just skim through it with me. Look at verse 29. The Spirit comes on Jephthah. He is victorious in battle. But he also makes a vow. Now, let me ask you, is the vow a result of the God Spirit coming on him or not?

Look at verse 31. Jephthah promises that whatever comes out of the door of the house will be offered in burnt offering. Now, what exactly did he expect might come out of his house?

[3:32] But more than that, did his vow work? Is his vow what gave him victory? And why is the passage so like and yet so different from the story of Abraham and Isaac?

Friends, if you read this story, you'll find so many echoes of Abraham and Isaac. It's not funny. But why does the Lord do something so differently here? Why does Jephthah appear to blame his daughter for the situation he finds himself in?

And what's all this about weeping but never marrying? Why did Jephthah go through with things?

And the list goes on. Well, friends, there are just so many questions here that are never answered

in the text.

And we, the readers, are left having to make decisions. There's some ambiguity. Now, friends, my view is that this text can be explained. And today I'm going to do it for you.

However, because of the ambiguities, I cannot be sure that I've got it right. Nevertheless, I think that I have. You see, I've spent this week carefully weighing the questions, trying to balance things out.

[4 : 33] I think that I understand it. Perhaps for the first time, you see, this passage is but one of a number within Judges. But this one particularly, that has held me preaching of Judges for 30 years of preaching.

I was not sure that I was able yet as a preacher to preach from it. But I think I understand this passage now. I also think I understand what we should learn from it as Christians.

Oh, and I've also concluded that I could preach now multiple talks on this passage. Friends, it is brimming with things terrifying, engaging, interesting and applicable for us in our contemporary and very ambiguous world.

So let's go. Have your Bibles open with me. Very important that you do that. Check out what I'm saying. See if you agree with me. Now, let's start off by remembering the context. Remember the context within Judges first.

Remember that we discovered this pattern in the very early stages of Judges. It can be summarized in a diagram. I've given you that diagram in your outlines. This diagram represents a cycle of human and divine action that crops up in the book of Judges.

[5 : 40] Do you remember it? Perhaps you might check it out again. Look at it in front of you. We saw that a typical cycle goes as follows. It generally starts with a downward human intervention.

That is, Israel, number one, does evil and becomes even more corrupt. Two, we then find that the Lord's anger is aroused at Israel's sins so that he gives them into the hand of a foreign aggressor. Three, Israel then cries out to the Lord. Next, there's an upward movement. Four, the Lord relents and raises up a deliverer. Now, often the deliverer is filled and empowered by the spirit.

That leads to the next item, which is item five. The Lord turns the tide of oppression and gives the foreign aggressor into the hands of the deliverer. And finally, we get to item six, where we hear that the land has rest for a certain number of years.

Now, as we've read on in the book of Judges, we have noticed this pattern break up. We've seen this with the preceding judges that we've looked at. And we see it again here.

[6 : 42] We've seen it in the previous weeks. So that's the larger context. Now, let's look at the context of the Jephthah story. And perhaps you remember the story. In chapter 10, Israel appears to get into that normal pattern of things.

That is, they do one. They sin. Then God does two. That is, he hands them over to a foreign aggressor. The focus falls on one particular aggressor, the Ammonites.

Anyway, in response, Israel does three. That is, they cry out to God and acknowledge their sin. And it is then that the traditional pattern changes. For God tells us, rather than relenting, he says that he's fed up with their sinfulness and he's not going to save them.

In fact, he says, well, why don't you go off and try the gods you're worshipping, see if they can help you out. But the Israelites throw themselves with vigour into repentance and they beg God to save them.

But in chapter 10, verse 16, I would argue that God's response is ambiguous. We are not sure. And I think Israel is not sure. And it's at that point in the story that our focus has shifted to one particular group of Israelites, the Gileadites.

[7 : 51] They are the subset of one of the other tribes, one of the 12 tribes. They live on the east side of the Jordan. They live, they're those that live probably as close as you can get to the people of Ammon.

And the Ammonites threaten war against them. And in the absence of a hero or judge raised up by God, the Gileadites search for their own. And eventually they find Jephthah.

He's an outcast. Do you remember him? He's an empty man, a landless man, I think is part of what he's, that is, he's ostracized from his people. Without land, without rights in the land.

He's an outcast. And what happens is he bargains to be reintegrated into Israel in return for his help as a warrior. And he proves to be a skilled negotiator. He succeeds with the Israelite elders and gets what he's after.

However, as we saw last week, he's less successful with the king of Ammon. After all, the king of Ammon doesn't listen to him and begins to wage war. Nevertheless, he casts himself upon the Lord, giving the Lord the final right of judging him.

[9:01] And that's where we get to in verse 27 of chapter 11. Then in verse 28, the king of Ammon decides to wage war anyway. And that brings us to our passage for today. Look at chapter 29, at verse 29 of chapter 11.

Now, remember the cycle again, chapter 10, verse 16, left us hanging. We didn't know, is God going to do item four and raise up a deliverer? His normal way of doing that would be to cause his spirit to come upon someone who would deliver them.

And when the spirit comes on someone, there was often a pattern. We've seen this pattern before with Othniel. Perhaps in your Bibles, you might like to flip back to chapter 3, verses 10 and 11. Here's Othniel, one of the earlier judges. And we read this. The spirit of the Lord, verse 10, came on him so that he became Israel's judge and went to war.

The Lord gave Cushan Rishathayim, king of Aram, into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for 40 years until Othniel, son of Kinaz, died.

[10:04] Now, there's the pattern. Let's now move to the second person who has a similar experience that we see with Jephtar here. Let's listen to the story of Gideon in Judges 6, 34 to 35.

We read this. Then the spirit of the Lord came on Gideon. There we have it again. Now, this looks just like Othniel, doesn't it?

We now expect that what will happen is there'll be a battle and a victory. But instead, we get an interruption before the battle is reported. And Gideon starts laying out a fleece to see if God will indeed give him victory.

There's some doubt, perhaps, in his mind. He then repeats the exercise with God to make it even harder for the Lord. And only then does he prepare for battle. But then God himself slows down the process by thinning out the army.

And finally, after fleeces and challenges and thinning out of armies and other assorted interruptions, we hear that Israel wins a spectacular war against the Midianites. Now, in our passage today, similar interruptions happen or a similar interruption happens.

[11:16] Let's return to our passage. Look at chapter 11, verse 29. We're told that then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephtar. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mispah of Gilead, and then he advanced against the Ammonites.

So, you know, we're getting him, the spirit coming upon him and him getting ready to do battle. And the words crossed, passed through and advanced are, in fact, three repeats of the same Hebrew word.

The same Hebrew word then is used in verse 32. And it's translated went over. So let's look at 32 and 33. We read, then Jephtar went over to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gave them into his hands.

And he devastated 20 towns from Arior to the vicinity of Mineth, as far as Abel, Kerimim. And thus Israel subdued Ammon. Now, that looks like Othniel, doesn't it?

But, that is, verses 29 and 32 to 33 belong together. If we take them together, we get a similar pattern as we had with Othniel.

[12:19] However, as with the Gideon story, the coming of the spirit and the ultimate defeat of the army is interrupted. With Gideon, the interruption is taken up with Gideon bargaining with God.

With Jephtar, that interruption is filled with a vow. Now, we'll look at it in a moment. But what I want you to notice that the interruption both by Gideon and by Jephtar is not instigated by God.

It is instigated by the judge who appears to want some guarantees and assurances. You see, being clothed with God's spirit is not enough for Jephtar. He seems to doubt God's ability and he seeks to bargain with or even coerce God.

In the end, Jephtar pushes God to the side, doesn't he? You see, God's war, God's victory is pushed aside while Jephtar pushes himself into center stage.

Of course, the end result is what we all know. You see, virtually no one here today, friends, remembers this story in Judges 11.

[13:22] For the victory that the Lord won through his spirit over the enemies of the people of God. See, virtually no one here today remembers how God the judge decided the dispute between the Israelites and the Ammonites this day as Jephtar had wanted him to.

No, no. God's victory, God's glory is pushed to the side. And Jephtar, us, the commentators, we all focus in on one thing, Jephtar and his vow.

Here's a man doing what is right in his own eyes. And here is the Lord receding into the background. But let's turn to the content of this interruption. Look at the content of the vow in verse 30.

Jephtar makes a vow to the Lord and says, If you give the Ammonites into my hand, 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'll sacrifice it as a burnt offering.

Now, there are a number of things to notice here. First, this is the one and only time that Jephtar speaks directly to the Lord in the whole of his story. Second, there is much to be lost here for Jephtar.

[14:34] Do you remember? When we first heard about him, he was an empty, landless man, ostracized from his family and tribe. He was an outcast.

But not now. Now he has a place in the world or at least the potential for a place. He will therefore do what he can to maintain this for himself and his family.

You see, if he loses here, he will lose everything. He'll be back to being an empty man, back to the lads, you know, out in the back blocks. A landless, empty man.

And we know that because it's reflected in the constant focus on himself in the vow. Did you hear it? My house, my house, me, I, I. No, not only has God shifted to the periphery.

Jephtar has shifted to the front. And then third, he speaks to the Lord much the same as he speaks to everyone else. He seeks to get the best thing for himself. He's therefore manipulative.

[15:37] Fourth, the vow here is somewhat typical of promissory vows in the Old Testament. It's connected with the sanctuary or the temple and is tied to an offering. In this case, it's a burnt offering. And friends, I need to tell you, a burnt offering is a burnt offering.

It is something that's totally consumed on the altar. And fifth, the focus of the burnt offering is clear. It is whatever comes out of the door of my house when I return in triumph from the Ammonites.

Actually, a better translation is this. Whatever comes out of the door of my house when I return in safety from the Ammonites. But the sixth point has to do with what Jephtar expects will come out of the house to meet him.

Now, I would argue quite strongly that his expectation is not his daughter. Oh, it's true that often women did come out of houses to meet their men who had been victorious in battle.

However, houses in the ancient world were not like sort of houses here in Doncaster, you know, a block with a big house in the middle of it. And, you know, it's just you and your kids and so on.

[16:46] No, houses in the ancient world had multiple rooms and enclosures. And those included closures for animals to keep them safe. And when Jephtar speaks of what might come out, I think he uses the indefinite gender rather than the feminine one, which would head us toward thinking it's not he's not thinking either of his wife or his daughter.

When his daughter does come out also, he's shocked to his core, meaning that that's not what he was expecting. What's more, burnt offering is normally used of non-human sacrifices.

And finally, then, just to help convince us, the narrator himself uses the word behold in the original language to demonstrate the shock and surprise that came when his daughter came out.

So there's the vow. By the way, I want you to notice something else before we see the aftermath of this. Do remember this. Jephtar is the skilled negotiator.

He got his way with the elders of Israel. He had a partial victory with the king of Ammon. But did you notice something here? Here, his negotiating partner, the Lord, will not even engage with him in his vow.

[17:53] He gets no negotiation from the Lord. All he gets is silence. And all we get is the Lord's deafening silence. You see, he is not going to be coerced to be at this human's beck and call.

Now look at verse 34. You see, normally, after great victories in the Old Testament, there was enormous rejoicing. Often there was singing, just like we saw earlier. Remember with Deborah and Barak in Judges 5?

A whole chapter devoted to the song. Or later in the books of Samuel, when we see the women singing after Saul and David's victory over the Philistines. But when Jephtar returns home, all of this gets turned on its head for who should come out singing?

His daughter. And look at how she is described. Let me give you a literal translation of the second half of verse 34. It goes like this. Now there was only her, an only child.

There was no other for him, neither son nor daughter. Friends, it's critical to understand this.

Jephtar came from being an empty, landless, peopleless man.

[19 : 03] He had forged his way in the world by his own assertiveness with his gifted mouth and his manipulation of the Lord. But now his mouth has brought him down. But look how he reacts.

He doesn't take it upon himself. But he casts it back on his daughter. Grief stricken at being caught as a victim of his own mouth. He uses his mouth again. And this time to condemn the innocent and join the ranks of the oppressors.

Ah, he says, not you. My daughter. You have brought me to my knees and I am devastated.

Friends, last week I told you Jephtar needed to read his Bible more.

I told you he's theologically weak. And I believe he's biblically wrong and theologically weak in this statement as well. That is all in the statement that is just about to follow.

Oh, you see, it is true that in the Old Testament and in the law, God treats vows very seriously. It is true that God himself is said to make vows and be faithful to them.

[20 : 03] Ezekiel 16 verse 8. It is also true that when a person makes a vow to the Lord, they must not break their word, but do everything they said. However, on the other side of things, the Passover ritual opens up the possibility that an offering to the Lord can be substituted.

You can see that in a number of places. Moreover, I think that Leviticus 27, 1 to 8 opens up the possibility of some sort of financial payment being made in cases less major than this that involve humans.

For example, if someone's life is dedicated to the Lord, not in terms of them dying, but they're dedicated to God as a servant of God, then you can actually pay that out, as it were, financially.

If that's true of a human being dedicated to the Lord to service of him, surely that could also be true, or you could argue that that could also be true of someone being offered as a burnt offering and so on.

It's also true that vows in the Old Testament can be negated by higher authorities. Surely the very strict rules about sacrificing children in the Old Testament would qualify as a sort of higher authority.

[21 : 20] So I'm therefore just not sure that this last declaration by Jephtar is accurate when he says, I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break. I'm not sure that it's true.

I think he could have. But now let's look at Jephtar's daughter in verse 36. This often happens in the Old Testament. There is a wise and godly woman present when men are most stuffing things up.

I've already seen that with Deborah, haven't we? When men are failing in Judges 4. And then, after hearing the catalogue of male failures throughout the book of Judges, we will open the book of Samuel, which is set in the time of the Judges, with Hannah.

The star of the books of Samuel, who acts rightly and theologizes correctly. And here is another.

You see, she addresses her father with affection. My father, she's not in a position to turn back his vow. She is in a position to endorse his inclination to keep his word, which she does.

[22 : 25] However, she does hint at some of the motivations that lay behind it. You see, Jephtar last week spoke of God judging. However, his daughter speaks not of God's enemies, nor does she speak of the people of God's enemies.

Rather, she speaks of the Lord avenging Jephtar of his enemies, the Ammonites. And then she puts in a final plea. She asks for a stay of execution. Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends because I'll never marry.

Now, just in passing, I find it intriguing that she wants to go and spend the two months with her fellow young women rather than her family. I don't know why that is.

But anyway, the request is granted. We're not told much more. And the story closes. And mind you, it closes with her having been offered as Jephtar promised. Friends, the irony of this story is so potent.

Did you see it? Here is Jephtar. He delivers Israel. He delivers them from the Ammonites who, along with other neighbors, did the most detestable things, including offering their children in sacrifice.

[23 : 32] And then after the victory over them, he turns, sacrifices his daughter to the Lord who finds such things immeasurably objectionable. Jephtar's a self-centered man.

He's a man without decent theology and a man is a man who has become an abuser rather than a deliverer. Friends, as I said, there is so much that could be said here. I could use this passage to speak about vows.

Or I could use it to speak about the awful abuses of women and children that we increasingly hear about in our own day and in our own country. Or I could address a number of other areas of application.

But I just want to focus in on two things. First, I want to speak about this deliverer of Israel and our deliverer, the Lord Jesus. Now, the contrast is strong and powerful, aren't they?

For when the spirit comes upon Jesus, he will have nothing to do with being tempted from God's way. He puts God first. He wills God's word truly and faithfully.

[24 : 31] He lives and ministers by God's word. He makes no deals with God, but gives himself obediently to God. Remember him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Not my will, but yours be done.

He does what is good for others, not himself. He obeys to the point of death, even death on a cross, as Philippians 2 will say. Jephtar may be a saviour of Israel, but such a flawed man could never be the saviour of the world as ours is.

The second point of application arises out of something that I've worked hard on these two weeks. I hope you've noticed. You see, I've spent two weeks making sure that we hear various notes about Jephtar.

Next week, I am going to speak about some of his pluses, but today I want to concentrate on his failures, for they are profound. Friends, there are undoubtedly reasons for these failures in his history, but Jephtar does have two fatal failures, and each of them are bad enough when they are on their own.

But in combination, they are disastrous. They may very well, as I've said, arise from abuse that he's suffered from others, but that does not make them right.

[25 : 42] Let me tell you what they are. The first is that Jephtar is a profoundly self-centred man. You can see it today as he faces his only daughter. He speaks not of her. Did you notice that?

He speaks of himself. He cannot see her except through his own eyes. No matter what matters to him is not what happens to her, but the effect it has on him. He's a profoundly self-centred man. His negotiations, his language, his careless vow, they all speak the same truth. A self-occupied, self-centred man. And the second fault is his theological shallowness.

We saw that last week as he mixed up the gods of the surrounding nations, or as he raised those gods to the same level as the Lord and gave them the same power, gave the same power to the gods of the nations as was only given to Yahweh, the Lord.

The result was that the Lord was reduced in his sovereignty over the world. He became one among many. And we've seen this theological shallowness again today. You see, he makes a vow he should not have made and did not need to make.

[26 : 47] And having made it, he ended up losing everything. Well, at least the potential to lose everything.

But he lost his future in the land. For there was no one to succeed him. Having made this vow that would cause him to do something that the Lord finds overwhelmingly offensive, he doesn't show openness to what the same Lord says elsewhere in his word.

Friends, those two weaknesses, those two weaknesses of profound self-centeredness and shallow theology result in God and his glory being diminished.

They result in other people being hurt and abused. Friends, let me tell you, there can only be victims when these two are unleashed together. And I've seen this at various times and in various places as I've engaged in pastoral ministry.

The examples can be multiplied. But I want to just give you one example, which is relatively common and which raises the area. And this happens in the area of healing.

[27 : 55] You see, people who don't know what the Bible says about healing and perhaps want to see them sort of rise in importance in people's eyes. So that is, see themselves exalted. Take it upon themselves to tell people that they are going to be healed.

I think they do this with a wrong view of guidance and a wrong view of God and healing and a self-exalted view of themselves wanting to lift themselves up. And they end up giving assurances to people unwell that God is going to do this or that.

In the end, they run the very strong possibility. And I've seen it. Friends, be very careful.

Read your Bibles very carefully. Don't exalt yourself. Don't give yourself prominence. If you're convinced God is going to heal them, why not just pray at home with confidence, thanking God for what he's going to do?

But you can hear what I'm saying, can't I? Can't you? I really want us to spend our time being humble like the Lord Jesus Christ, playing down our own importance, spending our time like the Lord Jesus, informing ourselves from Scripture.

[29 : 08] Friends, please, please, please leave self-importance and self-centeredness. Focus instead on becoming theologically sharp and biblically aware.

For if you do this, you'll be of most use to God and most use to his people. And you'll avoid some disastrous situations.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you that you have given us your word to guide us in how to live. Before you.

We thank you that you've given us the strong example of your son. Who did not regard equality with you as something to be grasped. But emptied himself.

And became a servant. Father, please help us to be like the Lord Jesus. To spend our time soaking up your will in your word.

[30 : 09] Wanting to do it. And humbling ourselves. To obey your word. To listen to your word. And teach your word. Father, please help us to do this, we pray.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.