

The Tragedy of Jephthah

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we pray that you would speak to us from your word today. I pray that utterance would be given me in the opening of my mouth that I might make known with boldness the mystery of your gospel.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, history is full of them.

Our historians have beautifully recorded them. They are fraternities of the dispossessed groups of men who have become disaffected, often economically deprived, often culturally alienated, socially excluded.

Such groups are often largely male, mostly young, often idealistic. But what happens is they gather in gangs and they rally behind leaders.

Friends, we know these men. We in contemporary society know them because we see them around the world. We know their work. They are present in our day. The ranks of terrorists and militia are full of them.

[1 : 0 7] Men outside normal society. Men who feel alienated and disenfranchised. Looking for a cause. And today, we're going to meet one of them in an ancient place.

He occurs in the book of Judges, chapter 11, and his name is Jephtar. Before we get to him, let's remember where we've been. A few Sundays ago, we returned after a couple of years to the book of Judges.

It's a world where Israel has been rescued from Egypt. The heroes are dead. That is, Moses is dead and Joshua is dead. They're in the land of promise, though.

They're where God wants them to be. But they don't yet have the kings that will come. They don't yet have a Saul, or a David, or a Solomon, or a Josiah.

But what they do have is these series of Spirit-empowered Judges. And you might remember that, at least initially, there is a general pattern about how things go with Israel and their judges.

[2 : 1 0] It can be summarised in a diagram, and I'd encourage you to open up your notice sheet and have a look at the diagram. Even if you don't need the rest of the outline, that will be helpful for you.

This diagram represents a cycle of the human and the divine that crops up throughout the book of Judges. And do you remember the pattern? Check it out. Have a look at it.

There's a typical cycle that goes something like this. It generally starts with a downward human intervention. This occurs at point one on my diagram. Israel does evil and becomes even more corrupt, hence the downward direction.

That's followed by item two generally. That is, the Lord's anger is aroused at Israel's sin, and so he gives them into the hand of a foreign aggressor. That's item two.

Item three. Israel cries out to the Lord in their distress because they're being persecuted and oppressed by this foreign aggressor. The Lord then relents and raises up a deliverer.

[3 : 12] Item four. Often that deliverer is filled and empowered by God's Spirit. And that leads to item five. That is, the Lord turns the tide of the oppression and gives the foreign aggressor into the hands of his Spirit-empowered deliverer.

And finally, we get to item six before things go back to the way they were. The land has rest for a number of years. Now, as we read the book of Judges, we notice that this pattern begins as the book goes on to break up a bit.

We saw a few weeks ago that that was true in our last foray into the book of Judges. So I want you to turn with me to that passage. Look at Judges 10. Now, from memory, it's page 250 or thereabouts in your Bibles.

Now, I just want you to see what happens. First of all, beginning of chapter 10, we're introduced to two minor judges. Verse 1 tells us about a certain Issachar and we're told, a man of Issachar, and we're told from the cycle that, sorry, we're told from the cycle that he rose to save Israel.

So we see where he fits into the diagram. Then we're told that God raises him as item 4 in our diagram.

[4 : 26] He simply rises. Then we're told about a Jair of Gilead. With him, we're not even told that he rose. We simply just rules Israel for 22 years. But then we're told of the Israelites and how they spiritually begin to decline again in these dark days.

And the story is straightforward. Perhaps you remember it there. It's there in verse 6. Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord. That is, they did three things. They served the gods of the surrounding nations.

They forsook the Lord and they no longer served him. That matches item 1 in our diagram. So there's the downward trend. And sure enough, God does item 2.

You can see it in verses 7 to 9. He becomes angry. He sells them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. And these foreign oppressors do exactly that.

They oppress the people of God. In verse 9, we hear that Israel is in great distress. And so they do item 3 on our diagram. It's there in verse 10.

[5 : 28] Have a look. They cry out to the Lord and they acknowledge their sin. And then, an astounding thing happens. God breaks the cycle.

We and Israel have been led to expect him to do item 4. That's how the cycle runs. That's what should happen next.

We've been led to expect that God will relent and he'll raise up a deliverer for them and everything will be alright again and the end result will be they have rest in the land. But he doesn't. In fact, look at verse 14.

In frustration and very deep irony, God tells them to go and cry out to the gods they've been worshipping. He says, I've had enough of you. Go try them. See if they can rescue you. Perhaps they'll save you from your trouble.

Then comes verse 15. They acknowledge their sin again and they cast themselves upon God. They beg God to do what they expect him to do. To act according to his character and forgive them and rescue them.

[6 : 32] Effectively, they have another go at item 3. And verse 16 tells us of God's response. And perhaps you remember it. Look at verse 16. First, we're told of their concrete repentance.

They got rid of the foreign gods among them. They turned to service of the Lord. And then we read the final half of verse 16. And when we looked at it last, I told you that the Hebrew here is ambiguous.

My translation goes like this. And God's soul was, and the Lord's soul was short with the pain or the trouble or the work or the effort of Israel.

It can go cut two ways, can't it? God is frustrated with the pain Israel's causing him or the pain they're experiencing or this effort of repenting that they keep doing and we're left hanging.

we're not told that he repents or relents. We would expect that he would do that, that he'd relent from sending disaster and rescue them. Verse 16 could also be interpreted as saying that he's fed up with Israel's fickleness.

[7 : 43] His soul is short. He's had enough. He's totally exasperated with them. And we don't know which one it is. We don't know if he's going to relent and send a saviour? Or is he going to just leave them to their own devices?

But what we do know is that the story which follows will contain the answer in some way. So let's have a look at it. We're now in the passage that is set for today and I want you to look at what happens.

It's an intriguing story. I have never fully understood the story of Jephtar but I think I'm beginning to grapple with it now and so hopefully I can communicate it to you. First, we're reminded of the Ammonites we met back in chapter 10 verse 10.

They are still there. Their ongoing presence in the land implies that God might indeed be exasperated with Israel beyond measure. Second, Israel as a whole has disappeared from view.

Instead, although we're dealing with Israelites we have focused down onto one particular part of Israel. We're dealing with one location where the Ammonites are lining up for battle.

[8 : 50] A place called Gilead. We're dealing with one group of Israelites who are confronted with the Ammonites that is the people of Gilead. Battle lines are drawn up with the Ammonites camped in Gilead and the Israelites assembled and camped in Mizpah and you can imagine them eyeing each other off as it were and this brings us to verse 18.

We're told that the leaders of the people of Gilead speak among themselves. Now I think it means the military leaders that is the captains of the people of Gilead. Okay, so you can imagine all of these guys there they are they're looking at their enemies opposite them and they hold a little conference together.

They notice that God hasn't raised up a leader for them yet they've just got them the captains. No judge no leader. So the captains decide among themselves what they'll do they say to each other whoever will take the lead in attacking the Ammonites will be head over all who live in Gilead.

Let me just explain what's going on here. First the word head is a word that is used elsewhere for tribal chieftains. It's clearly what is meant here. What's being said by these captains is whoever launches the attack against the Ammonites will be head of everyone in Gilead.

They will be the tribal chieftain. Second this discussion among the captains is not theirs to take is it? It's not their job.

[10 : 14] Back in Judges 1 we saw what the cycle should be. Israel lacks a leader after the death of Joshua. What do they do? They say to God give us a leader and the Lord tells them the tribe of Judah will be your leader.

Appointing leaders in Israel is not the job of the Israelites it's the job of God. It's God's prerogative not that of the people. So it looks as though Israel's given up on God doing anything.

They think he's exasperated beyond measure. They seem to think he's not going to relent because of their sin. So what they do is they say well you know we better get on with it haven't we? They take things in their own hands or to use the language of the book of Judges elsewhere they do what is right in their own eyes.

In the absence of God in the face of what appears to be his reluctance the captains of Gilead call for a volunteer and they offer a carrot will make you chieftain.

Okay that brings us to chapter 11. Immediately we're faced with a possible hero. Look at verse 1. There are a number of things to notice about this character we're introduced to. One his name is Jephtar.

[11 : 23] Two he is a Gileadite. In other words he's one of them. He is therefore a possibility for being their head their chieftain.

Third he's a mighty warrior. That makes him a likely suspect as well doesn't it? However there's more to learn about him for his mum is a prostitute.

Now as I read verse 1 you might notice that that's not the way the order occurs in the text. Did you notice that? The order I went through it's not the order that occurs in the text but it's the order that occurs in the Hebrew text.

So his mum is the first person in terms of who he comes from that is introduced. I should note that the word prostitute might have stronger associations for us than the Hebrew word here that is used but what it does mean is whatever it means it means she was not a woman of high repute or resources.

Five he's got a known father this man. Six he has brothers who are legitimate in a way that he is not. That is brothers who come from another woman the wife.

[12 : 39] Seven those brothers denied him and what was his right according to God's law in Deuteronomy. They drove him away from the family you're not meant to do that according to Deuteronomy.

They denied him any inheritance with the family and they did so because he was the son of another woman. Eight he therefore fled from his family and settled in the land of tolf.

You know what tolf means? Good. I don't know whether there's meant to be anything we make out of that but he settled in the good land. Nine he had gathered around him a group of men who followed him.

Now in our version these men are called a gang of scoundrels. The Hebrew literally says empty men. Most commentators say they are empty of morality therefore they're scoundrels or thugs.

However it may be I think we need to take care with this. I wonder if they're empty men in the sense that they are empty of rights and inheritance. They are empty of land.

[13 : 47] Can you imagine that? You see you can understand can't you because if Jephtar has been thrown out of his family he no longer has rights to land in Israel. He is landless.

He is empty and in the ancient world that's disastrous because you can't forge your way. How are you going to supply your family or yourself with a living?

You have no land. Well you could be a thug and rip off other people or you could do a variety of other things. So they are landless men.

They are men who have no economic future. They are men who gather together and perhaps try and forge a future together. Sometimes they might act immorally. Sometimes they might look like bandits and thugs.

Sometimes they might need to do things that are a bit on the edge or beyond the law in order to make their way in the world. But it doesn't necessarily mean that they have to be thugs.

[14 : 44] After all let me tell you David was part of such a band when Saul threw him out of the court. He did do some things that might be slightly suspect while he was doing that.

But he was part of one of these empty men groups. Anyway, this is the man we meet in these verses. And having introduced him, we return to the Ammonite problem. Look at verse 4.

So we've got Ammonite problem, we've got here is Jephtar, and then we've got back to Ammonite problem. Some time has passed, and apparently no one has answered the call of chapter 10 verse 17.

That is, the plan of the captains has not resulted in anything, and a war is waging. Look at verses 5 and 6. A new group enters, not the captains this time, no, it's the elders of Gilead, and they take the initiative right over the top of the captains.

Captains are there waiting to do war, the elders say, look, we've got to do something about this, so they step in, and they go to Jephtar in the land of Toph, and we hear them speak, verse 6, and look at what they say, come, they say, be our commander so that we can fight the Ammonites.

[15 : 56] Now I want you to notice again just a few things about this. The leaders of Israel are assuming that God is not going to raise up someone, aren't they? Second, they don't offer him what the captains offered, true blood Gileadites.

They don't offer him the role of being head, chieftain. No, they offer him a lesser role of being commander, that is, a military role. It was undoubtedly a lesser role.

It was probably just a temporary position, probably under the oversight of the elders, when the job was done, out you go. It was a lesser role than offered to true blood Gilead people.

And the elders, you see, what they wanted was someone to win a war for them, but they didn't want to give themselves into his hands on a broader, more permanent basis. They offer it to him so that he can just get the task done, fight the Ammonites, get rid of them, we'll get on with life.

Let's look at the perspective hero's response. It's really very good. It's full of sarcasm. Look at verse 7. Jephtar said to them, didn't you hate me and drive me out of my father's house?

[17 : 05] Why do you come to me now when you're in trouble? A good question. I want you to notice that this verse implies that there may have been some legal dispossessing of Jephtar's rights and the elders would have overseen that.

So perhaps the brothers dispossessed him and the elders oversaw it. The brothers may have brought him to a court of some sort that was presided over by these very elders. Therefore the elders may be complicit in denying Jephtar his legal rights.

So he rightly says, what obligation do I have to you given what you've done to me? You didn't help me when I was in trouble, now you expect me to help you when you're in trouble. Why?

It is full of sarcasm. Anyway, look at verse 8. The elders of Gilead said to him, nevertheless, we are turning to you now.

Come with us and fight the Ammonites and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead. Do you notice something? They've reversed the order of things and they've changed what they're offering.

[18 : 12] So it was a bargaining chip that they put out there. And perhaps in doing so they're tacitly acknowledging in doing what they're doing the Jephtar's charges. They talk about fighting first and then they change commander back into what was going to be given to all the other Gileadites.

He can behead. Come with us, they say. In other words, come and be one of us. You've been cast out, but come and be one of us. Come and fight with us against the Ammonites and you'll be head over all who live in Gilead.

And verses 9 to 11, Jephtar seizes the moment. Look at verse 9. He makes sure that they understand. he even brings the Lord into it. The Lord's been noticeably absent up until now, but he brings the Lord into it.

Jephtar answered, suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me. Will I really be your head? He's got the elders, hasn't he?

And they bring the Lord into things as well. Look at it. In what's possibly an ill-considered oath, they promise this. The Lord is our witness. Now let me tell you, according to the commandments, if you take the name of the Lord your God in vain, you are in big trouble.

[19 : 28] But they have taken the name of the Lord. Behind the word Lord there sits the word Yahweh. They've taken Lord and asked him to be their witness. If they don't, if they break this oath, they will have God looking at them.

They will have broken the commandment. So they say, the Lord is our witness, we will certainly do as you say. The initiative, though, in all of this, has not been God's activity.

Sometimes it's been motivated by Israel crying out, but not here. Here the Israelites take all the initiative. They take their own action. They do what is right in their eyes.

They take upon themselves the role that belongs to the Lord alone. And having given that, having done that, they then drag the Lord in at the end to sign off on it.

They seek the endorsement of the Lord after the fact. The raising up of Jephtar is therefore portrayed as a human event, with God called in to sign and seal it.

[20 : 37] There's the story for today, friends. So what are we going to make of this? What are we going to make of it? I want you to notice something. There are some parallels between the first incident in chapter 10 and the second incident, in chapter 10 and a half to 11.

Let me show you. Let me just parade them before you. In chapter 10, the Israelites reject the Lord, don't they? In our passage today, the people of Gilead reject Jephtar.

Second, in chapter 10, the Israelites find themselves under threat from the Ammonites and they need some help. So it happens today in our passage.

Third, in chapter 10, the Israelites seek some help from the Lord, the one they rejected. So too in our passage today, but this time the people of Gilead seek the help of Jephtar, the one they rejected.

Fourth, in chapter 10, God rebuffs their seeking help. So too today. Jephtar basically tells them they've got some cheek coming to him and offering him a lesser deal. Fifth, in chapter 10, the Israelites repent of their rejecting of the Lord and reinstate him as the one they serve.

[21 : 50] So too in our passage for today, the Israelite leaders give Jephtar what they had offered all other Gileadites, therefore effectively offer him full citizenship and oversight of their tribe.

Israel. But I want you to notice there's something that's got no parallel. Did you notice it? We still don't have God's exasperation answered. We still don't know if this is God's man.

We've still got this nagging question in our brains. Is this God's action or not? Has he relented? Has he raised up a deliverer? But what we do know is Israel is indeed fickle.

their repentance is not repentance. It is expediency, isn't it? Isn't that what's going on here? This is sheer expediency. It is not deep.

It is not heartfelt. It has no substance. It is desperate political expediency. It is not a quick fix and it is not a change of heart. These people are making their own way, doing in their own eyes what is right.

[22 : 55] Their heart has not changed. And it's the heart that exasperates God when it is wicked. You see, God knows that quick victories with transitory judges will not solve the problem.

It won't fix the underlying heart issue. And that's the problem that God faces throughout the period of the judges. He's been facing it from day one of creation, as it were. You see, from Genesis 3, he has been facing this problem.

It's the heart of humans, which desires to be independent from God. It wasn't fixed with Abraham. It wasn't fixed with Joseph. It wasn't fixed with Moses.

The symbol of that was he wasn't able to enter into the promised land. It isn't fixed with the judges. And it won't be fixed with the kings. Saul certainly won't fix it.

Can you see where this story leaves us? It leaves us with unanswered questions. We have a frail and sinful nation whose heart is inclined toward evil.

[24 : 04] We have a hero who is frail. And we'll see that as the story goes on. So the question is, where do we find a solution to this problem? Is there a dependable hero for us? You see, underneath it all, we know that these humans are made of the same stuff as Adam and Eve and as us.

They are us and we are them. Frail, fickle, sinful, needy, in need of rescue. From where shall our help come? And the Old Testament goes on, as I said, we will continue to look.

We'll continue to come up without answers. Beyond judges, we'll look for kings. First King Saul, as I said, will be a severe disappointment. Second King David, well, he'll be a step up from Saul, but he'll still be human.

Israel will end up in exile because they couldn't get the heart right. God will promise them a day when he'll cleanse their hearts.

They'll come back from exile. They'll intermarry as God told them not to. It will show the heart is still desperately evil.

[25 : 15] And they will wait. And they will watch. And we will watch waiting for a hero, one from God who will sort out the problem.

And of course we know the answer, don't we? We know that he comes born of a woman, born under the law, so that he might fulfil it.

He who lived perfectly will then die so that we might be forgiven for what we have failed to do. Prince, this is the only answer to that problem.

And the Bible shows time after time after time after time again. The heart is desperately wicked. I, the Lord, search the heart. And do you know what he finds in it?

The disposition to sin. We need a hero, a deliverer. God and there is only one of them, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 25] Friends, there's one other thing I want to say though. After telling you to turn to him, put your faith and your trust in him, for he's the only way that we can be right with God.

But I want you to notice what happens when Jesus comes into the world. he comes to his own and his own do not receive him. But as he comes to the nation of Israel, he is the answer to what has been absent in their hearts.

And they do not receive him. That's John chapter one. Just like they don't receive Jephtar, just like they don't receive the Lord himself and don't worship him.

friends, we must seek succor in the very one whom God has sent. Otherwise, there is nowhere to run, nowhere to go.

Let us pray.