

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

Judges 11: 29-40

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BACKGROUND AND REVIEW

This morning we continue in our year-long sermon series, "Fifty Bible Stories that Every Christian Should Know." If you've been following the schedule you will have noted that we got things a little out of order when I ran off to Knoxville to welcome our new grandson and our Lay Leader, Randy Riley, stepped into the pulpit for me.

Today, we correct the disorder and next week we'll be back on track. So maybe a little review would be appropriate before we begin. You will recall that...

The year is 750 BCE.

Hezekiah is king and his goal is to reunite the twelve tribes of Israel under the Davidic Monarchy. Toward this end he has ordered his court historians to reach back some 300 years and rewrite the history of the Israelites. Under his orders they have produced the books of Joshua, Judges, First Kings and Second Kings. These books tell the story of the history of Israel as King Hezekiah wanted it told.

In Joshua we are told of military conquest and victory, how the land of Canaan was conquered and divided among the twelve tribes.

The book of Judges is presented as a hundred-year arc. The first stories tell of the ascendancy of Israel as a power, ruled by Judges – prophets and war lords -- who protected the people, enforced the Mosaic Law, and mediated in civil conflicts. Israel's success led to complacency and arrogance, however, and the second half of the book gives us cautionary tales, stories of what happens to a people when they turn to idols and choose to separate themselves from God and God's will. The punishment for such a choice, it turns out, is that God allows us to have what we want.

On July 3 you heard one of the three descending stories, the story of the shibboleth and the civil war where some 42 thousand Israelites were slain by other Israelites. Next Sunday we will hear the final story of Israel's descent into corruption, the story of Samson. Today, we hear the second of the three descending stories, and probably the saddest, the story of Jephthah's daughter.

JEPHETHA

You've heard of Gilead. You've probably, at one time or another, heard or sung the Spiritual, "There's a Balm in Gilead." So you know that Gilead was a place. It sat about twenty miles south and east of the Sea of Galilee and if you look in that Bible Atlas that you carry in your brain, as all good students of the Bible do, you will have no trouble locating it.

Before Gilead was a place, however, Gilead was a person. He was the one after whom the place, Gilead, was named. He was the great grandson of Joseph (he of the coat of many colors) and the grandson of Manasseh, founder of one of the original twelve tribes. Gilead was the founder of a sub-tribe called the Gileadites who lived in the area called, you guessed it, Gilead. And he had lots of sons.

All but one of his sons was born by his wife. But one son was born by a prostitute, making him illegitimate by Hebrew law. His name was Jephthah and all his brothers, the legitimate ones, hated him. Mostly they hated him because they were afraid his father was going to cut him in on the inheritance reducing their share.

So, when they reached adulthood and saw that their father was getting old, with one foot in the grave, they ganged up on Jephthah and told him that if he knew what was good for him he'd find somewhere else to live.

He did, in fact, know what was good for him so he packed up his stuff and moved to the land of Tob. (Don't try to find it on that Bible Atlas you have in your brain because no one knows where it was. If you ask me, it sounds like a made up name, anyway. Tob. Huh!) When he got to this Tob place, wherever it was, the story teller tells us that he took up a sort of Robin Hood existence. He became an outlaw and because of his superior outlawing skills and personal charisma he gathered a band of outlaws around him and they made their living from outlawing and, probably, from hiring themselves out as mercenaries.

They were, as you might guess, a pretty scary bunch.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN GILEAD

While Jephthah was making a name for himself outlawing and fighting for money for other people, his brothers were not having it so good. Israel was being invaded by the Ammonites and, not to put too fine a point on it, they were getting their heads handed to them. Gilead was on the frontier, the first area the Ammonites were invading and they were getting the worst of it.

Worn out, beaten down, busted, broke and abused, they decided that they needed the help of someone who knew more about fighting Ammonites than they did. So who do you think they decided to call for help? That's right, Jephthah.

Only they didn't want to pay him. They wanted him to come and help them, out of family loyalty. Did these guys have hutzpah or what? They kick him out of the family, threaten to kill him, and banish him to a foreign land and then, when they want his help, they appeal to his sense of family loyalty.

And, big surprise, he agrees.

Only he has couple of conditions. Well, just one, really. "If I help you, I want complete control. You have to make me the head guy, the man in charge, the *capo de tutti capo*, boss of all bosses, and do everything I say."

They're so scared that it only takes them about half a second to agree to his terms. So the next day he shows up with his band of mercenaries/outlaws and proceeds to turn his former home boys into a fighting force.

(Is this sounding familiar? Does this remind you of the plot of about a dozen old western and war movies from "The Magnificent Seven" to "The Dirty Dozen?" Well, that's because it is that plot! Ask any professional writer and they'll tell you, there are only seven story plots and they can all be found in either the Bible or Shakespeare. This is one of those plots.)

Before Jephthah will go to war, however, he wants to figure out just what is going on. He has to talk to the Ammonites, get their take on this thing and see if he can't broker a peace deal without further bloodshed. Not bad for a mercenary, huh?

THE AMMONITES

Jephthah sends some messengers with a white flag into the Ammonite camp tells them to find out what the heck is going on here. Ask them, "Why are you oppressing the people who formerly were my family?"

The Ammonites send the messengers back with this answer: "We're not oppressing anyone. We're the oppressed ones, here. About seventy years ago you people came to this land, uninvited, and you clomped through here and just took whatever you wanted including a bunch of our land and we're just taking back what is rightfully ours. You want to avoid a war? Give us our land back! And we'll go back home and leave you alone.

Jephthah says that sounds like a good plan and he'll be glad to give them back any land which belongs to them which is NONE!

Then he gives them a little history lesson which I'm sure they appreciated:

Joshua led us through the dessert and the wilderness, he said, and we came to the land of the Edom on our way to Canaan and we asked if we could pass through and the Edomites said no.

So Joshua led us to the land of the Amorites and we asked if we could pass through and they said no. So we went around.

This happened about a dozen times, people refusing to let us pass through and us going around and finally we came to the land of the Ammonites, your land. And we were going to ask if we could pass through but you never gave us a chance. You just attacked us.

So we defended ourselves and fought back and we gave you a whipping and any land we took from you was spoils of war, plain and simple, so it's not yours any more, see. It's ours! And what's with you people, anyway. The Moabites beat you in another war and took some of your land and you're not demanding it back from them.

So we're not giving' it back to you or anyone else. You want to fight and die over the same land, again, well, come on, boy. Let's have at it.

The next morning he's thinking about everything that got said the day before and kind of second guessing himself and thinking more war might not be a good idea, but that's a bell that cannot now be unring.

A big battle is coming, like it or not.

So Jephthah decides to hedge his bets a little by making a bargain with God. He prays what has got to be one of the dumbest prayers in the entire Bible. He says, Lord, if you will just let me win this battle, then, I will make a burnt offering sacrifice to you of the first person I see come through the door of my house when I come home.

Hearing no objection from God he considers it a done deal. He calls his men together and the men of Gilead and off they go into battle. And, of course, they don't just defeat the Ammonites, they destroy them. There is no hint of a question about it. They win the battle in a final and decisive way.

THE SACRIFICE

That evening Jephthah returns home all happy about the battle, celebrating and singing and whatnot and as he approaches his house he hears bells ringing and knows that word of the victory has reached his home and his beautiful teenage daughter, his only child, is dancing to show him how happy she is for his victory and that he has returned home safely and then, suddenly, he remembers his promise.

And, in a scene that begs to be rendered in film, probably in slow motion, just as he is remembering the vow he made, he looks up at the door and, before he can stop her, she crosses the threshold and runs into his arms.

The first person through the door, the person he has promised to sacrifice on the altar to God if he won the battle against the Ammonites, has turned out to be his beautiful, marvelous, loving and lovely, daughter.

"Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; 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."

For all her youth, she understands what now must happen. She asks only that she be allowed to go with her friends and spend two months in the mountains on retreat, bewailing and grieving for herself and the life she will never get to live.

Jephthah grants her wish and she spends two months grieving in the mountains with her friends. After that the story teller tells us that she returned to her father and he “*did with her according to the vow he had made.*” He killed her and sacrificed her as a burnt offering to God.

In the final sentence of the story we are told, as an epilogue, that for some years after that it became the custom that every year for four days, the young women of Israel would go off together and grieve for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

REFLECTION

The temptation with this story is to think of it as a story about a stupid promise that never should have been made, because, well, the promise was a stupid one and it never should have been made. YHWH had rejected human sacrifice nearly a thousand years earlier with Abraham and Isaac on the mountain top and Jephthah had somehow failed to learn that lesson.

Later, in the history of Israel, when the people once again return to considering this barbaric practice the prophets will chastise them. In Jeremiah God will tell them that not only did he not desire human sacrifice, it never crossed his mind. In Hosea he will remind them that he desires “mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”

In Isaiah, God will ask, not just about human sacrifice but about any sacrifice, “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?...I have had enough of burnt-offerings ...Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean...cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

The only sacrifice God desires is that we “love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all [our] soul, and with all [our] might.” So why did Jephthah think that this cruel and barbaric practice was still okay? And why didn’t God step in to stop it as he did with Abraham and Isaac? Where is the lesson in this story?

If, indeed, there is a lesson to be taken from this horribly sad story it is to be found in the context in which the story is told. Remember, that the book of Judges ends with three cautionary tales about what happens to a people who choose to separate themselves from God.

In this first story, from chapter eleven, we hear of a man who seeks to manipulate God with a promise of sacrifice and ends up sacrificing his own child.

In the second story, in chapter twelve, we hear the story of the shibboleth wherein Israelites kill Israelites in civil war and forty two thousand die because they cannot pronounce a word correctly.

In the third story and the final chapters of Judges we will hear the story of Samson and what happens when power becomes corrupted by pride and vanity and arrogance and complacency.

This first story sets the stage for the others. It tells us what signs to look for when a people have fallen away from God. And one of the first signs is the willingness to sacrifice their children.

Let me be victorious against the Ammonites, said Jephthah, and I will sacrifice whoever comes through that door. And, yes, that it was his own loving daughter makes the story tragic, but would it have been less so had someone else’s daughter or son come through the door?

Let me be victorious over the Ammonites, O God, and I will sacrifice my child...or someone’s.

Let us be victorious over worldwide terrorism, O God, and we will sacrifice our children in Afghanistan and Iraq and Libya and Pakistan. Or, if not our children, someone’s.

Let us be victorious over crime, O God, and we will sacrifice the children of others less fortunate than we.

Let us be victorious over inconvenience and self-sacrifice, O God, and we will sacrifice the unborn.

Let us be victorious over personal poverty, O God, and we will sacrifice our relationships with our children.

Let us be victorious over taxes, O God, and we will sacrifice our children’s education.

Let us have freedom, O God, and we will sacrifice our children upon that altar.

Do we think that this is not what we are doing when we go to war? Is this simply another one of Pastor Dean’s rhetorical hyperboles? It’s not mine, brothers and sisters. Listen to the words of one of our most beloved presidents as he tried to comfort a mother who, he had been told, had lost her sons in war. “I pray,” he says in a letter, “that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours **to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.**” It is signed: “Yours very sincerely and respectfully, Abraham Lincoln.”

Would we seek to know the cost of turning away from God’s will? It is written in the book of Judges.

First, as with Jephthah’s daughter, we destroy our children.

Then, as in the story of the shibboleth, we destroy our neighbors and even our own kindred.

And, finally, as in the story of Samson.....

Well, let us give thanks, this day, my friends, that, when we stray from him, as stray we will, God will, as promised, receive us back into his loving embrace when we return.

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever heard the story of Jephthah's daughter before? If not, why do you suppose that is the case? Why do pastors and Bible teachers tend to shy away from certain passages and stories?
2. This is the second story about child sacrifice that we have encountered in our study of the Hebrew Scriptures. In both cases it is clearly condemned but in one case God steps in to stop it. Why does he not do so in this story?
3. Abraham bargained with God over the fate of Sodom and Gammorah. Jephthah bargained with God over the outcome of a battle. Compare how these two bargains turned out. What lesson should we take from these stories?
4. Have you ever tried to bargain with God? Made a promise to God if only God would fulfill a wish for you? How did that turn out for you? Did you try to manipulate God with a bargain? How did it turn out for you?
5. How can we structure our prayers better so they don't come off as trying to manipulate God into doing our will?