

Judges | When All Hell Breaks Loose

Making Deals with God

Judges 11.1-3, 29ff
10.27.19

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. And Gilead was the father of Jephthah. ² Gilead's wife bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." ³ So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him.

Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon. ³⁰ Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, ³¹ 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."

³² So Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. ³³ He struck them with a very great slaughter from Aroer to the entrance of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel.

³⁴ When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had no son or daughter. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "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." ³⁶ So she said to him, "My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon." ³⁷ She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions." ³⁸ Then he said, "Go." So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity. ³⁹ At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel, ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

We've been working through the Book of Judges – it's the history between Joshua taking the Israelites into the Promised Land (after Moses and the Exodus) and the time of the Samuel and the kings.

At this point in our study, the multi-generational spiritual decline of the Israelites is really showing. The “centre cannot hold” as, we read last week (W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”). Israel mixing with the spiritual practices of the serpent – the pagan religions of death and their widespread use of child-sacrifice has worn thin the social fabric... And the judges (the leaders whom God calls to rescue His people from their oppressors) are not people of integrity (listen to last week’s sermon on the topic of INTEGRITY).

The rescuer/judge we meet today...isn’t really raised up by God (though God does use him) and NOT only is this man a “man of his time” but ALSO he had the disadvantage of (what we would call) “significant childhood trauma” – a horrific family life, bullying, rejection and was even a kind of gang-member.

As we’ll see, all these factors – the sins of his age, the social environment, trauma in his family of origin and his own inner flaws – all these factors converge to make him NOT the leader we would hope for – in fact a kind of anti-hero who actually participates in a human sacrifice at the end of today’s reading.

Today’s sermon is NOT a psychology lesson but it does raise some psychological issues: can we ever get free from our past? Are we determined by our environment (and bound by how we were raised or NOT raised)? What factors make YOU the person you are and IS there any healing...any liberation? Can God help you – is there any good news here?

Let’s Look at:

1. The Effects of Our Conditioning/Trauma
2. An Answer to the Prophet’s Question
3. How to Apply the Answer (and with what results)

Going back into the last CH (10) we learn that after the death of the antichrist figure we met last week (the illegitimate, usurper-judge, Abimelech) who made a new covenant (8.33; 9.4) with evil and married Israel to Baal... after Abimelech goes to this next level of spiritual infidelity – then, the floodgates open.

Israel consorts “AGAIN” in CH 10 with SEVEN gods (10.6). It’s the writer’s way of saying, “they were completely unfaithful to their marriage covenant with YHWH.”

Then the Ammonites “afflicted and crushed the sons of Israel...for 18 years” (10.8) And in their severe distress they cry out to God but God sees their well-worded repentance as a PLOY – they only want the pain to stop (trying to make a deal with God but no return relationship with Him). God does not send a rescuer.

So the leaders of Gilead put their heads together as if to say, “Well – if God won’t help – we’ll appoint our own rescuer...and we’ll make him our CHIEF!”

So they find this man, Jephthah – he was son of a prostitute. His father was named Gilead and he had a bunch of sons from his wife...AND also this dirty little secret (a son with a prostitute) and the other sons were embarrassed by this Jephthah and his mother so they drove Jephthah out and he settled in a “Good Land” (Land of Tob) but he found bad friends in the good land (worthless fellows) and they started a “motorcycle club” – a gang (Bad to the Bone).

But his relatives (elders of Gilead) were desperate so they found this tough-guy and they tried to recruit him to their cause – offered to make him a leader. And he sees the irony of it – “they kicked me OUT because I was an embarrassment and an ill-bred ruffian BUT NOW THEY need a ruffian – this is my shot!”

So he negotiates – wants to make sure that IF HE delivers...HE WILL INDEED BE THE HEAD MAN! And yes! They swear to God – negotiation successful!

Then he figures he should try diplomacy first (seems wise) and he negotiates AGAIN (Jephthah = “he opens” – he opens his mouth! Expert negotiator!) but this diplomacy thing doesn't go so well – king of Ammon disregarded the message – “NO DEAL!”

And that’s when, God came upon Jephthah and empowered him to rescue Gilead and Israel... and it should’ve been “happily ever after” ... EXCEPT, for Jephthah’s conditioning. See, he was a product of his environment...of his childhood trauma...bad family dynamics... bad company... the times... zeitgeist. This was a bad time, a low-point (the centre cannot hold). Relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...of Moses and the Law... that was all forgotten... a faint whisper from our distant past.

So... wanting to ensure that he would get healed from all that childhood rejection and to ensure that he would FINALLY be given the respect/position he deserved as the Head of Gilead – even though God’s Spirit was with him and HE WAS PROMISED VICTORY by God’s presence and grace – the negotiator (“he opens”) he opens his mouth and he negotiates THIS TIME WITH GOD. He wants to seal the deal to show God that he is serious and to DO HIS PART, like ALL the gods require of their worshipers (I know how this works!)

“LORD, if you will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, I WILL give YOU whatever comes out of my door first when I return triumphant.”

And when it happens...when he returned victorious, it was his young daughter...“his one and only child” who comes first to greet him. Some scholars say she knew what she was doing (that’s why he responds that way) – that she wanted to be the heroine and give her life for her people. I don’t know.

The God of Israel detested human sacrifice and He was not pleased by it. Deuteronomy CH 12: “beware that you are not ensnared to serve their gods (and do as they do) You shall not behave thus toward YHWH your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it. (31ff)

But the Law was forgotten... and there was even a provision IN the Law (Lev 27) that allowed for dumb vows to be redeemed – if a person came to his senses and said, “WOW! What was I thinking...that was a rash and stupid vow!” Leviticus made a way for the person to pay a kind of penalty and NOT be a promise-breaker... BUT this was NOT a time when the Law was valued or applied or even remembered.

Was there no priest or rabbi or Torah-scholar to help Jephthah...even during those two months when his daughter went away to grieve that she would never have children – TWO MONTHS and no one helped.

Jephthah had been damaged by his parents...and now that HE IS A PARENT... is he destined to do even more damage to the next generation? Is he simply a product of his broken family, his hurts and rejections, his fellow gang-members? Are we just the product of our environment, our age, our conditioning?

Are we trapped by our environment and our family of origin and that’s end of the story?

And the answer is – YES.

Really, T.J.?! Do you believe in environmental determinism? Well...unless something or someone comes from outside our situation... we are pretty much STUCK. The spirit of our age (cultural biases with which we were raised, prejudices, nature/nurture) these have a tremendous gravitational pull. But sometimes someone comes along – a hand of a teacher, a friend, an unseen factor pulls us out.

And ultimately we ask – “but where can we find such a help?” And we remember a very famous question posed much later in Biblical history by the Prophet Jeremiah. It turns out that this region where Jephthah was born (and driven out) was famous for a resinous evergreen tree, a balsam tree used to make a healing ointment... And later Jeremiah asked the question, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” (8.22)

And Christians have often applied that question to Jesus Christ and in hymns/poems celebrated that, “YES... when we are bound and trapped by our own flaws and guilt, traumas and conditioning and deep wounds suffered in our own families – YES, there is a Balm in Gilead that can heal the sin-sick soul.”

Jesus Christ is the Child... “the One and Only child”... innocent in a way that the virgin daughter was not – but like her, He pays the price for the sins of those who have forgotten the Law and broken covenant with God and have turned from God completely (7 idols!)”

Jephthah was bad to the bone but Jesus Christ is good through and through. Jephthah “he opens” his mouth and manipulates with his words (even tries to manipulate God Himself) but Jesus Christ IS the Word from God and everything He says and does is Faithful and True.

Where Jephthah tries to relate to the Infinite, Eternal, Unchangeable God as if He was a dumb idol that can be handled and controlled – Jesus Christ, the Balm of Gilead calls Him “Abba!” and He fully delights to do all the Father’s will – it was His joy!

And when He has done everything that I was supposed to do – I, who often do wrong without even knowing it; often I DO know it and often I do the right things for wrong reasons... I, culturally bound, conditioned by factors outside my control – lacking in self-awareness – Jesus Christ comes from outside my situation (“extra nos”) to “broker a deal” on my behalf – not simply to tell me the Law but to DO IT FOR ME – “all the Father has given Me to do, I have done” (John 17.4) - It IS Finished (John 19.30).

There is help for people traumatized – for people bound by conditioning – “Is there no balm in Gilead?” Yes, Jeremiah there is a Balm in Gilead (healing from a Tree)!

Now, just a few ideas on how this weird story can help us (because God means it for our good!):

First, take the deal. Don’t make the deal – take the deal.

Don’t hold out to God stuff YOU have done to please Him like He’ll be impressed. Listen to the hymn:

Lo! th’ incarnate God ascended,
Pleads the merit of His blood:
Venture on Him, venture wholly,
Let no other trust intrude.

(Come Ye Sinners, Joseph Hart, 1759)

Do you see what that’s saying? Venture on Him (like venture capitalists – i.e. invest, put all your eggs in His basket). Don’t say or live like “I trust Jesus to save me...and I’m also doing MY PART!” That’s NOT taking the deal – that’s hedging your bets!

Take Jesus Christ as THE fulfillment of everything you were supposed to do but didn’t. Then, go with the Spirit as He claims ground in your soul. Become in practice what God already declared you to be and has destined you to be. Keep coming back to the deal that Jesus Christ brokered

for everyone desperate enough to believe. This is the True New Covenant and able to heal you and change you.

Second, pray like C.S. Lewis prayed: "The prayer preceding all prayers is, 'May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.'"

In other words, "Lord, I don't even know my motives in praying and I know so little of YOU... I want to know the only true and living God – the Holy, Holy, Holy God who can't be bribed or bought and thereby to know myself AND I NEED YOU – the Hand from beyond to help me."

Thirdly, future generations will laugh at us and judge us for our present sins. So, understand that our expectations for getting free from our cultural conditioning should be tempered. We should hope and trust God but we're NOT going to get it totally right ...on this side.

Last, some of us have had very traumatic situations in our family of origin. Jephthah kept on negotiating and ALL OF US return to sin-strategies and wrong ways of thinking about God and about ourselves and generational sins (e.g. combative, people-pleasing, isolation/hiding, fear etc. etc. etc) because that's how we learned to cope and survive.

And where Jephthah didn't find help – we can. You can. Talk to someone – it could be a professional counselor or doctor (that may be the hand from outside that God uses in your life) or someone sitting near you right now (a Gospel-friend!) who can listen to you ...pray for you ...share with you.

If Jephthah would have been helped by SOMEONE telling him the Law – how much more would YOU benefit by a friend telling you the Gospel. That's why small groups, classes, retreats, being together is so helpful... and essential in applying the Balm of Gilead to chapped souls.