

Author and speaker Tony Campolo tells this story:

I was in a church in Oregon not too long ago, and I prayed for a man who had cancer. In the middle of the week, I got a telephone call from his wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." I said, "Had?" Whoa, I thought, it's happened.

She said, "He died." I felt terrible.

She continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing.

And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

In our passage of study today in Judges... , the Israelites cry out to God... but He doesn't give them what they want. ... Has that ever happened to you...? ... What will we do when God doesn't give us what we pray for... though we want it desperately... though we do what we're supposed to do... though we cry out for it with all our hearts..?

Why would God refuse to answer us...? ... We will see in today's passage... just as Tony Campolo's story illustrates so well for us... that...
THE LORD IS COMMITTED TO BUILDING CHARACTER IN US. ... The Lord knows just how to bring about change inside of us... the kind that lasts forever.

Our passage is part of a flow of thought... by which the writer of Judges is teaching about character. ... I think it is best for us to acknowledge the flow... by reminding ourselves of where we have just been in the narrative of this book we have been studying.

Last week we read about Abimelech and how he had destroyed the rebellious Shechemites. ... He did this by destroying the city and burning one thousand men and women alive in the tower of Baal-Berith. ... He then proceeded to the city of Thebez... intending to inflict the same punishment here as he did at Shechem. ... While storming the tower... he gets too close and a woman throws a millstone upon his head from the tower inflicting a fatal wound. ... He orders his armor bearer to kill him with his sword so he would not die at the hands of a woman. ... This all leads up to chapter ten.

Abimelech is now dead... and two minor judges are used of God to bring peace in the land for forty-five years. ... No great battles or enemies were a nuisance... but rebuilding Israel from the mess Abimelech created... was no small matter. ... And God... in His mercy... used these two judges to restrain the influence of evil in Israel.

I doubt that the two judges who open chapter 10 (Tola and Jair)... are on your list of favorite Bible characters. ... We don't know enough about them to make them favorites... because they only get a verse or two. ... We could learn more about a person from a newspaper obituary... than we can gather from these brief verses. ... So Tola and Jair are sometimes called minor judges – as opposed to major judges like Ehud or Deborah or Gideon... about whom we have more detail... and get to read about their exciting adventures and victories. ... Tola and Jair are minor judges

because they receive less ink... less space in the story... a fact which does not mean they were of no importance. ... In fact... because they kept Israel at peace and focused on the Lord for 45 years... there was probably little difference in function between these so-called “minor judges”... and Deborah and Gideon.

Not all the judges have been famous through the ages... with prominent successes. ... Of the thirteen judges in the book of Judges... just seven (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson) have such eminence. ... The other six were nothing exceptional. But they were needed. ... Many tasks are not front-page news... but they are essential to God’s Kingdom work... just the same.

Judges 10:1-2

OK... so all we are given about Tola is... his pedigree... his tribe... his residence... his tenure... and where they buried him when he died.

However... verse 1 is careful to state that Tola arose 'after Abimelech to save Israel.' ... Here we have a clear hint of Yahweh's goodness. ... We don't know just how Tola saved Israel... whether by establishing a period of stable administration or by some military victory. ... But his saving work – whatever it was – came 'after Abimelech'... after the destroyer of Israel had done his worst... after the chaos he caused... after the infamous treachery against Gideon's family – after that... Yahweh raises up Tola for a saving mission. ... That is... I would say... typical of Yahweh. ... He does not allow such evil to go on forever... God does not allow His people to be trampled ad infinitum... but it is God’s way after the Valley of the Shadow... to anoint our heads with oil... after sorrow and sighing... to grant joy and gladness.

Yahweh is the gracious God who never allows 'Abimelech' to be the last word for his people.

Judges 10:3-4

If in Tola's regime we find a hint of Yahweh's goodness... we may see in Jair's reign... a true picture of man's tendency.

In these days... kings rode donkeys. This is long before the days of Macedonian conquests... the Greek... Roman... or Persian Empires. Those kings rode stallions. ... But the stallions of this time period... the kingly form of transportation... was a donkey! (Today Jair's sons would all be driving Ferraris...) ... And in addition to the status of having their own personal donkey... Jair gave each of his sons a city to rule over. ... So this is quite a boast!

The text depicts Jair's lavish affluence... and his wide influence... through his thirty sons... their thirty donkeys... and the thirty cities that they ruled. ... Such affluence and influence... does not necessarily imply there was anything wrong with that. ... Indeed, Israelite theology taught that numerous sons were a gift from Yahweh... and a means of protection from enemies (Ps. 127:3-5). ... However... Jair's thirty sons (and who knows how many daughters he sired?) imply he had multiple wives. ... This text records no specific displeasure about this. ... HOWEVER... when we heard of Gideon's seventy sons... the writer of Judges offered us that fact as an explanation... for what made the ugly fiascos in chapter 9... possible... *'for he had many wives'* (says 8:30). ... The writer seems to have put a certain negative cast

over that situation. Hence I suggest we may regard Jair with the same concern. ... This does not speak of noble character!

We don't need to condemn Jair for his success... his influence... or his evidently peaceful administration. ... But there is something about his character... that we might understand about him... which sets the tone for where the rest of this chapter and the next one will take us ... You see it seems to be a tendency of our human nature... to act out on our own... to secure for ourselves a sense of security and significance... In all our ways there is this subtle urge to secure our position... to display our status... to extend our influence... to guarantee our recognition. ... Often we make these attempts on our own... These are our own fleshly attempts. We want security and significance... but we don't seek it through the Lord. (And this will be the theme from here through the next chapter... the pursuit of security and significance apart from the Lord.)

Judges 10:5-6

"I've had a bad day. ... I had a flat tire on Highway 97 driving to Bend this morning..." ... If a husband said that to his wife... she would probably acknowledge that such an inconvenience would justify marking such a day in that manner. ... But suppose he said: *'I've had a bad day. ... I fell on the ice and popped a rib out of place... drank my coffee with soured milk... ripped my pants on the latch of the car door... had a flat tire on highway 97... a passing truck hit a nearby mud puddle as I was changing the tire and splattered my suit... got stopped by the highway patrol for speeding... the boss raked me over the coals for being late... and I didn't have a*

chance to eat lunch because my ATM card is missing from my wallet..." ...
His wife would surely concur; he *really* had had a bad day.

Judges 10:6 is like the second example. ... It does not – like the previous occasions when God raised up a judge... – merely state the fact that Israel sinned again and turned from the Lord. ... Here... it says they really committed apostasy. ... The writer of Judges piles up his statements so that you will see how intensely and totally Israel had fallen away from Yahweh: *'The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines; so they forsook the LORD and they did not serve him.'* ... Here is faithlessness stacked high. Israel's state is not merely critical but disastrous.

Israel served Baalim and Ashteroth, the gods of Syria and Zidon. Chemosh was the god of Moab. Children were burned in fire as a sacrifice to him. The Philistines worshiped Dagon, the fish god, and Baal-zebub, the lord of flies and prince of demons. These were the gods of the surrounding nations that had been defeated, yet, Israel is worshiping them. The spiral of rebellion continued deeper and was worse than before. God's people were worshiping anything that came their way except God. Rebellion will lead you to do things you never dreamed you would ever do. Man's tendency is to look for a substitute for God. The root of man's problem is his desire to secure security and significance – apart from God.

Why would his people choose to aggressively reject the infinite One and follow a Canaanite deity? ... The succinct answer is that Canaanite deities

seem to pay off more quickly... they appear to be a short-cut for giving you security and significance - sooner. ... What the Lord God is committed to is building character in us... bringing about change that lasts forever.

We might think of it as the difference between having relief and being renewed. ... When we're suffering with a problem... often what we are willing to settle for is short-term relief from the problem... or an anaesthetizing of the pain. ... What the infinite... limitless Lord God is interested in... is renewing us. ... It's the long... character-building work of making us different people. ... But what the limited Canaanite god will offer us... is perhaps short-term relief... some kind of anaesthesia... a way to set the problem aside and ignore it for the moment.

Canaanite gods offer the quick fix. That's the advantage of serving them. They promised that crops would grow if sacrifices and rituals were performed to their honor. And the ancient people of God in times of peace would often settle for the quick fix... for the same reasons that you and I are willing to do so. ... We want security and significance... but we don't want God's way for achieving it. ... God's way is a long route through character development.

Judges 10:7-8

The anger of the Lord was hot. ... Their sin was so great it kindled God's wrath until it was "*hot*." ... This was a Hebrew figure of speech meaning "*One's nose is burning*." Their sin was a stench in God's nostrils. ... In his

anger... God sold His children into slavery. ... He took his hands off them... and let them have what they insisted on having.

Verse 8 says that the enemies of Israel crushed and oppressed them. The wording is very strong... indicating that this time... the Lord has increased the intensity of His discipline on them... more than Israel's previous times of apostasy.

Eventually... and predictably... the Israelites cry out to the Lord for help. Surely this is what God was wanting to hear. ... But evidently... he has heard this song and dance before. ... This time... God will answer with a little history lesson... casting their unfaithfulness against the backdrop of His previous acts of deliverance.

Judges 10:10

When God chastens us in love and we're suffering because of our sins, it's easy to cry out to Him for deliverance and make all kinds of promises. But when we're comfortable and enjoying His blessings, we tend to forget God and assume that we can sin and get away with it. *Comfortable living often produces weak character.* "Happiness is not the end of life," said Henry Ward Beecher, "character is." But character is built when we make right decisions in life, and those decisions are made on the basis of the things that we value most. Since Israel didn't value the things of God, she ended up destroying her own character.

Judges 10:11-14

Oops! Once again it's, "Oh, Lord, deliver us. We're sorry, we've gotten ourselves in this mess again. Oh, gosh, we've really stepped in it this time. Please come and deliver us." Only instead of sending a deliverer as before, what does he say? "You've chosen another god. You've appealed to the Baals, Molech, Ashtaroth, Dagon, and the gods of the peoples around. You said that they were the ones you would serve. Well then, let them get you out of the trouble you're in. Are they strong enough? Where's the deliverance from them?" He reminds them of his acts of deliverance in the past, "Go back to the exodus from Egypt, to the period of wilderness wanderings, to the times of earlier judges. Over and over again you've abandoned me, gotten yourselves in trouble, and called out for help. And over and over again I've delivered you. Enough is enough. What would make you presume on me that I should do it again?"

For the people to abandon God was one thing, but for God to abandon His people was quite something else. *The greatest judgment God can send to His people is to let them pursue security and significance - their own way.*

'You cried out to me, I would save you... but you abandoned me.' Same song, sixteenth verse. The theology of bombshelter religion teaches that – of course – God will help you in your need, that he is – helpfully enough – incredibly naïve and hopelessly soft. He's like a great warm vending machine in the sky into which you need only drop a token or two of repentance before he spits out the relief you currently crave. Religion is a great game – you only need to know a few rules. And Yahweh is a great God – if you happen to need him and want to use him.

Yahweh must destroy these false images we fashion of Him. ... Israel apparently assumed that whenever things became too bad she could always go back to Yahweh... and here... He says that she cannot. ... There is a difference between the prodigal son of the New Testament... and Israel... here. ... Israel's sin is no longer a cycle... it is now a deep plunge. Israel must awake to its peril.

(Please listen carefully!) ... When we sin... confessing our sin to God is not enough. ... God does not accept just confession. ... He also demands repentance. ... If we merely confess sin and do not turn away from it... this reveals an insincere... deceptive heart... that is only trying to manipulate God. ... God knows that our confession is false... insincere... that we are only deceiving ourselves. ... To be forgiven... we must repent... turn away from our sin and turn back to God. ... Repenting—turning away from sin—is the only way God will ever accept us.

Judges 10:15-16

I don't think the Lord God was much impressed at all with the quality of their repentance. He sees that they are manipulative, rather than repentant. He rejected the first statement of repentance in verse 10. But they came back to him later and said in verse 15, "*We have sinned. Do to us whatever seems good to You.*" ... Now... if they had stopped right there... that would have been a sign of a broken heart. ... "Lord... all we can do is cast ourselves on your mercy. Do whatever seems good to You." ... But they don't stop there: "Do whatever seems good to You... only deliver us." But they don't even stop there: "Only deliver us today. *We want this... and we want it NOW!*"

They are not repenting of their sin in any deep or profound manner. They just want out of trouble.

Perhaps sometimes you want to say, "*Lord, I hate to bring this up again. I know we've been over this a lot of times, but I need help. I'm still weak, frightened, and burdened.*" Or we say, "*Lord, this time I really mean it! This time for sure I'm going to turn over my life to you; it's never going to be the same again. This time I'm serious.*" ... And as much as we know ourselves when we make such statements... we're telling the truth. ... But we don't really understand very much about ourselves at all. ... Yet... thankfully... the quality of our repentance is not the basis on which we're forgiven. ... It's the heart of God... which cannot bear the misery of His people... and so He acts to save. ... Our hope is anchored in His loving heart... for before we ever thought to seek Him out... He sought us out... and He'll continue to do so.

But... sometimes... like the Israelites... we cry out to the Lord and He doesn't seem to respond... at least not the way we want Him to respond... and He leaves us to lie in the bed we've made for ourselves. ... What then will we do? ... Perhaps... like the Israelites... we will confess our sins... repent... worship... and throw ourselves on the mercy of the Lord. And let's be very honest... We do all this... like the Israelites here... mostly to persuade Him to give us what we want.

What's it like to cry out, to confess, to repent, to worship, to throw yourself on the mercy of the Lord, and to feel that he is turning you away? ... Have you ever been there...? ... What do we resort to... at those times when we

feel as if we're doing all the right things and getting nowhere with God? ... We probably resort to the exact same behavior that we see Israel do. ... The Israelites take matters into their own hands.

If the Lord doesn't answer our cries, we may be inclined to do what the leaders of Gilead did: look for a quick fix. If the Lord doesn't give us what we want, we may be inclined to take matters into our own hands.

Sometimes, as in the case of the leaders of Gilead, the quick fix involves persuading an individual to come through for us. How do you find such an individual? Well, if the Lord has refused to answer you, you might be inclined to forget him completely and consult wisdom of the human sort. If so, then you're likely to seek out an individual of your own choosing, not the Lord's. You might pin your hopes on someone like Jephthah, a man with great strengths but equally great character flaws.

Nations, states, and cities make such choices. Companies, churches, and individuals make such choices. Desperate for victory or success or love, they value charisma over character.

The Ammonites were about to attack and Gilead was caught in a leadership vacuum. ... They could only go to the one despised and rejected by men... to Jephthah, the man nobody had wanted...

Judges 10:17-11:3

The material of 11:1-3 gives us the vital background about Jephthah. ... His problem was not his military ability but his mother. Gilead, Jephthah's

father, had an affair with a prostitute; Jephthah was born; Jephthah was the one who suffered. Gilead and his wife also had legitimate sons, who (by the time they were smart enough to think of inheritances) banished Jephthah since he, obviously, didn't 'belong'. ... Jephthah fled to the land around Tob, where the dregs collected themselves around him, a band of freebooting guerrillas led by a social outcast.

Here is this man with three hurdles to surmount before he can become a leader for his country: he is the son of a harlot; he has been exiled by his brethren; and he is the leader of a despised, rejected group. He is not a very likely man to be used; but, you see, God uses men like this. God moves in mysterious ways, and He chooses men that are despised in this world. God also humbles those whom He intends to use. He humbled Joseph, He humbled Moses, and He humbled David. Our Lord humbled Himself. He is "despised and rejected of men." He is the "Stone which the builders rejected," but which was made the head of the corner. His enemies said, "We will not have this Man reign over us." Yet God has highly exalted Him and given Him a name that is above every name.

Jephthah is despised, rejected, acquainted with sorrow and grief. He was alone except for one person... he had God. The Lord was enough to sustain him and meet his every need. He will meet your needs too.

Jephthah is not the only person to be rejected by his family. His life's pattern is repeated over and over again in Scripture. Little did Jephthah's brothers realize they were rejecting the future judge of Israel... a future Savior and deliverer. The same truth held for Joseph's life. He was driven away from his family and later promoted by God to be a savior.

Jephthah illustrates that God uses the lowly, weak, and foolish (1 Corinthians 1:28, 29). God not only wants men who can trust Him, but men whom He can trust! Despite Jephthah's spiritual immaturity, he was committed to God. His knowledge of the Lord was not deep, but it was real. Jephthah learned to depend upon the Lord in his life. We find that Jephthah used the personal name of God more than any other person in the book of Judges.

Judges 11:4-6

God did not “raise up” Jephthah, as he had raised up all of the previous judges... Now... for the first time... a leader was commissioned by the people... without seeking God’s approval — another sign of their incomplete repentance.

In their fleshly manner... their own way... apart from doing things God’s way... the elders were careful not to offer Jephthah too much. They invited him to come and be their “commander in chief” in this battle against the Ammonites.

Now... if we look back to the last chapter... Judges 10:18... the leaders had promised headship (*the Hebrew word is rō’š*) ... over all the inhabitants of Gilead to anyone who would volunteer to lead them in battle. Now... in chapter 11... what they offered Jephthah is something different... chieftainship (*qāṣîṅ is the Hebrew word in this offer.*) The word qāṣîṅ is relatively rare, occurring elsewhere only eight times. In contexts where it bears a sense more specific than “leader, man in authority,” it serves as a precise title for military leader. In this context the Gileadites were desperate

for a military leader. In presenting their case they were careful to offer him a lesser role than they had made available to full citizens of Gilead. It was enough that they had to beg one whom they had rejected now to come and lead them in battle. They could entrust themselves into his hands on a broader and more permanent basis.

Judges 11:7-8

OK... Now they increase the offer... They bring it back up to rō'sh ... You will be "President"... the rō'sh...!

Appealing to the worst of human motives, the leaders of Gilead simply call for a volunteer and then offer him the carrot of leadership over the entire region. But in the Book of Judges there are no volunteers, except for the rogue Abimelech in chap. 9. The reader has already learned from his life and rule the lethal effect of any approach to leadership that is based on and caters to personal ambition rather than the care and needs of those to be led. Nevertheless, as in the story of Abimelech, in the leadership style of Jephthah the reader will again be confronted with the tragic effects that arise from treating leadership as a matter of power rather than a call to service on behalf of those led.

Jephthah wanted reassurance of their respect, and so asked them to confirm their offer of his being their ruler when the war is over in Israel's favor. They forcefully reassured him of their offer by swearing by Jehovah that is was so.

Judges 11:9-11

Through this entire episode Yahweh's silence is deafening.

Rebuffed by the Lord, yet desperate for our own sense of security and significance... victory... success... or love... we sometimes pin our hopes on our self-efforts apart from God. ...And so often these efforts get tied to a particular individual with serious character flaws. ... If, so to speak, our “bargaining position” is so weak that we increase the offer before we even start negotiating, we might question whether we want whatever it is we’re bargaining for too much. At this point, we might want to ask, “What price victory? ... What price success? ... What price love?” ... What are you giving up to get what you think you need? ... What are you allowing into your life? ... What are you setting yourself up for? ... What are you becoming? ... What happens to your soul? ... Listen to Jesus:

Matthew 16:26 (ESV)

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

God not only reveals Himself to us by what He gives us... but also by what He doesn’t give us. ... When God doesn’t give you what you want, He wants to give you something deeper with Him. You don’t need what you think you need... you need what God is trying to give... something much better than the trinkets you want.

THE LORD IS COMMITTED TO BUILDING CHARACTER IN US