

Jephthah: The Danger of Designer Faith Judges 10-12

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Happy Father's Day. The difference between going to church on Mother's Day and Father's Day is that on Mother's Day, mothers get built up, and on Father's Day, fathers get beat up.

But today, I guarantee that every father is going to come away encouraged, because no matter what, you're a better father than Jephthah, the judge we are going to meet today.

You probably already know a lot of the stories in the book of Judges... Samson; Gideon; maybe even Deborah...

But, almost nobody knows the story of Jephthah here in Judges 10. Why? Because it's terrible. It may even leave you feeling unsettled or disturbed.

But before we get into the story, let's talk about cats. I was watching some videos on YouTube about cats the other day and learned that cats, like dogs, kind of fit into three categories:

- **Mutts:** You can go to the shelter and for around 50-75 dollars, you can pick out your very own cat. It won't have any papers, you won't know any of its history. You'll just kind of accept what you get, no questions.
- **Purebreds:** Unlike mutts, with purebreds you know exactly what you are getting. You've got papers. You've got bloodlines. You've got breeding experts who're able to tell you exactly how big they're going get, what their characteristics are, and so forth.

- Designer: This is when you mix and match the characteristics of one breed with some preferred characteristics of another breed.

Many people think they can build their faith like designer cats. They take a little bit of something from this religion and mix it with a little bit of something from that denomination.

The result is a concoction that you can hardly call Christian, which isn't only bad for you; it's spiritually toxic.

That's what we're going to see today with Jephthah. He's got a little bit of Yahweh worship, mixed in with a whole lot of beliefs and practices he's picked up from the religions around him.

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Judges 10:6, "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines... the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him."

If you were counting, seven gods are listed. That's the number of completion in Hebrew, which is to say that Israel had completely abandoned God. This is the lowest they've fallen thus far!

So, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of the Philistines and the Ammonites, who crushed and oppressed the people of Israel. This is a familiar pattern.

The Israelites serve false gods, then end up in slavery. But here the author presents a twist: the Israelites are serving the gods of the Ammonites and the Philistines, the very people who wind up oppressing and crushing them!

Verse 10, *“Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals,”* and for the first time in Judges, God says, *“No. I’m not going to save you.*

Judges 6:13-14, *“But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”*

Why does God say no? Well, what the people were expressing wasn't true repentance. They're just hating the consequences of their sin, but they aren't hating the sin itself.

These people don't want God for God; they're just in pain and want somebody, anybody, to make it stop.

There had been no change of heart toward God; they are playing the *“let me use you to get out of trouble”* card.

Did you know that it is possible to come to God in an idolatrous way? It's like there's purebred faith, with all its expectations of surrender and exclusivity and surrender to the absolute Lordship of Christ.

Then there's that designer religion, where you want to mix and match what you like about Christianity with what you like from materialism, self-fulfillment, or whatever.

The people realized their sin, and in verse 15-16a, they truly repented. Judges 6:15-16, *“But the Israelites said to the LORD, “We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.” Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD.”*

Well, believe it or not, they finally got it. See the difference in what they said in verse 15 from what they said in verse 10?

In verse 10, they said, *“We want peace from You.”* In verse 15, they said, *“We want peace with you, even if it continues to mean trouble for us here!”*

In other words, *“We’d rather not have trouble, of course, but having you is the essential part.”* That’s true repentance.

Lord, I don’t care if life gets easy or hard; I just want You. Well, they genuinely repented, and the Lord *“could bear Israel’s misery no longer.”*

So, in Judges 11:1, we meet our hero, Jephthah.

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Judges 11:1, *“Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. Gilead’s wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. “You are not going to get any inheritance in our family,” they said, “because you are the son of another woman.” So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.”*

Now it’s worth noting that unlike most of the other judges that saved Israel, here in Judges 11, it doesn’t say that the Lord *“raised up Jephthah.”*

Jephthah was a rejected man; a man driven away from his family by his own brothers. A rejected brother who fled to a faraway land where worthless men gathered around him; where he became a kind of crime boss.

But then the Ammonites made war against Israel. Verses 5-6, *“The elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. “Come,” they said, “be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites.”*

Which Jephthah replied in verse 7, *“Didn’t you hate me and drive me from my father’s house? Why do you come to me now, when you’re in trouble?”*

Being in need of a leader, they say, *“No, no. We’re really sorry! If you come home, you can be in charge.”* Jephthah agrees and verse 11 says that the people made him head and leader over them.

So, here’s the first lesson from Jephthah’s life: We’re far more influenced by our culture than we realize.

The people didn’t seek out Jephthah because God told them to, or because, like Deborah, Jephthah had demonstrated spiritual leadership.

They came to Jephthah because he was a thug. They looked at him and said, this is a strong man who can whip on the Ammonites.

Maybe his morals are a little shaky but that’s okay, we aren’t electing a Sunday School teacher, we are electing a leader! So, they made a decision based on culture.

They aren’t abandoning the worship of Yahweh, they’re just cross breeding it with practicality and pragmatism.

They’re thinking, the end justifies the means, and if an amoral mafia boss can get us out from under this oppression, then maybe Jephthah is God’s man for the moment!

Jephthah didn’t realize it, but a lot of his outlook about God and life were shaped by his culture which caused him to end up with a designer faith that doesn’t honor God at all.

And, as we’ll see, it’s going to have devastating effects.

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Here's the second lesson we learn from Jephthah: We can know facts about God and still miss the heart of God. In chapter 11, we get a short history lesson from Jephthah to the king of the Ammonites.

I'm not going to take the time to recap it, except to say that the details Jephthah gives about the Israelites wilderness wanderings are all pretty spot on from what Moses wrote in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

We actually get our timeline for the book of Judges from Jephthah. 300 years up to this point, according to verse 26.

So, Jephthah knew the Bible. But for all his knowledge of biblical history, he didn't seem to have a clue about the heart of God or the character of God.

Judges 11:28-31, *"The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him. Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, 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 will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."*

DON'T MISS THIS! The spirit of the Lord was on Jephthah BEFORE he made this vow, NOT as a result of it.

Here's Jephthah's designer faith. He makes this vow that he will offer up as a burnt offering whatever comes out of his house to greet him.

He had taken what he knew about Yahweh, the one true God, and combined it with some of what he had heard about other gods.

Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, and Molech the god of the Ammonites both required humans sacrifice, so he probably thought Yahweh did too.

Yet, God couldn't have made His heart any clearer because in Deuteronomy 12, God explicitly warned the Israelites about this very thing.

Deuteronomy 12:29-31, "The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."

As much as Jephthah knew the story of Leviticus and Numbers somehow he missed how God felt about human sacrifice and makes this horrible promise.

Some commentators have tried to make Jephthah look better by saying that he was thinking an animal would come out the door to greet him, a sheep or a bull or maybe even a Persian cat.

But there are two problems with this. First, people of this culture didn't keep animals in the house as pets.

Second, the noun that's translated "whatever" actually is a Hebrew word that should have been translated "whoever," because the form it's in, in Hebrew, is typically used for humans and not animals.

So, Jephthah had in mind a human sacrifice. He just expected the first one out of his house to be one of his many servants or comrades-in-arms and, in his culture, this was actually acceptable.

This was just the way they did things in the culture around Israel, and Jephthah had just become desensitized to the idea that he was supposed to live by a different set of values.

Human life was cheap when it came to the idol of military dominance.

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Now, before you shake your head in bewilderment, we commit similar excesses with our own idols... and we don't wince nearly as much... For example...

- We've made finding romantic or sexual fulfillment an idol, to the point that a husband or wife could meet someone on the Internet, become convinced that they married the wrong person, and walk away from their vows, their family, their life, all because we've made an idol out of being happy.
- Or take the idol of "living out your truth:" Suppose I, as a conservative Baptist pastor, suddenly decided I'd been living a lie these past years of public ministry, that I was gay, and then left my wife and kids for another man.

Within 24 hours of posting that on Instagram, I'd be hero for how true I was being to myself. Within a week I'd have a book contract. Why?

Because we've created a designer faith that mixes up the clear moral teachings of Scripture with the idolatry of self-fulfillment.

It's how young Christian women from godly families can justify terminating an inconvenient pregnancy.

There's a story about a man who was kept in solitary confinement in a Spanish prison for 33 years, with nothing to read except the Bible.

With only one book to read, he read it over hundreds and hundreds of times. The book became his constant companion.

After thirty-three years of imprisonment, he died. When they came in to clean out his cell, they found some notes he had written using nails to mark the soft stone of the prison walls. The notations were of this sort:

- Psalm 118:8 is the middle verse of the Bible.
- Ezra 7:21 contains all the letters of the alphabet except the letter j.
- The ninth verse of the eighth chapter of Esther is the longest verse in the Bible.
- No word or name of more than six syllables can be found in the Bible.

This individual, who spent thirty-three years of his life studying what some have described as the greatest book of all time, could only glean trivia.

From all we know, he never made any religious or spiritual commitment to Christ, but he became an expert at Bible trivia.

We want to produce more than people who can win a Bible drill. It isn't enough to have head knowledge about the Bible if that knowledge isn't transforming you.

So, Jephthah makes this vow and the next part of the story is just horrible. It's the worst thing we've seen in Judges so far. After God gives the Ammonites into his hand, Jephthah goes home.

Judges 11:34-35, *“When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break.”*”

Why? Because Jephthah had mixed in an incredibly toxic ingredient to his designer faith: a works-righteousness understanding of God’s character.

He felt like he had to earn God’s favor, the way you earn a pagan god’s favor, by making sacrifices that guarantee it; and now he feels like if he doesn’t keep his horrific vow, God will punish him.

But God doesn’t give victory or favor or salvation because we earn it. *“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy, he saved us.”* He bore in his own body the price for our peace, *“by his stripes we are healed.”*

Did Jephthah keep his tragic vow? He did. Before he sacrificed her, his daughter asked permission to go into the mountains for two months with her friends and weep for the fact that she would never know a man, would never have kids or grandkids, would never grow old.

Judges 11:39-40, *“After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite tradition that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.”*

Could Jephthah have gotten out of it? He had two months, while his daughter was off weeping in the mountains, to say, *“You know what? That was a stupid thing to say.”*

God, You never said you'd give me victory only if I sacrificed something. No, You give Your people victory as a gift of grace. So instead of fulfilling this wicked vow in which I thought I could purchase Your grace, I repent of making it in the first place; I repent of thinking there was something I could do to earn Your favor, and I receive Your grace for what it is, a gift!"

Instead, Jephthah was trapped in this mindset of works righteousness, which brings us to the third truth we learn from this awful story: God's grace runs deeper than we will ever understand.

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See, what Jephthah failed to realize was that God's deliverance wasn't set in motion when he made this horrible vow.

Look back at the beginning of the story. When God's people truly repented, not just because they wanted to get out of trouble, but because they wanted to have their relationship with God restored.

Judges 10:15-16, "But the Israelites said to the LORD, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now." Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer."

I love that phrase, "*And he could bear Israel's misery no longer.*" It shows you how God feels about His people. He hurts with them. So, the deliverance didn't come because of Jephthah's vow, it came because of God's great mercy.

This is the Gospel: You never have to make promises or sacrifices to God to earn His favor. God's favor is GIFT! It's like a favor I give to my son or daughter. They don't earn it; they just receive it.

There's only one way to please God. Only one. Faith. Faith in His grace, His lovingkindness toward you. That's why we're in desperate need of a better judge.

Believe it or not, the story actually gets worse from here. In Judges 12 we see the roots of the first civil war in Israel.

The men from the tribe of Ephraim got ticked off that Jephthah didn't call on them to fight against the Ammonites, so the Israelites turned on each other.

But since they all looked alike, they decided the only way they could tell the difference between them, and the other tribes, was by the way they pronounced a certain word.

Therefore, the men of Israel wound up killing 42,000 of their own countrymen because they had a different accent.

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Conclusion

You see this today in how the world's mindset divides instead of unites. As long as we keep looking to human saviors and human solutions, we're just going to be more divided. We're in desperate need of a better judge.

A recurring theme in Judges is that human saviors fall short. Jephthah was a savior, but a very broken savior, and not the true Savior Israel needed. But he presents to us a picture of the true and better Judge that was coming.

Like Jephthah, Jesus was driven from his brothers. *"He was despised and rejected of men."* But unlike Jephthah, Jesus didn't wait for us to bargain with Him before He saved us.

Jephthah offered to sacrifice someone else to secure his victory. Jesus sacrificed Himself to secure my victory. Purebred Christianity is the grace of God received as a free gift.

Faith in the grace of God is the only way to health in Christianity. It's Gospel all the way through. Faith in the finished work of the Gospel is what Peter calls the pure milk and meat of God's Word.

God's acceptance is given as a gift not as a reward for perfect righteousness, not as a response to our extreme sacrifices, but as a gift of righteousness from God for all who will simply admit how badly they need it and receive it for what it is, a gift of grace.