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DESPISED AND REJECTED

Judges 10:6-12:7

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The book of Judges describes the history of God's people as they went from "generation to degeneration," and Jephthah's story is yet another tragedy. How in the world can there be any good news in this? Perhaps, like me, you're growing weary of the book of Judges. But that's the whole point, isn't it? That in reading through the book of Judges we become weary of sin and sorrow, and give our lives more fully to Jesus, our faithful deliverer and king.

Lord Jesus, high and holy, meek and lowly, you have brought us again to the valley of vision, where we live in the depths but we can see you in the heights; hemmed in by the darkness of sin and shame we can see your glory. In the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells the brighter your stars shine. As we learn from your Word, shine your light in the darkness and let us find your life in our death, your joy in our sorrow, your grace in our sin, and your riches in our poverty. Amen.¹

JEPHTHAH'S CONTEXT: MASSIVE PROBLEMS, SHORT-SIGHTED SOLUTIONS

In the final chapters of the book of Judges, there's a repeated refrain: "In those days there was no king in Israel."² This is not merely a statement of fact, but it's also a judgment against God's people for their disobedience after they entered into the Promised Land. God had rescued them from slavery under the tyrannical king of Egypt, by appointing Moses to lead them—out of bondage, into a covenant relationship with God, for the sake of the world. Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God instructed them how to live for the sake of the world, as "a light to the nations." Among other things, they were to put away all idols, committing themselves fully to God. They were also to unite under the king whom God would choose, a king not like Pharaoh or those of the other surrounding nations. A king who didn't amass for himself wealth or weapons or wives, but instead someone who was first and foremost a subject of the Lord most high, the rightful king of all creation. As God's loyal subject, the king would make his own personal copy of the Scriptures, and he would study them all the days of his life, and do everything in his power to live and rule according to God's word (Deut 17:14ff).

¹ Adapted from Arthur G. Bennett, *The Valley of Vision* (Banner of Truth, 1975).

² Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25.

However, after Joshua led God's people into the Promised Land, they soon disobeyed God's instructions. The book of Judges describes several generations of widespread *apostasy*, as they gave their hearts to other gods, and also widespread *anarchy* in the absence of godly leadership.

The context for the story of Jephthah was again both apostasy and anarchy. Apostasy, because God's people had turned away from him to worship false gods. And anarchy, because they had no king, nor was there any other kind of recognized leader among the tribes. Thus, not only were they prey to attack from other nations, but they often went to war against one another.

Jephthah's story takes place primarily in the land of Gilead, east of the Jordan River. Their neighbors the Ammonites had surged into Gilead, and God's people gathered to repel them. But they needed someone to take the lead. So they said to one another, "Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all Gilead" (10:18). While the narrator offers no commentary here, we know from the broader context that already something was terribly wrong with their plan: *God's people had massive long-term problems, but they only wanted short-term solutions*. They needed to put an end to their apostasy and give their allegiance to a godly king. Instead, they wanted to repeat the short-term solution of prior generations, by uniting under a warrior figure who could get them out of a jam. Then after being delivered from their enemies, they could go back to apostasy and anarchy as usual. As is so often the case in these Old Testament stories, the moral here is be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it.

THE CALL OF JEPHTHAH (Judges 11:1-11)

Judges 11:1-11 describes the call of Jephthah in three stages. Pay careful attention to the order of events, because they're important for understanding the larger narrative.

Stage 1. Rejection & Ruin (11:1-4). Jephthah was just the sort of mighty warrior that the Gileadites might like to use to get them out of a jam like the Ammonite invasion. But sadly, they had sent him away. Through no fault of his own, Jephthah was illegitimate (11:1), the son of a prostitute. He couldn't help his ancestry any more than any of the rest of us can. Nevertheless, his family despised and rejected him for it. When his half-brothers came of age, they drove him out (11:2). In their greed, they didn't want to share any of their inheritance with their half-brother. As a result, Jephthah went into exile and took up residence in the borderlands between Syria and Jordan, surviving as best he could. There he developed something of a reputation as a leader for a whole group of outcasts who gathered around him, taking whatever they could get, however they could get it. But then ruin came to Gilead, in the form of the Ammonite invasion, and Jephthah wasn't around to deliver them. Once again the people had neither king nor deliverer, and the false gods they worshiped were of no help in protecting them against their enemies. Thus *rejection* led to *ruin* in vv 1-4.

Stage 2. Request & Refusal (11:5-7). Suffering the ruin of the Ammonite invasion, the Gileadites sent an envoy to Jephthah to request that he come to their aid. They said, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites" (11:6). But then Jephthah quite understandably refused their request. He said "Didn't you hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?" (11:7). They were hoping Jephthah had forgotten how they had mistreated him before, but of course he hadn't. How could he forget their rejection? They were hoping that Jephthah would be happy just to be welcomed back home, but he was wary. Would they use him just to get out of a jam, and then cast him out once again? Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Thus Gilead's *request* led to Jephthah's *refusal* in vv 5-7.

Stage 3. Appeal & acceptance (11:8-11). The elders of Gilead appealed, offering not only the opportunity to lead them into battle, but also leadership in their community after expelling the Ammonites. They said to him, "This is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (11:8). In response, Jephthah reiterated the agreement with one important addition. For the first time in their deliberations Jephthah mentioned the one who historically chose Israel's leaders: the Lord himself. Illegitimate Jephthah (and not the respectable elders of Gilead) was the one who mentioned the Lord, saying, "If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, then I will be your head" (11:9). The elders of Gilead agreed, this time putting God first: "The Lord will be witness between us if we do not do as you say" (11:10). So Jephthah accepted their offer, and returned with the elders to Gilead, and "**the people** (not the Lord) made him head and leader over them" (11:11). Again, note that this is not historically how it was done, nor was it the way that God had said they were to find a king. They were to anoint the man of God's choosing. After the people made him head and leader, *then* Jephthah opened his mouth and "spoke all *his* words before the Lord," (11:11) letting God know what he had decided. Through Gilead's *appeal* and Jephthah's *acceptance*, Jephthah came to be their leader in vv 8-11.

THE FALL OF JEPHTHAH (Judges 11:12-12:7)

If Judges 11:1-11 describes the call of Jephthah, the remaining verses describe the fall of Jephthah. In 11:12-28, Jephthah sent a diplomatic envoy to the Ammonites, and they made a very strong case for why the Ammonites were dead wrong for picking this fight. These verses show that in spite of his illegitimate ancestry, Jephthah had an excellent grasp of the religious and political history of the region. Nevertheless, the Ammonites refused his diplomacy (11:28). Gilead therefore had to drive them out militarily.

Prior to leading his troops into battle, Jephthah made another decision and then opened his mouth to let God know what he had decided. He said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace shall be the Lord's and I will offer him up for a burnt offering" (30-31). Jephthah had thought of

a “good deal” that he was going to give to God: “God, if you help me kill several thousand bad guys, I’ll throw in one of my own servants in return.”

Most of us have some experience offering God “good deals” like this, and they’re usually just as absurd. “God, I promise if you get me out of this financial mess I’ve gotten myself into, then I will help you solve global poverty.” God must be so relieved to be given opportunities like this. He’s probably thinking, “Wow, that’s great, because I so need a financial advisor.”

In fact, God doesn’t need our help. He is already set. Our bargains with God always betray a fundamental theological mistake, namely that there’s nothing we can do for him that he can’t already do for himself. In Jephthah’s case, what he offered to the Lord was neither something God wanted, nor was it something that Jephthah was allowed to give. He should have kept his mouth shut instead of making a rash vow before the Lord.

The defeat of the Ammonites was a huge, historic victory for the people of Gilead. Yet it is described in vv 32-33 as little more than a footnote. From God’s perspective, just as he has no need of our good deals, he has no difficulty in turning back a massive invasion. Victories like these are unremarkable for God. What is important, however, is whether his people trust him and follow him. As we have seen throughout this series, Judges isn’t about the battles. Instead it is the sad story of a people whom God had called to be a light to the nations, but who ended up embracing the darkness of their neighbors.

Jephthah, on returning home in v 34ff, is a classic example. He had only a daughter, no other children or grandchildren. It was she who came out through the doorway to meet him. As soon as he saw her (v 35), he tore his clothes and said, “Alas my daughter, you have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have *opened my mouth* to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.”

Jephthah was a great warrior, but he wasn’t much of a theologian. Sometimes what he said and did was really stupid. He had undoubtedly expected anyone or anything other than his daughter to emerge first. In making this vow, he probably assumed that he was going to lose one of his servants, but his daughter emerged, and he felt that he had no other choice than to keep his vow. As unbelievable as it sounds, she agreed, saying, “My father, you have *opened your mouth* to the Lord; do to me according to *what has gone out of your mouth...*” (v 36).

What happened to Jephthah’s daughter? There’s a lot of thoughtful debate about this in the academy, with the top two possibilities being:

Jephthah’s daughter became a burnt offering. Some argue that Jephthah really did sacrifice his daughter as a burnt offering to the Lord, even though God forbids human sacrifice repeatedly. Jephthah was copying what everyone else did to worship their idols, particularly pagan kings who were victorious in battle. So according to this view, Jephthah

slit his only daughter's throat, burned her on the altar, and in so doing lost any hope of continuing his lineage of headship into successive generations.

Jephthah's daughter became a nun. Other scholars argue that Jephthah knew that the Old Testament law prescribes dedicating the firstborn to God in lieu of burnt offerings. Instead of offering his only daughter up as a burnt sacrifice, Jephthah made her a living sacrifice as a perpetual virgin in the Lord's service at the tabernacle. Even though she did not die, her entering the convent meant the same outcome for Jephthah, namely that he lost any hope of continuing his lineage of headship into successive generations.

There are merits to both sides, and it's not at all clear which position is the correct one. Either way, we draw the same conclusions regarding the fall of Jephthah:

1. Jephthah should not have made his rash vow. Regardless of the outcome, we can say that Jephthah should never have opened his mouth and made a rash vow. In fact, this point is emphasized not only by the repeated refrain in the story of Jephthah opening his mouth, but also by his very name, which means "He opened."

2. Jephthah should not have kept his rash vow. Jephthah was wrong when he said "I opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." Again, God repeatedly declared human sacrifice to be wicked. What Jephthah offered to the Lord was neither something God wanted, nor was it something that Jephthah was allowed to give. A vow to sin against the Lord is a vow that must be broken.

3. Jephthah was not fit to be king. Despite his illegitimate ancestry, Jephthah was fearfully and wonderfully made. He was an image-bearer of his maker. He was highly accomplished as a mighty warrior. He was also gifted as a political and religious historian. So he had extraordinary, remarkable qualities. But Jephthah was profoundly unqualified for the kingship. He was neither called to it by the Lord, nor was he competent as a man of God's word. When he opened his mouth, God's wisdom did not flow out of it. He had no business being king.

One of the enduring strengths of the U.S. system of government is that anyone could become president. Theoretically you don't have to be of royal lineage or enormously wealthy, etc. But our strength can also be our weakness, in that *anyone* could become president. Just because one can doesn't mean one should, and the vast majority of our citizens should not become president. They simply are not gifted, equipped or prepared for the responsibility.

If we require a special person for the office of president of the United States, where there is some measure of separation between church and state, then think how much more would have been required of the leader of the theocracy of the Promised Land. The most important requirement for the throne was that king himself be a very loyal subject of the Lord. If he didn't meditate on God's word day and night, loving the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving his neighbor as himself, then he was not fit for the office. Jephthah was

neither qualified nor called to the office of king. After he returned to Gilead as head, he sinned against God first by sacrificing his only child (one way or another), and then by superintending the slaughter of 42,000 of his kinsmen in a squabble with the Ephraimites (12:1-7). In other words, the apostasy and anarchy that had come to define the period of the Judges became substantially worse.

Judges ends with this refrain: "In those days there was no king in Israel," and on a couple of occasions it goes on to say, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judges 17:6, 21:25). The fall of Jephthah proves the point. Because they lacked a proper king, everyone in this story did what was right in his own eyes. Jephthah's brothers drove him into exile. Gilead gave Jephthah headship as well as military command. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, and led a genocide against his kinsmen. They did what was right in their own eyes because there was no king in Israel.

THE MORE ENDURING NEED: RECONCILIATION WITH GOD

The fundamental problem facing God's people wasn't the absence of a human king. It was that they rebelled against their proper head. The Lord was their true king, and any human king was to rule under his authority. What they needed more than a short-term deliverer or even a human king was to restore their covenant relationship with the Lord.

If we zoom out and read Judges chapters 10 and 11 side by side, we see that this message of God's kingship dominates the entire passage. In fact, the way that Jephthah's story is told in Judges 11 is meant to remind us of the way the Lord was treated by his people in Judges 10. The three stage call of Jephthah (11:1-11) is a rerun of Israel's call for deliverance in 10:6-16.

Stage 1. Rejection & Ruin (10:6-9). God's people once again despised and rejected the Lord by turning to false gods. Six or seven times already in the book of Judges we have heard that the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served false gods. Now here it is yet again in Judges 10:6: "The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," giving their hearts to other gods, other things, other priorities. Yet this time it was over the top. Consider how many idols there were: the Baals and the Ashtaroath, Syrian gods, Sidonian gods, Moabite gods, Ammonite gods, and Philistine gods (10:6). That's a seven-fold apostasy, which is the narrator's way of telling us that they had given up every pretense and now were apostate *in full*. God's light to the nations had become *completely and fully* compromised by the darkness.

Think for a moment about how God felt when this happened. He was rejected, again, for the seventh time. It was a full and complete break-up.

Somewhere along the way, many of us have been misled into thinking that God is without emotions. Yet a brief survey of the Bible shows the opposite to be true. God is a lover. He

laughs, rejoices, and weeps. And God grieves. Imagine how he felt when humanity first rejected him. Imagine how he felt after this seventh rejection. Imagine how he feels whenever we push him away.

In Judges 10, God's people abandoned him, and that inevitably led to their ruin. Once again, the Lord allowed them to fall into the hands of their enemies, and for 18 years the Ammonites oppressed those living in the land of Gilead (10:8). The Ammonites became so strong that they also crossed over the Jordan and oppressed the tribes in the West bank as well. So, *rejection* led to *ruin* in vv 6-9.

Stage 2. Request & Refusal (10:10-14). When they couldn't stand it any longer, God's people requested deliverance. "The people of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, 'We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals'" (10:10). At this point what has happened in the prior stories has been that the Lord raised up a deliverer, someone like Othniel, or Ehud, or Deborah, or Gideon. This time, instead of sending a savior, God refused. The Lord said, Didn't I already save you from (1) the Egyptians, (2) the Amorites, (3) the Ammonites, (4) the Philistines, (5) the Sidonians, (6) the Amalekites, and (7) the Maonites? (10:11-12). That's a seven-fold deliverance, which is again the narrator's way of telling us that God had rescued them *in full*. He had done plenty. After having delivered them 7x, God's patience, very understandably, had run out. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me seven times? "I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress." (10:13-14). So their *request* was followed by God's *refusal* in vv 10-14.

Stage 3. Appeal & Acceptance? (10:15-16). The people responded to God's refusal by appealing his decision. In this case, they made what appears to be the only wholehearted confession with repentance found in the book of Judges: "'We have sinned. Do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.' So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord." (10:15-16a). In past times, they only apologized with their fingers crossed. This time they truly did some housecleaning, putting away their false gods and returning to the Lord. In response to their appeal, even though God had had enough of their infidelity and two-timing and had said that he would save them no more, he still hadn't written them off. He still felt for them deeply. "God became impatient over the misery of Israel" (10:16b). It's not clear what God would do, but he wouldn't leave things broken forever.

God is not capricious. He doesn't threaten people falsely, nor does he waffle on whether to take action. Every person is made in his image, like a little replica of him. He regards us each with dignity, concern, care and love. Like a loving Father he teaches and warns, patiently, repeatedly, always looking to find hearts that soften towards him, always willing to extend mercy and offer alternatives to those who turn to him.³ No matter how much you're to blame for your own brokenness, God is impatient over your misery, too.

³ Jeremiah 18:7-10.

JESUS: DELIVERER AND KING

What was the outcome of Israel's call for God's help in Judges 10? Did God accept Israel's appeal and send them Jephthah as a deliverer? Maybe so. Yet Jephthah's whole story is such a mess that it's hard to know whether he was a blessing or a curse. Sure, he delivered them from the Ammonites, but he probably ended up killing a lot more of his own people. That's why it's not surprising that the narrator never really tells us whether Jephthah was God's answer to his people's prayer. After all, he knew what they really needed, which was more than a short-term solution. He knew they needed a king who submitted himself to God by keeping God's word, and in the end, that's what he was determined to give them.

A century later, King David would come to power, and his kingdom would be a foretaste of what God had always intended. Yet even David's reign strayed far from all that God wanted, and all that humanity needed. David was a student of God's word, yet he repeatedly violated God's law in reprehensible ways, particularly murder and adultery. He amassed wealth and weapons and wives, and in future generations the kings in Israel did what was right in their own eyes, until the Lord finally sent them into exile.⁴

Through the centuries, faithful students of God's word still looked forward to a day when God's kingdom would finally come to stay, through a son of David who was fully committed to the Lord. Isaiah saw him most clearly, some 700 years before his coming, and best captured his role as both *deliverer* and *king*.

Jesus came to be king, but he loved his subjects so much that he first came to deliver us. Not only did he heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and set the captives free, but he also was:

Despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. He was pierced for our transgressions; crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isa 53:3-5).

Jesus gave himself up to be the only human sacrifice our heavenly Father accepted. Jesus stepped in for us, receiving the full punishment for our sins, so that he might deliver us from sin and death. After three days, our Father raised him from the dead, and crowned him king. He rules according to God's word because he is the incarnate Word. His kingdom is growing, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." (Isa 9:7).

⁴ If God forgave Israel seven times in Judges 10, he forgave Israel 7 times 70 times prior to the Babylonian exile. Yet even God's enduring patience eventually came to an end.

What the people of God needed so long ago, we now have in Jesus. He is a deliverer who can truly save us from every enemy, and a king who is always faithful to God's word.

A day is coming when it will be too late to claim Jesus as deliverer and king. He foretold a day when people who despise and reject him will call out to him, yet he will say, "depart from me, I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). Give him your life today, and that day will never come. Don't turn him away. He is eager to rescue you from apostasy and anarchy, and to be your rightful king.