

Judges 11

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[0 : 00] What do we make of Jephthah? What can we possibly learn from a man who sacrifices his own daughter in some pious but perverse display of promise-keeping, and yet who, intriguingly, is introduced to us in this chapter as a mighty warrior, the very language that the prophet Jeremiah uses to speak of the Lord himself. But the Lord is with us like a mighty warrior. It rather begs the question, a mighty warrior like Jephthah? Surely not. What we're going to try and do is step back from the messy and perplexing detail and try to see the big picture. And as we drew, draw out some enduring lessons that are relevant for you and me today in 21st century Scotland as we live our lives in messy and perplexing times. The way we're going to try and see the big picture or draw out some enduring lessons is by posing three questions. And I'll say what the questions are, and then we can have a bash at trying to answer them. The first question that we'll pose is as follows, what does Jephthah teach us about who God chooses and uses? The second question we'll pose is this, what does Jephthah teach us about submitting to God's word and resting in God's grace? So it's one question, but there are two parts to it. And then the third question is this, what does Jephthah teach us about God's salvation and about

God's Savior? So again, it's a two-part question. It's really just a devious way of making five questions into three, but these are the questions that we're going to pose and try and answer. The first one then, what does Jephthah teach us about who God chooses and uses? Now the very question is based on a presupposition. It presupposes that God did actually choose Jephthah, but did he? One of the curious aspects of the account of Jephthah is that unlike with most of the other judges, not all of the other judges, but unlike most of the other judges, we don't find in the account the language of and God raised up Jephthah or language of that kind. That's the kind of language that we've become familiar with as we've gone through the book. And God raised up, and then the name of the judge, whoever he happened to be. We don't find that language here. With Jephthah, as we've read, it's more a case of the elders in Gilead in an act of desperation, turning to whatever potential deliverer they could lay their hands on, however unlikely or however unsuitable he might appear to be.

As we've read through the passage, there's no evidence, certainly it's not recorded for us, of the elders seeking God's guidance. Everything would suggest that that is something that they did not do. There's no evidence of God maybe prodding them in the direction of Jephthah.

Curiously, as we do read through the account, it's Jephthah who is the first to make any reference to God at all in his negotiation with the elders of Gilead. Notice what he says there in verse 9. Jephthah answered, suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me. Will I really be your head? Not only a reference to God, but really quite a revealing reference to God on the part of Jephthah. And yet though the manner in which Jephthah is called, the manner in which Jephthah is chosen by God may be different from the manner in which we find others being called. There can be no doubt that God did choose Jephthah. He's recognized by the author of the book of Judges as a bona fide judge over Israel in chapter 12 and verse 7, where you have the concluding summary comment concerning Jephthah. We read Jephthah led, or more literally, Jephthah judged Israel for six years. It's the classic formula that is used to identify not only the length of time, but also the status of the one who judged. Jephthah, without doubt, was chosen by God to be a judge over Israel. And then, of course, perhaps even more strikingly, Jephthah is one of the four judges who is mentioned by name in Faith's Hall of Fame, if we can call it that, in Hebrews chapter 11 and in verse 32, four judges are mentioned by name, and one of them, intriguingly, is Jephthah.

[5 : 33] God is not bound by convention or precedent. He can choose and call as He pleases and who He pleases, and He does. He still does. But moving on to consider the man God chooses and

uses on this occasion, having established that He did indeed choose Him. What can we say about Jephthah? Well, Jephthah is not your nice Christian boy from a lovely Christian home. Everything was stacked against Jephthah.

His father, we're told, was a man named Gilead. We know nothing more about him. And his mother was a nameless prostitute. I say nameless, of course, she would have had a name, but she's not given her name.

She wasn't worthy of being called by name. So many would have imagined or believed. His mother was probably a foreigner, given her her line of work, and we can be sure that she was despised by the great and the good of Gilead. She was, after all, just a piece of flesh, available on demand to satisfy the sexual appetites of folks like Jephthah's father. I wonder if Jephthah's mother was involved in bringing up Jephthah. We don't know. We're not told. I wonder if his maternal care was foisted on Gilead's unwilling wife, who would have seen Jephthah as a permanent and unwelcome reminder of her husband's infidelity. Did even Jephthah's father view Jephthah as the unfortunate byproduct of a night or probably just a moment of passion? Jephthah was tolerated as he grew up, but I imagine, and I don't think this is undue speculation, I imagine he knew little of genuine love and affection in his home. And Jephthah did grow up. I wonder, did matters improve with the passing years? Well, as we've read, on the contrary, his brothers begin to see Jephthah, his half-brothers, begin to see Jephthah as a threat to their inheritance, and they conspire to protect their share of the family cake. And the manner in which they address him is so brutal in its directness. There in verse 2 of chapter 11, you are not going to get any inheritance in our family, they said, because you are the son of another woman. Again, not dignified even with a name, the son of another woman. You've got nothing to do with us. Just go away. Just get lost. We don't love you. We don't care for you. You're just an obstacle for us. Just leave and never come back.

This was Jephthah's life. So Jephthah is, as we've read, driven away into the wilderness, into the land of Tob. I don't know about that name. It just sounds like something out of a Tolkien novel.

But anyway, that's where he was driven, into the wilderness, and forced into an existence, very much on the wrong side of the law. If we were to describe Jephthah in one phrase that captures who he is and how he was treated by others, we could say that he was despised and rejected.

[9 : 22] Is that not an accurate description of Jephthah? Despised and rejected. Now that sounds like somebody else we meet in the Bible. Another mighty warrior who experienced similar treatment, and we'll come to him in a moment. God chooses and uses the despised and rejected.

God makes what seem to us unlikely choices. God fixes his eyes on those deemed by many as good for nothing, and he lifts them up and turns them around and molds them and shapes them and makes them not just good for something, but good for great and God-honoring purposes. This is God's way.

Listen to what Paul says as he writes to the believers in Corinth in his first letter and in chapter 1 from verse 26. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that aren't, so that no one may boast before him. And he goes on.

But notice another aspect of God's choosing and using of the despised and rejected. In God's overarching ordering of our lives and circumstances, the very experience and results of being despised and rejected form and equip those chosen for their God-appointed mission. Just think about it in the case of Jephthah.

[11 : 15] Imagine if Jephthah had been the legitimate firstborn son of Gilead and his wife. I wonder what would have become of Jephthah. Well, we don't know. I wonder if he would have become a little bit like his half-brothers, spoiled and grasping for the family inheritance. I can't imagine Jephthah would have become a mighty warrior in those circumstances, though they seem so much more favorable to him. You see, it's not only that God chooses the despised and rejected. He uses their experience, terrible though it is, of being despised and rejected to mold and to form and to prepare and to equip for the task that he has for them, for us.

Does this picture of a man being formed and molded and trained through suffering and reject us and rejection remind us, albeit with fundamental differences, of another who learned obedience through what he suffered? Does the picture of a man rejected and despised becoming the rescuer

of the very people who rejected and despised him remind you of anybody? God chooses and uses the unlikely, the marginalized, the weak, the sinned against, as well as the sinner. Given that this is so, where does that leave us in the matter of being used by God to call the despised and the rejected to him?

The elders of Gilead, in their case, oblivious to God's bigger picture and motivated by the need for self-preservation, they sought out Jephthah. That's what we're told. They sought out Jephthah. They sought out the rejected one. They sought out the despised one. What about us?

Do our paths even cross with the despised and rejected of our broken and sin-sick world? In our ideal world, would these pews here in our sanctuary be filled by nice, respectable people from good homes with good jobs and no messy issues to complicate our tranquil existence? And yet, God is the God who chooses and uses the despised and the rejected.

But there's a second question that I want to pose and try and answer. And the second question is this, what does Jephthah teach us about submitting to God's Word and resting in God's grace?

[14:06] Let's think of the first part of the question first. What does Jephthah teach us about submitting to God's Word? Jephthah is an enigma. He was despised and rejected. He became an adventurer.

That's the rather generous word that's employed in our translation, but his adventures were not of the kind that the famous five got up to. He was a man of violence who lived and operated on the principle that might is right. And yet, and this is the fascinating thing, he knew his Bible. Well, he didn't have a Bible, but he knew God's Word. And we know that he knew God's Word because of this full and detailed and accurate answer that he gives to the king of Ammon. You see, there in verse 14 through to verse 27, we're not going to go through it in detail. But you know the situation. The situation is that the Ammonite king has said, I'm going to take back my land. You're occupying my land, and I'm going to take it back because it belongs to me. And Jephthah, though he was a mighty warrior, doesn't say, well, I'm going to go down and I'm going to kill you and all your men, and you're not going to get any of my land. No, he enters into what is presumably an attempt at negotiation, at persuading the Ammonite king, well, actually, no, it's not your land. But as I say, without going into the detail, the fascinating thing is Jephthah's really quite detailed knowledge of Israel's history and, indeed, of Israel's God, this mighty warrior, this adventurer, this man who was cast out into the wilderness by his family. And yet, when we read what he says to the king of the Ammonites, we discover that he knew God's word in great measure.

I wonder how he knew what he knew. Well, I presume that his knowledge derived from listening to and retaining the oral accounts that would have been passed from one generation to the next. Who would have thought that the illegitimate son of Gilead was paying so much attention to the tales of God's dealings with his covenant people as they were recounted by the old men and women around an open fire? But he did. He listened and he learned and he retained all of that knowledge. He knew God's word and he was not afraid, we might say, to preach it to the king of Ammon. Not that the king paid a blind bit of notice. All of Jephthah's Bible knowledge, his commendable Bible knowledge is dismissed there in verse 28. The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him. Jephthah knew God's word and he knew the God of the word, the one who delivers his people. We notice already the first reference to God, as Jephthah's saying, when God delivers our enemies to us, what will happen? Or this will happen? He is the one who describes in his message to the king of the Ammonites, describes and identifies the God of Israel as the judge. Very significant there in verse 27, right at the the concluding part of his argument, if you wish. I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the Lord, let Yahweh, the God of Israel, the judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites. You see, Jephthah doesn't say, well, I've got my God and he's got his arguments and you've got your God and, well, they can argue it out and we'll see what happens. No, he says, my God is the judge. He's the judge over all the nations. He knows who his God is. He knows the power that he enjoys and the sovereignty that belongs to him and to him alone. He knew God's word. He knew the God of the word, but he failed to submit to God's word in his own life. This is the great tragedy with which the account ends, this horrific, abhorrent account of him promising to offer to God as a sacrifice, whoever comes out of his home when he returns from victory.

And it's his daughter who comes out of the house. And we're told, though, people try and wriggle the way out of this, but it seems very clear that what he does is fulfill his vow. It's so horrific.

[18 : 57] You say, well, what's going on here? He knows God's word and yet he behaves in this way. You see, given the precision with which Jephthah was able to recount Israel's history, it is, I would suggest, inconceivable that Jephthah would have been ignorant of God's law and specifically God's repeated and unequivocal prohibition of human sacrifice.

This was not a gray area. Let me just read one verse. There are many that we could turn to, but for reasons of time, let me just read one verse. In Deuteronomy chapter 12 and in verse 31. Deuteronomy chapter 12 and verse 31. God giving his instructions to his people, you must not worship the Lord your God in their way, in the way of the nations, in the way of the pagans, because in worshiping their God, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even, notice the language, they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. And God says, don't you even, don't you even contemplate such an abhorrent thing? Now, it's inconceivable that Jephthah wouldn't have known that God had forbidden such things. One who was so knowledgeable about God's history, God's people's history, all the details of the conquest and the order of events, that he would have known nothing of God's prohibition. It just doesn't add up.

[20 : 38] And so what does he do? He behaves in a way that is contrary to his knowledge of God's word.

Now, of course, given how difficult this is, it's not surprising, and no doubt with genuine intention, some have tried to argue that Jephthah did not actually vow to literally sacrifice anybody, much less his only daughter.

And that what Jephthah had in mind was a metaphorical offering of a life, though conveniently not his own life, to the exclusive service of God. And one of the arguments that is employed to suggest that this is actually what's happening here is precisely that Jephthah must have known that God had forbidden human sacrifice.

But the question I pose is this, in the knowledge of my own sinfulness, since when has knowledge of God's word guaranteed submission to God's word?

If we can leave Jephthah to one side for a moment, what about you and me? Is it the case that knowledge of God's word guarantees submission to God's word? Well, clearly, there is no such guarantee.

[21 : 54] Jephthah knew, but he did not submit. Now, there's another aspect to this matter of submission to God's word, and it is this, that Jephthah's submission, in the measure that there was submission, was compromised by his adoption of the values and practices of the surrounding culture and religions.

How did Jephthah even get the repugnant idea of a human sacrifice offered to God? Did it just occur to him? No, the practice was part and parcel of the pagan religions that Jephthah had been influenced by.

So he knew God's word, he knew God in some measure, but that knowledge had been compromised by the influence of the society, if you wish, that he formed a part of.

Well, so what? What has this got to say to us today? None of us are likely to be planning a human sacrifice anytime soon, and yet to what extent is our morality, our behavior, our attitudes, our prejudices, molded not by God's word, but by the surrounding dominant culture?

Is our submission to God's word known to us, compromised by our unthinking and culpable adoption of the values and behavior of those around us, of our surrounding culture?

[23 : 21] Now, this is something we could develop in different ways. We're not going to, but let me just throw out three areas where we are in danger of doing just that, knowing God's word and yet not submitting to it, because somehow we're compromised by the values that surround us and that we adopt unconsciously, perhaps, but culpably.

The whole area of the sanctity of human life and our attitude to it. In the whole area of sexual ethics, what we believe to be right and wrong. In our attitude to money and possessions. To what extent are we in danger of, though we know God's word, our submission to it is compromised by the influence of the society that we form part of?

Well, we could think a great deal about these things, but we need to move on to the final question.

The final question is this. What does, no, it's not the final question. It's the second part of the second question.

What does Jephthah teach us about resting in God's grace? The second question was, what does it teach us about submitting to God's word, but also about resting in God's grace?

Now, in posing this question, we're picking up on the thread of our prior question. Why did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter? We've said that this is to be explained by his failure to submit to God's word, but that is not the whole answer.

[24 : 44] I think there is a more fundamental issue at play here, and it is this, a failure to rest in God's grace. Now, let me explain why I say that.

Jephthah knew God's word. He knew the God of the word. He knew that God was a powerful God capable of delivering his people. He knew that God was a sovereign judge over all the nations, but he seems to know little of God's grace.

What else can explain his foolish vow, both the making of it and the keeping of it? Jephthah, in making the vow, was bargaining with God.

There was a battle to be fought. The odds were stacked against him. There was so much at stake. He knows that with God's help, the victory can be won, but that he thinks that he needs to buy God's help.

He needs to buy God's favor. He tried to negotiate with the king of Ammon. That was a legitimate attempt. But now he tries to negotiate with God.

[25 : 52] The language that he uses is the classic language of negotiation. Notice in verses 30 and 31. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord.

Notice what he says. If you give the Ammonites into my hands, if you do this, and then what does he say in verse 31?

If you do this, I will sacrifice as a burnt offering. If you do this, I'll do this. If you give me A, I'll give you B. He's negotiating with God.

He's bargaining with God. This was all about earning or paying for God's favor. Look what I'll do for you. I'm willing to do this for you.

Will you do your part for me and grant me the victory that I need? Jephthah didn't know what it was to rest in God's grace.

[26 : 47] You see, it's never been that way with God's salvation, with God's favor. We can't earn it. We can't pay for it. And God never asks us to earn it or pay for it.

It's all about grace. God's favor towards us is grounded in his love, a love that finds glorious and beautiful expression in his lavishing upon us unmerited and undeserved mercy.

But Jephthah didn't get that. He couldn't get his head around grace. His pride couldn't cope with something for nothing. He needed to earn anything he was going to get from God.

All his life, he had earned what he got. Nobody served it to him on a plate. He always had to fight for it. He always had to sweat for it. He always had to work for it.

And it was going to be the same with God. Yes, he needed God's help, but he would pay for it. He would pay his Jews. Jephthah couldn't or wouldn't rest in God's grace.

[27 : 51] And there's nothing new under the sun. Every man-made religion rests on the basic premise that we have to climb our way up to God. But the gospel rests on the historical reality that God has come down to us, uninvited and certainly undeserved.

Undeserved. And he's done so in the person of his dear Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Then finally, and briefly, what does Jephthah teach us about God's Savior and God's salvation?

Now we've stressed repeatedly, as we've made our way through the book of Judges, that they, the judges or deliverers, serve to point forward to a greater deliverer and a greater deliverer.

And they do so in two ways. Their virtues or strengths serve as a pale shadow of the perfect deliverer. And their weaknesses and sins serve to highlight the need for another deliverer, as well as standing in stark contrast to that other perfect deliverer.

Well, so too with Jephthah. With that in mind, what does Jephthah teach us about God's Savior? Jephthah was God's Savior.

[29 : 10] He was God's deliverer. He was God's mighty warrior who delivered God's people from the Ammonites. That's what we're told. He was God's Savior and he saved God's people.

But though that is true, and this is the tragedy of it all, though he saved God's people, though he delivered God's people, he couldn't deliver himself from himself, from his own folly and sin.

Jephthah's moment of greatest triumph, the defeat of the Ammonites, became his moment of greatest personal failure and tragedy as he sheds the innocent blood of his only daughter.

Jephthah is a Savior, but he's a flawed Savior. Jephthah is a sinful Savior. That's a strange juxtaposition of words, but that's what he is.

He's a sinful Savior. He saved others in a measure, but himself he could not save. He couldn't save himself from his own sin.

[30 : 13] What we need, what you need, what I need, what we need is a sinless Savior who can concentrate all his attention on saving sinners. We need a Savior who can lay down his own life for the sins of others, for he has none of his own to die for.

Of course, the wonder and the good news of the gospel is that God has provided such a Savior. He has provided his own son, Jesus, and we need Jesus.

Jephthah, a sinful Savior, points starkly and vividly forward to Jesus, our sinless Savior, our perfect, mighty warrior.

And though these are so very connected, let me just pose the question, what does Jephthah teach us about God's salvation? Not only about God's Savior, but about God's salvation. The people of God in Gilead, through Jephthah, experienced God's salvation, but it was a partial salvation. They were saved from their physical enemies, from the Ammonites. They were saved from their oppressors. They were granted a time of peace and prosperity. They were saved from the consequences of their sin and rebellion, but they were not delivered from the sin itself.

[31 : 35] The people remained hopelessly enslaved to sin. Because as we read on through the book of Judges, the cycle continues. In chapter 13, and only a few years have passed.

The chronology is sometimes difficult to know with certainty, but it's certainly only a few years have passed after Jephthah's time as judge. And what do we read? In the first verse of chapter 13, again. It's that predictable word in the book of Judges. Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They'd been delivered from physical enemies.

They'd been granted a measure of peace and prosperity, but this was not the salvation, the full salvation that as sinners they needed, they had not been delivered from their own sin, from sin itself.

A flawed and sinful Savior could only ever secure a temporal and partial salvation.

[32 : 35] Our need is greater. We need to be saved not only or principally from the consequences of our sin, but from sin itself and its guilt. We need to be forgiven. We need to be cleansed.

We need to be restored. Jephthah was not equipped for such a saving work, but he does, in his very limitations, point forward not only to a perfect Savior, but to a perfect and a full salvation.

A Savior and a salvation that deals not only with the consequences of sin, but with sin itself. A salvation that we all need. A salvation that is offered to all.

A salvation that we can know and enjoy and experience as we put our trust in God's mighty warrior. As we put our trust in his eternal son, Jesus Christ, who was sent into this world to be our Savior, to die in our place, to secure for us full and sufficient salvation.

Jephthah points us to Jesus and to his saving work Jephthah points, but will you follow his finger in the direction of the one he is pointing to?

[33 : 55] One of the great tragedies of the book of Judges would be if we had all these judges pointing to Jesus, but we don't follow their finger to the one that he is pointing to, that they are pointing to.

Will you follow the finger that is pointing to Jesus? Do you see Jesus as God's perfect, all-sufficient Savior?

Do you trust in Jesus as your only and sufficient Savior? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word.

We pray that you would help us to understand your Word, help us to hear your voice as you speak to us through your Word. and we do thank you for the manner in which we find Jesus on every page.

We thank you for the manner in which he is the one who stands at the very center of your great revelation of yourself to us. And we thank you for him.

[34 : 57] We thank you for who he is. We thank you for what he has done. We thank you for the death he died. We thank you for the call that he extends even now to sinners such as we are to put our trust in him and to know what it is to be forgiven to know what it is to be cleansed to know what it is to be restored and welcomed into your family that that would be our experience and we pray these things in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen.