

Gideon 2

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[0 : 00] Let us turn to the passage you read, and we take us out, connecting link, the first verse of chapter 11, the first part of it.

Judges chapter 11 at the beginning, now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor. And you will remember that he is one of the men mentioned in the epistle to the Hebrews chapter 11 as a man of faith, the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, of Barak, of Samson and of Jephthah, who through faith subdued kingdoms.

He was a man of faith. Now, you will remember that this book, which covers a period of 450 years, deals with periods of revival and declension in the history of Israel.

Periods of prosperity followed by adversity. Periods of prosperity. Periods of a period during which a judge would rule when there would be peace and tranquility, and after his death, Israel would lapse again into ungodliness and into idolatry.

Well, Gideon became a judge in Israel after another extended period of unbelievable idolatry.

[1 : 46] But it seems that the oftener they fell away from the worship of the true God, the worse their condition became.

And by the time that Jephthah was called as judge, they had multiplied the gods that they had in Israel.

And chapter 10 of this book gives an account of what happened. By now they had various gods established, various deities, Balaam and Ashtaroth, both male and female divinities.

They had the god Bel, which they had taken from Syria, Astartith, from Sidon. The god Moloch, from these people whom Jephthah dealt the people of Ammon.

It was to this god, Moloch, that the children of Israel ultimately began to offer some of their own children as burnt offerings.

[2 : 51] And then, of course, they had the god Dagon, whom they had brought in from Philistia, from the Philistines. A god, half fish and half man.

So these gods were multiplying in Israel by the time that Jephthah was called to office. Each period of spiritual declension brought them into a worse spiritual condition.

Now, by this time again, with the increasing number of deities in Israel, little or nothing was being heard of the name of God himself.

We find this in the book that by now, heathen incantations were filling the land from end to end.

Whereas in the past, people would gather and call upon the name of God and rehearse God's mighty acts on behalf of the people, by now, as I said, that was being replaced unbelievably by heathen incantations.

[4 : 12] And they were, at this time, as chapter 10 tells us, sold by God into the hands of Ammon. Now, for years, this king, with his followers, terrorized the area of Gad and Ephraim and Manasseh with a sort of guerrilla warfare.

And the people, as we read in chapter 10, were driven through this tyranny into great distress.

It lasted for 18 years. And ultimately, they turned in penitence to God. Under pressure, under this pressure, under this distress, they cried to God and they even renounced their idolatry.

And it's quite significant that you come across this kind of thing in the book of Judges. And as I've said already, and as the Bible tells us, there's nothing new under the sun. As long as things are going reasonably well with people who have little thought of God, they don't bother with religion or with God.

But once things turn against them, they begin to cry, they begin to recognize that they need something that they don't have. Now, you come across this in our own, you come across this today.

[5 : 45] In many instances, perhaps there are some of yourselves who recollect times in your lives, but perhaps in a crisis, whatever brought it on, be it illness or death or whatever, in a crisis, in need, you cry to God.

Once the need passes, once the crisis goes, once the need is met and the crisis passes, God is conveniently forgotten. And this is what happened over and over again in the history of Israel.

We've sung it in Psalm 78. God would chastise these people. Then they would remember God and they would turn to God. But once they were delivered, then they would lapse again into a period of forgetfulness of God.

You have it also in times when people, perhaps under a sense of divinity, they become quite religious. Perhaps they begin to attend the means of grace with greater regularity than in the past.

They begin to listen. Things begin to influence them, perhaps to profoundly affect them. And to all intents and purposes, things look so promising for a while with people like that.

[7 : 02] But then the whole thing passes away. And invariably, these people become more religious than they ever were before.

Well, that's something like what happened to Israel. So when these people turned to God and they cried to him, God said this to them. And we have this recalled for the Genshah chapter 10.

Well, why should I listen to your cries any longer? And God addressed them like that so that that message would deepen their penitence.

And that message became very effective in their lives. They gathered at Mizpah to worship God and to determine what they would do.

And it was at Mizpah that the discovery was made. Well, they were leaderless. They had no one really could lead them against the children of Ammon. And it was that, it was out of that gathering, that the message was sent to this man, Jephthah, to come and act as their leader and their judge.

[8 : 19] Before I leave that, just to hark back a minute to the message, to the reply that God gave to their cry for deliverance. Why should I listen to your cries any longer?

Do you know that there is a sense in which that text could be very readily applied to ourselves, to each one of us? Because by our own sins and by our own forgetfulness and by our own faithlessness, we have forfeited any and every claim that we have to God's intervention on our behalf.

I think it is generally accepted today, certainly in this island, by people who have any depth of spiritual perception at all.

I think it is generally accepted. And I think also very sadly felt that there is a spiritual death and a spiritual dearth hanging over us as a people.

Perhaps it is a judicial spiritual hardening. But I think that if every one of us were to stand honestly before God tonight and recognise and accept that state of affair, we would have to acquiesce in this message from God.

[9 : 44] Why should I listen any longer to your cries? If you apply that to your own life and to your own heart, you will acknowledge that God is under no obligation whatsoever to listen of all people, to listen to you.

Well, when they took that message to heart, they turned in deep penitence to God. And now, onto the stage comes this man, Jephthah.

Now he has a very strange history. We read that he was a son of a harlot. Probably his father, Gilead, had a concubine, as many of the people in that day had.

And children who were born to their concubines were in years to come thorns in the sides of that family. The classic example, of course, is the family of Jacob, who had two sons by his lawful wife, Joseph and Benjamin.

And the other sons who were born to him through his concubine were instruments of great sorrow to that man and to his family.

[11 : 05] Well, in the course of time, Gilead's true sons drove this man out of the house, out of jealousy, because they didn't want him to have any part at all in their father's inheritance.

And so he was banished. And after a while, banished in the northern kingdom, he gathered together a monthly crew. And that was a man that God laid his hands on to deliver Israel.

A man of poor birth, a man of very inadequate means. And yet God was to use that man to deliver this people. They sent a message to him, ultimately to come and help them.

And when he came, he asked the question, Why are you calling me now? When in the past you despised and rejected me? It is on this basis, for example, that Augustine uses Jephthah as a type of Christ.

I don't think he is warranted in doing that. But one of the reasons that he uses Jephthah as a type of Christ is this, that Christ was also rejected and despised by his people.

[12 : 13] And despised by all. And yet when grace touches the heart, it is the Christ who was despised who was called to become their deliverer.

Well, he became their leader. And the message he took are very interesting. When he assumed power and control, he sent a message to the king of Ammon.

And the message was very simple. He asked him to justify his terrorist activity against the tribes of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Reuben, and Gad.

Justify, he says, your murderous intentions for 18 years against my people. And he got the answer back. And the answer he got back from Ammon was that his activity against Israel was rooted in their past history.

And what he said was this, shades of the Middle East crisis today. What he said to Jephthah was this, you have taken possession of my land, and the land does not belong to you.

[13 : 26] So Jephthah sent him back this answer, and the answer was rooted in the history of Israel. And he corrected Ammon on one score.

And what he said to him was this, when Israel is set to possession of the land that we have today, the land did not belong to you. The land was then under control of the Amorites, not the Ammonites.

They, he said, had taken the land from you, and we took their land from them. And what's more, he said, the land that we took possession of, we took possession of in accordance with the word of God.

God gave us this land. And furthermore, he said, if you claim to have possession of your land through the intervention and the power of your God, Shemosh, surely we can claim the land that we have been given, not by an idol, but by the living God of Israel.

And then he went on. You're not the first one, he said, who has tried to dispossess Israel from the land given to them by God. Balak, he said, sent word to a so-called magician, Balaam, so that he would curse the people of Israel as they were passing through that very land.

[15 : 01] And he failed because of God's purpose for this people. And he said, you have now taken his place and you are trying to dispossess this people of their God-given inheritance.

And in effect, he said to him, you will fail where Balak failed with Balaam. And as I said, you have shades of the same thing in the appeal that you have this very night in the Middle East itself.

All the trouble that has ever arisen in that area can be traced back to God's purpose for this people.

And time and time again, people will rise and try to thwart the purpose of God.

And we know whatever is going to happen, that God's purpose, whatever it is, and one would be very careful to wander into fields of interpreting biblical prophecy, but whatever purpose God has, for this people and for this land, God's purpose will not be thwarted.

[16 : 33] And I'm sure that in common with yourselves, that we all lament how little we are hearing from the politicians of our day, news conference after news conference, briefing after briefing, and how little we hear of God's word and God's purpose for his people, for his church, and for the world.

It is surely a sign of the deep, deep spiritual declension into which we, as nations of this world, have fallen, and who knows, but that history today is moving towards this, and may God grant it, turning the hearts of the people and of the nations back to the God of Israel.

Well, Jephthah took a stand in biblical history, and he appealed to the God of history for help, and equipped, as verse 29 tells us, equipped with the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, he went out with his army to meet Ammon and to engage him in conflict.

Now, when we read that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, what that means is this, and this is why it's referred to as a man of faith together with Samson and with Gideon and with Barak.

The Spirit of the Lord came upon them. Now, what that means is this, the Lord revealed to him that he was to be the deliverer of Israel, and faith always lays hold of the revelation.

[18 : 38] See that you remember that. When you read of faith in Hebrews 11, what it means is this, and you have this not just in Hebrews 11, but right throughout the Bible, God speaks, and faith receives the word.

Faith believes what is said, and then goes out and acts in faith on the basis of what is said. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him.

God spoke to him. God revealed his word and his purpose to him. He believed that, and he went out in faith. Jephthah was a man of faith.

And this chapter tells us of the victory that he accomplished over Ammon. but it tells us something else, and this is what I want really to speak of tonight. It tells us of something terrible that happened in the life of this man.

Before he went out to battle, he made a vow. And this is the vow. He said to God, God, if you will go with me, and if you will without fail deliver these people into my hands, then, when I return home, whatsoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

[20 : 04] Now, you know the sad, solemn, terrible history. When Jephthah returned home, the first person that came out of his house was his only child, his daughter.

And he was so distressed when he saw her. He couldn't believe his eyes. And he went to his and he said to her, Oh, he said, you've been the cause of great grief to me today because I made a vow to the Lord.

He didn't tell her what it was. I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back on what I said. And probably rehearsing to the doctor what he said, what he had vowed, she, her spirit comes out as a very noble and courageous one and she said to him in effect, Well, if you've said that, you must do what you've said.

Let me go away for two months and I'll come back. And she went away and she came back. Now, the great controversy amongst commentators is this.

did Jephthah really mean this literally or is it to be taken in another way?

[21 : 31] In other words, was it a promise or a vow to offer her up as a burnt offering on the altar to God? Remember, this was not new in Israel.

Because of their allegiance, some of them, to Moloch, it was already practiced in Israel that children were offered up as sacrifices to the God Moloch. But this was not an offering to the God Moloch, this was a vow made to the God of Israel.

So the question is, did he really mean to sacrifice his daughter or did he just mean that he would dedicate his daughter to the service of God so that she would live a life forevermore, a life of celibacy, perhaps in what you would probably call today a convent or something like that, devote your whole life to God?

Now there are lots of commoners who think that that was what he meant by the vow. Just as Hannah vowed to the Lord, if you give me a son, I will dedicate, I will give my son up to you.

And what she meant was that she was going to dedicate him to the service of the Lord. There are many mothers who do that when they pray for children or when they're carrying children. They pray for the safe delivery of the child and if the child is delivered safely, they will consecrate the child to the Lord.

[22 : 49] There are some who think that maybe that was what Jephthah meant. My own view for what it's worth is that to make it mean that is to really try to evade a difficulty that we have before us here.

And I think that one of the things it brings, I take it that Jephthah meant this literally. The first thing that comes to meet me, I will offer it to the Lord's upon offering. if he was a man of faith as he was, why did he not think in terms of it being his daughter?

Why did he not think of it in terms of being his wife? Or perhaps an animal? If there had been a goat or a sheep or an ox, that would have been all right. But if there had been a dog or an ass, that would not have been all right because they were unclean of animals and they were not allowed to be offered to God, that would have been an abomination to the Lord.

And I think he comes across to us here as a man who said something he shouldn't have said at all. As a man who made a rash vow. A man who made a wrong vow.

Because you've got to remember that though they were men of faith, that does not mean that their lives were perfect. That does not mean that these men didn't make mistakes.

[24 : 18] Samson made a mistake. David made a mistake. They all made terrible mistakes in their lives. And this brings before us the mistake that this man made.

And it was a dreadful mistake. It was wrong to make this kind of vow. Now of course you know that our confession of faith deals with the making of vows.

Making a vow in itself is not wrong. David made a vow that he wouldn't give rest to his eyes until he found a place for the ark until he built until there was a proper resting place for the ark of the covenant in Israel.

There's nothing wrong with that kind of vow. The mariners the heathen mariners who were Jonah and the ship they made a vow. Well I leave it up to you to decide whether that vow was right or wrong.

Jacob made a vow when God met with him that night and blessed him at Bethel and he said he made this vow if God is with me and if God keeps me I will do this and I will do that and I will do the next thing.

[25 : 29] Nothing wrong with doing that kind of vow. Some of us here in four weeks time will make a vow. Sitting at the Lord's table publicly you are making a vow a public vow that you belong to the Lord that you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and that you are giving your life to him in witness and in service.

People make that vow. Doesn't mean that we always keep the vows that we make. Children, parents come here with their children two or three times a year baptized I'm going to come back to that in a minute.

They baptize their children into Christian church they make a vow and they vow that they're going to bring up the children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Nothing wrong with making that kind of vow.

Doesn't mean to say that everyone keeps it but the point is that it is made though it isn't kept in many instances. But I think that Jephthah was very wrong in making this vow.

Let me explain to you why I think it. He said to his daughter I cannot go back on what I said. Now there are some people who praise Jephthah for this.

[26 : 39] not for a moment not for a moment did he falter in his determination to fulfill the vow.

but I think he was very wrong in not faltering. He had very good reasons for going back on what he had vowed.

It would have been far better for him to have broken a vow than to have kept that vow. The vow he made in the first place was rash.

He didn't think before he made it. And there are very vows that you've made and you've been rash in thinking and making them and you never thought of the consequences when you made them.

Some of you may have faced death and you vowed that if God saved you you would give yourselves to God. And you made that vow based upon your own inability.

[27 : 43] But you never kept the vow. You were rash in making it. Jephthah was rash in making this. And as I said he had good reason for going back on what he had vowed.

It would have been better for him had he broken it than to keep it. Because keeping a vow that you've made is not always right. You may make a vow. What would you say of a person who walked along Cromwell City tonight who said I vow I'm going to break every window between here and around about at Perseval Road.

So he keeps his vow. That was wrong. The vow was wrong in the first place. And it is not to his honour that he kept the vow. He would have been far better if he had broken the vow that he made wrongly.

And the same would have been true of Jephthah. By keeping that vow to my mind did not make his action honourable at all. And I find it impossible to justify his actions.

Why would he not have said when he saw his daughter Oh Lord I was wrong in making that vow. Forgive me for making it.

[29 : 00] Forgive me for not honouring it. And show me what to do. Show me what is right. There was sin in making the vow.

There may have been sin in breaking that vow. But there was greater sin for him in keeping that vow.

Someone put it like this. The vow put him under the dreadful necessity of sacrificing his own and his only child. His having sworn to do it did not make it right.

it was just as wrong to keep it. If he really did sacrifice her it was a horrible action and dramatised it or disguised it or spiritualised as you may he had no right to make the dangerous promise in the first place and he had less right to carry it through after he had made it if it led to such terrible consequences.

And I share that view entirely. Here was a man returning in triumph from the field of conflict and his joy is turned into sorrow.

[30 : 30] His exaltation is turned into despair and that which would no doubt in past days have been the means of his choicest comforts became now that of his greatest trial.

and so he made this discovery that what he had said was wrong.

And I must say that it was a feeling of some relief that I would want to turn away from this shocking incident because it reminds us that these men full of faith as they were were not without blemishes on their character.

But before I turn away from it and come to the last thing I want to deal with I want just to say one wee thing about making vows in the presence of God in general and then one in particular.

As I said vows have their place in the service of God. When a man or woman, boy or girl is called by the grace of God it is right that he should vow to serve the Lord for the rest of his life.

[32 : 07] It is right that we should put ourselves under obligation to God. it is right that we should place ourselves under the necessity of keeping vows.

You know that every Christian here tonight, every member of the church of God perhaps could take these words out of their context and apply them to themselves and say, I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back.

Those of us who are members and professing members ought to remember that the very act of professing faith in Christ and the very act of making our vows ought in itself to keep us on the straight and narrow.

I cannot go back. But there's another vow I want to speak about and I mentioned already. The vows that parents present here tonight and some not present at all have made when they have presented their children for baptism in the face of this congregation.

And they have put themselves under the solemn obligation to bring up their children in the nurture and in the admonition of the Lord. Now that is a pleasant and a rewarding vow to make.

[33 : 51] And a pleasant and rewarding sacrifice to offer as well. But it strikes me that there are many parents who from that day onwards have taken these very children and offered them as burnt offerings on other altars.

Offered them to the God of their own ungodliness, to the God of their own religion, to the God of their own materialistic and worldly instincts, to the God of immorality, to the God of lawlessness and dare I say it, to the God of drink.

And instead of taking their children to the altar in which they offer them in dedication to the God of heaven, they have since this day, that day rather, that they stood here with them, led them to various other altars.

Where are you leading your children tonight? You who have vowed solemnly before God, where have you taken them? What are you doing with them?

How are you leading them? what are you telling them? Or what are you keeping from them? When it comes to the things of God, how will they remember you?

[35 : 27] As a person who has made a vow to serve God or to dishonor God? As a father who delights in publicly acknowledging himself as an enemy of Christ or as a friend of Christ?

Where do you stand as a parent who has vowed in the presence of the God of Israel with reference to his day, to his word, to his cause, and to his law?

I have made a vow, said Jephthah, and I cannot go back. Jephthah, you are not an honorable man. because of that. That is something to be proud of, because you offer your child as a burnt offering on the altar.

But there are many others who have said I have made a vow, and I don't care what I said. I have stood here with them, and I don't care what the church says.

I have made a promise, and I don't care whether I fulfilled my promise or not. You ought to care, because one day with them, you will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and he will ask you, what have you done with a vow that you made?

[37 : 00] There are vows that are right and that are honorable. vows that are wrong and dishonorable, and I put Jephthah with his vow into that category.

But Jephthah thirdly and finally and very, very briefly learned something else. He learned the fickleness of popularity. You see, he became a great deliverer of Israel.

He judged them for six years. But during that period, he discovered the trauma, this trauma that there were people there who ought to have been with him, who were not with him at all.

The people of Ephraim came up to him one day and said, look, you never asked us to fight for you or with you, and now we've no share in the spoils of victory. And Jephthah says to him, did I not?

You refused to come out and to help me. And there was a big blow up. And a battle followed. And the Gileadites had to engage the Ephraimites in battle.

[38 : 09] And of course, Jephthah with his Gileadites defeated the Ephraimites in battle. This man learned that there was never going to be peace. There was always going to be some problem, some difficult to contend with.

Anyway, the Ephraimites, many of them fled from the field of battle. And they wanted, they tried to escape, but their escape routes were cut off. And they were ambushed by the Gileadites.

And when they were ambushed, when they were caught, arrested, they would claim that they weren't Ephraimites at all. So they gave them a test, and it was a test of pronunciation.

It is almost laughable to come across this kind of thing, a test of pronunciation. So they said, they were told, who do you belong to? Are you an Ephraimite? No. Very well then, if you're not an Ephraimite, say the word shibboleth.

And it seems that the Ephraimites had difficulty in pronouncing their sh's, their sh's, they could only pronounce the hard s, shibboleth. And because of the way they spoke, the pronunciation were caught out.

[39 : 17] You know, we come across this in our own dialects today. There are some people, I'm not going to mention, in case people think I'm getting at others, but you know that there are some people in Lewis, some areas of Lewis, they can't, if I may use the galley just for a moment to explain this, take the word che, some people can't pronounce, they don't pronounce like che, they say che.

There are people, politicians and broadcasters who can't pronounce an r, they use a w, you hear that today on the radio, on the television. Some people can't pronounce th, th, th, they say s, s, so it's the same thing, a test of pronunciation, ludicrous, isn't it?

And when they discovered that they couldn't pronounce the shibboleth, that they signified that they were Ephraimites, and 42,000 were put to the sword.

Oh, the madness of popular revenge. The lack of Christian restraint and Christian charity that so often manifests itself even in our own midst.

an Episcopalian won't allow a Presbyterian to preach in his pulpit.

[40 : 43] A Dutch Reformed church won't allow a Reformed minister to preach in the pulpit unless he's got a note from his session or from his church stating that he's allowed to preach.

church. These are only two examples of the silly, silly things that mars so much of our fellowship.

Ephraim envying. Oh, how good it is written in the word of God that the day is coming when Ephraim will not envy Judah, and Judah will not envy Ephraim.

The silly distinctions that exist today. Oh, there are distinctions which are necessary, but there are some which are not. There are some which are stupid, some which are silly.

Thank God the day has come when they will no longer exist. distinctions yourself, regarding your own fellowship.

[42 : 17] No doubt does I make distinctions regarding my own. I always fear that the people who are most apt at finding fault with fellowship because of cliques are very often the greatest culprits themselves.

if I'm in one, so are you. And let you and I examine what shibboleths we apply to other people.

Now in studying a life like this, Jephthah's life, I hope that you will have discovered in it something that may be of interest or of profit for yourself.

But let me close with this remark. I think that a study of this kind of life will lead you to ask yourself one very important and solemn question.

Have I put myself under a right obligation to God? Have I made a vow that in the name of God in accordance with the word of God was right?

[43 : 46] And I know you have. How have you kept it? Let us pray. Lord, have mercy upon us.

Bless us with thy presence and with thy peace and with thy forgiveness in holy things and the pay shall be thine in Christ forever. Amen.