

What Has Been Lost?

(Judges 10; 11)

As the Book of Judges continues, so does the record of Israel's downward spiral. Their pattern of turning from God, facing conquest, crying to God, and being delivered is repeated in chapters 10 and 11.

TOLA AND JAIR

Following the death of Abimelech, Israel was led by two judges about whom little is known. (Their names make great questions in a Bible quiz game!) The first, Tola, may be remembered by the English-speaking Bible student as being from a family with unappealing names (Tola, son of Puah, son of Dodo). He led Israel for twenty-three years.

The next judge, Jair, is connected with the number "30." (He had thirty sons who rode thirty donkeys and controlled thirty towns.) He led Israel for twenty-two (not thirty) years.

THE SPIRAL CONTINUES

"Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, . . ." (10:6). Predictably, as the Israelites began to serve the gods of their neighbors, God became angry with them and gave them into the hands of their enemies, this time the Philistines and the Ammonites. Just as predictably, their anguish turned them back to God for deliverance. At first, God told them to ask their new gods for liberation from their captors. However, the people confessed their sinfulness, removed their idols, and God "could bear the misery of Israel no longer" (10:16).

The next time the Ammonites assembled their army in Gilead, Israel was ready for battle. They gathered at Mizpah, ready to fight their oppressors of eighteen years—except for one detail: Israel had no commander! They had mustered an army, but they had no one to lead them into battle. The leaders of Gilead even came up with an incentive plan to attract the best candidate for the job. They announced, "Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (10:18).

RECRUITING JEPHTHAH

Far north of the Israelite army at Mizpah lived Jephthah, a mighty warrior with a tragic past. Originally from the land of Gilead himself, Jephthah was the son of a man named Gilead and a prostitute whom Gilead had never married (11:1). When the sons of Gilead's wife grew up, they saw their half-brother as a threat to their inheritance and drove him out of the land. Fleeing to a place called Tob, Jephthah became the leader of a band of "adventurers" (NIV) or "outlaws" (NRSV).

When the people of Israel found themselves facing a battle with no general, their thoughts turned to Jephthah. Though his ancestry was scandalous and his lifestyle was infamous, he possessed the single qualification for which they were looking: He knew how to wage war. Swallowing their pride, the elders of Gilead

made the fifty-mile trek to Tob to recruit Jephthah for the battle with the Ammonites.

When presented with the elders' request for him to return and lead the army of Israel, Jephthah was, as one might expect, bitter. "Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'Did you not hate me and drive me from my father's house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?'" (11:7). The elders then offered to Jephthah what no one else in Israel had been willing to accept. They said, "For this reason we have now returned to you, that you may go with us and fight with the sons of Ammon and become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (11:8). Maybe because he could not believe the offer, or maybe because he wanted them to have to say it again, Jephthah asked the men to repeat their proposal. He had indeed heard correctly, and the once-banished son of a Gileadite prostitute returned to Mizpah as commander over the people of Gilead and the army of Israel!

THE DIPLOMATIC OPTION

Though he was an able and willing soldier, Jephthah preferred to settle the dispute with the Ammonites at the negotiation table. His first official act was to send messengers to the Ammonite king to ask the reason for their attack on Israel. The reply came to Jephthah that the Ammonites wanted the land that Israel had taken from them after coming out of Egypt, three hundred years earlier. Jephthah responded with a lengthy (11:15–27) defense of Israel's right to the land of Gilead. He contended that Israel had taken the land from the Amorites, not the Ammonites, and furthermore, that the Lord their God had given it to them. The diplomatic exchange proved fruitless, and war between the Ammonites and the Israelites became a certainty.

THE WARRIOR AND THE VOW

The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah (11:29), and he stormed across the country toward the Ammonites. It was then that he made the worst mistake of his life, a terrible vow to God. He swore to Him,

If Thou wilt indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet

me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering (11:30, 31).

Having made this deal with God, Jephthah went into battle. His military campaign was a brilliant success, because "the Lord gave them into his hand" (11:32). Before he was finished, twenty Ammonite cities had been destroyed, and Ammon had been subdued.

Jephthah's name had been cleared, he had become a military hero, and he had just been proclaimed the ruler of Gilead. It should have been the best day in Jephthah's life; instead, it turned out to be the worst. As he came home in conquest, the first thing that came out of the door to meet him—the thing he had promised to sacrifice—was nothing less than the most precious person in his life, his daughter, his only child! Jephthah's finest hour became his darkest night. As she came out the door dancing a joyous, carefree dance of victory, Jephthah, for the first time that day, tasted the bitter bile of defeat. His heart went cold as the memory of his vow ripped through his brain. He cried, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot take it back" (11:35).

From that point on, the story is told efficiently, with few details to describe the nightmare of a father trapped between his desperate vow and his desperate love for his only child. Jephthah's daughter calmly accepted her doom, realizing that her father had made a vow to God and was honor-bound to keep it. Her only request was to have two months during which she could roam the hills, weep with her friends, and mourn her virginity. She would never marry and have children, and Jephthah would never have grandchildren. Her life, so full of potential, would be remembered forever as the fulfillment of a vow. The Scriptures almost shield our faces from a sight too appalling to watch. "And . . . at the end of two months . . . she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; . . ." (11:39).

Surely an Old Testament hero would not have physically sacrificed his daughter as a "burnt offering." Wouldn't God have inter-

vened as when Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac? (See Genesis 22:1–14.) He vowed to make a burnt offering of the first thing to come out his door when he returned in victory (11:30, 31), and the text simply says that he “did to her according to the vow which he had made” (11:39). He either offered her as a burnt offering or committed her to perpetual service. It is hard to determine exactly what he did.¹

Jephthah conquered difficult circumstances over which he had no control to become a great leader. Even in the personal calamity of losing his daughter, he proved himself to be a promise-keeper. This is even more impressive when seen in the light of Israel’s failure to keep their word to God. Actually, we can find a great deal to admire in this man. He is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as a hero of faith.

WHAT ABOUT US?

If the people of Israel allowed themselves to drift slowly yet steadily into the Canaanite way of thinking about God, how may similar forces be at work in the lives of Christians living in the midst of pagan cultures today?

¹John L. Kachelman, Jr., in *Studies in Judges* (Abilene, Tex.: Quality Publications, 1985), summarized the major arguments for and against the view that Jephthah actually offered his daughter as a human sacrifice.

In favor of the “human sacrifice” view would be the following arguments (p. 111): (1) The times were those of lawlessness and disregard for God; thus there would be no qualms in a literal offering. (2) Jephthah was brought up surrounded by a pagan influence which advocated the sacrificing of humans to the gods. (3) The Hebrew word for “burnt offering” is used with the sense of killing. (4) If Jephthah could kill 42,000 fellow Israelites in cold blood, he could sacrifice his daughter. (5) The word “laments” (v. 40) seems to be best understood as “to recount,” suggesting that this treacherous deed was recounted annually. (6) The text says that “he did to her according to the vow which he had made” (v. 39). This indicates he really sacrificed her. (7) Jephthah’s great grief indicates that he was going to kill his daughter. (8) An important point to consider outside of the text is that it was generally understood that Jephthah killed his daughter up to the Middle Ages. Thus the weight of the early church historians and teachings closer to the period agree with the conclusion that Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering.

In favor of the view that Jephthah committed his daughter to perpetual service to God would be the following arguments (pp. 111–12): (1) Human sacrifices were contrary to God’s laws (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2–5; Deuteronomy 12:31). (2) Although the Hebrew word for “burnt offering” normally means a burnt offering, it can be used to denote complete surrender to the Lord. Thus

What attitudes toward people, toward history, toward God have we unwittingly picked up from the land? Jephthah’s sorrow is another of the wake-up calls from the Book of Judges to the church today. What have we forgotten about God? What truths have been lost in our time? Let us reflect on a few indicators that we also are in danger of forgetting some significant spiritual truths.

Honor of Rulers in a Culture of Disrespect

I heard former U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle speak at Harding University. The greatest impression he made on me that evening was the way he spoke with deep respect about the office of the President. Although he had no great affection for the current President, he always spoke about him with great deference. Even during the reign of the first-century madman Nero, Christians were instructed to “submit” to their rulers and to “honor the king” (1 Peter 2:13–17). Is our disrespect for government leaders a subtle indication that we are getting our values from the land and not from our Bibles?

Jephthah offered his daughter in perpetual Tabernacle service, where she remained a virgin. (3) The conjunction in 11:31 can be translated “or” (as in the NASB), thus signifying Jephthah provided himself with an option in case a human came out first. He would either offer the human in dedication to the Lord OR he would offer the animal in a sacrifice. (4) The Hebrew in verse 40 can be translated, “The daughters of Israel went yearly to talk with, or sympathize with, the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.” (5) The Law provided an “out” for Jephthah’s rash vow. He could redeem his daughter for a sum of money, thus releasing her (see Leviticus 27). (6) Jephthah is listed in “Faith’s Hall of Fame” (Hebrews 11:32), and it is inconceivable that he would be there if he had committed such a gross sin.

A thorough discussion of the “human sacrifice” view can be read in *Judges* in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series (Arthur Cundall [Downer’s Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968], 146–49) and in *Judges* in the Pulpit Commentary series (A. C. Hervey [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950], 125–30).

A thorough discussion of the “perpetual service” view can be read in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel* in the Keil-Delitzsch series (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. Trans. James Martin [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.; reprint, 1978], 385–95); in *1961 Teacher’s Annual Lesson Commentary* (Gospel Advocate series [Nashville, Tenn.: Gospel Advocate Co., 1960], 111–14); and in *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Gleason L. Archer [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982], 164–65).

Fear of God in a Culture of Unbelief

No one has to convince us that the level of discourse in our land is plummeting at a terrifying pace. Reverence for God is still a part of God's will for us, yet we find ourselves surrounded by entertainment and even casual conversation in which surprise is commonly expressed by using God's name in vain. Such language is too often heard inside the walls of Christian homes as we invite video pagans to fill our evenings. In our pop culture, "Jesus Christ" is more often heard as an expletive than as a confession. Our own words condemn us when we say, "I just didn't notice it, I guess." Is our culture getting to us?

Permanence of Marriage in a Culture Of Convenience

Many people over forty can remember a time when they did not even know a divorced person. Today, most children need reassurance from their own parents that they will not get a divorce, because they are growing up in a world of frequent divorce. The sign "We Rent Wedding Rings" may once have been a joke, but now it is all too believable. The scandal in the church is that Christians are divorcing at about the same rate as the rest of our society.² To bail out on a lifelong commitment is to listen to the land more than we listen to God.

The Great Commission in a Culture Of Self-Interest

What is your attitude right now toward foreign missions? What is the attitude of your congregation? Did these attitudes come from an intense study of the Scriptures or from the bias of a culture that is crying, "America first!"?

²George Barna, *The Future of the American Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 70.

Barna wrote, "Interestingly, the religious life of the married couple has a direct bearing on the likelihood of divorce, but the connection is not as strong as it used to be. In fact, the most recent studies indicate that people who belong to denominations that tend to campaign most vigorously against divorce—Protestants and evangelicals—actually are somewhat more likely than others to experience a marital split. The most surprising finding is that evangelicals represent 12 percent of the adult population but 16 percent of the divorced population."

Staying Rooted in Christ in a Culture Addicted to the New

People today cannot stand "the same old thing." We assume that everything should change. Consequently, some church discussions these days sound more like they are coming out of a marketing textbook than from the Bible. Facing a somewhat similar situation in the first-century church in Colossae, where the "new" and the "novel" were more attractive than the "true," Paul wrote,

Colossians 2:8–10

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority."

Society's fascination with new gods and new ways can rub off on us all. Just ask Jephthah!

CONCLUSION

The tragedy of Jephthah can have a great impact on us today. It can make us more determined than ever to search the Scriptures in pursuit of the knowledge of God. It can make something as old and ordinary as Bible school take on the energy and significance of a survival course. It can remind us to ask ourselves the painful question "What do I really know about God, and what have I simply accepted from others?" It can make us face up to the real possibility that our religion has been polluted by the spiritual smog which continually moves around our increasingly pagan world! ■

What Is Your Religion Like?

- To many religion is like . . .
- a faucet — to be turned on when needed
 - a bus — to ride on only when it is going their way