

Despised and Rejected

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 10:6-12:15

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Put away the palm branches.

This Palm Sunday, we're putting the palm branches away early. We began our service with praise—Jesus the King has come to save his people. What a reason to rejoice! But then Curt announced his plans to move to the Middle East. And while there's certainly reason to rejoice in this, there's also a justified sadness. To make matters worse, we now turn our attention to Jephthah. He's the fifth judge in the book of Judges, as we trace the slow descent to the basement of sin and idolatry and the Canaanization of Israel. But as we've seen so far, there are positive lessons to learn from the negative examples in Judges. This week is no different.

Our passage this morning is Judges 10:6-12:15. We won't read it all at once, but will walk through the passage as we go along. It's divided into six parts. These six parts will teach us four lessons. The six parts and the four lessons overlap quite a bit. I know that's not as neat and tidy as we'd like (6 sections/6 points). But I hope it will all become clear as we move through the text.

SECTION ONE (10:6-9)

Let's start with the first section of this passage, in 10:6-9. Here we're given the theological backdrop for the whole passage. We're told in 10:6 that "The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and Ashtaroth..."¹ But it doesn't stop there. The description of their rebellion is as bad as it's been. We're also told they served, "the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him." But not only is the description of Israel's sin as bad as it's been; the description of God's judgment is also as bad as it's been. In verses 7-8 we're told that "the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For 18 years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead."

Sin leads to slavery.

What's going on here? Here's the lesson we learn. Sin leads to slavery and slavery leads to sin.² Why do I say this? Back in 3:12-13, we saw that Israel's sin led to their bondage to the Ammonites. You would think that when a nation was oppressing and enslaving Israel that they would come to hate and reject that nation's gods. But instead of rejecting their gods, we see in 10:7-8 that they're serving the Ammonite gods again. It makes no sense! They're like a battered woman who keeps going back to her abuser. But we're no different. So often, when our sin leads to slavery, we end up wanting more of the sin that led to our slavery, not less. Think of someone who makes an idol of a relationship. When that relationship fails, what happens? Most people find another relationship immediately! As Tim Keller says, we fail to see that idolatry is the problem. We think "we're just not

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

² Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013.

giving enough devotion to the idol.” Sin leads to slavery. And that should lead us to repentance. But often, we just dive deeper into sin. We know this is true with a crack addict, for example. But have you ever noticed how it applies to your life? When the money that’s enslaved you isn’t enough, you go after more. When the approval of others isn’t enough, you do whatever it takes to get more. This is the first lesson we learn in the first section.

SECTION TWO (10:10-16)

Let’s look now at the second lesson, in the second section, in 10:10-16.

Manipulating God

When we try to manipulate God, we show that we don’t understand his grace. Look at verse 10. In response to their slavery, Israel cries out to God. Not only is the description of their sin and slavery more detailed than others we’ve seen thus far in Judges; their cry for help is more detailed too. Not only do they cry out; they also acknowledge that they’ve sinned against God and forsaken God and served the Baals. This sounds like true repentance. So why do I say that Israel is trying to manipulate God? Well, there’re a number of reasons. For one, God seems to indicate that their cry for help is no different than their previous cries for help. In verses 11-12, God lists seven nations he’s saved Israel from in the past, after they cried out to him. But as verse 13 says, each time they turned back to sin and idolatry. God knows this is no different than the other times. Therefore, he says in verses 13-14, “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.” Then in verse 15, Israel confesses again that they’ve sinned. And this time they even put their idols away (v. 16a). But I don’t believe this is genuine.³ I think they’re trying to manipulate God. They’re saying, “Look! It will be different this time, I promise.” But God is not moved by their manipulative, so-called repentance. In the last part of verse 16, we’re told that the LORD “became impatient over the misery of Israel.” God will act to save them, yet again. But it won’t be because of their manipulation. It will be because of his compassion for their misery. Even though we don’t deserve it, God loves his people. Thank God that “our hope doesn’t rest in the sincerity of our repentance but in the intensity of Yahweh’s compassion.”⁴ God acts according to his love and grace; not because we talk him into it!

SECTION THREE (10:17-11:11)

Another reason I’m convinced that Israel is trying to manipulate God comes out in the third section of this passage, in 10:17-11:11. In verse 17, when the Ammonites are encamped at Gilead, the leaders of Gilead try to secure a person to save them from imminent defeat. They recruit Jephthah (who, by the way, is himself a master manipulator). And the way they go about recruiting Jephthah is also manipulative. And their negotiation with Jephthah parallels Israel’s negotiation with God very closely.⁵ As I describe the manipulation of Gilead’s leaders, I think you’ll be convinced that Israel is also trying to manipulate God.

³ Contra Keller

⁴ Davis, Dale Ralph. *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007.

⁵ Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2012;

Webb, Barry G. *Judges and Ruth: God in Chaos*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway 2015;

Block, Daniel Isaac. *Judges, Ruth*. Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999;

Younger, K. Lawson. *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002;

Davis; Keller.

Jephthah's Background

But before we look at the interaction between the leaders of Gilead and Jephthah, we need to take some time to answer the question, who is Jephthah? His background provides the necessary background for understanding the rest of this passage. In 11:1, we see that Jephthah was the son of Gilead and he was a mighty warrior. But what made him mighty? It was the school of hard knocks. You see, Gilead had a number of sons, but Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. And when his brothers grew up they despised and rejected Jephthah. They didn't want him getting his filthy bastard-paws on their inheritance money. So, they likely took him before the elders of the city and made a case that he was an illegitimate son and, therefore, had no rights to an inheritance.⁶ Apparently the elders of the city agreed and they banished him (v. 2). Can you imagine the hurt and damage this would have caused? Being abandoned by your own family is a wound that is hard to heal. Some of you here know what it's like. And how did Jephthah deal with this hurt and rejection? He moved away to Tob and rose up in the ranks of organized crime. Verse 3 says, he gathered worthless men around him. 'These are criminals!'⁷ And Jephthah is the crime boss. He's the mafia don. Or the captain of the pirate ship, so to speak.⁸ This is the stuff that crime movies are made of. The wounded child becomes the hardened criminal.

Parallel Stories

This is Jephthah's background. And it's important if we're going to understand the parallels between his interaction with the elders of Gilead and Israel's interaction with God. In verse 5, the elders of Gilead—the same elders that rejected Jephthah and banished him—now come to Jephthah and ask him to bail them out of their troubles with the Ammonites. This is parallel to the Israelites who had rejected God, but come to him to rescue them from their slavery (10:10). But verse 7 shows us that Jephthah knew the elders were trying to use and manipulate him and so he rejects their offer.⁹ "Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?'" This is parallel to God's response to the Israelites. He told them he would save them no more (10:13). In verse 8, the elders of Gilead say they've changed their attitude about Jephthah and now are willing to make Jephthah head over Gilead if he will fight for them. This is parallel to the Israelites who told God they had changed and would now put their idols away (10:16a). The difference in the stories is that Jephthah is willing to negotiate with the elders of Gilead. In verse 9, he says that he will fight for them if they'll give him what he wants. He's willing to be manipulated. But God isn't willing to be manipulated by the Israelites (10:16b). The point is clear. Like the elders of Gilead, Israel is trying to manipulate God. But, friends, it's important to note that God will not be manipulated. That's not how he works.

Application

How often do we say to God something like this? "God, if you'll just bail me out of this situation, I'll stop sinning, I'll start reading my Bible and praying more." When we do this, we show that we don't understand God's grace. God saves us because he loves his people. And he saves us based on what he's done for us in Christ, not what we do for him. Sure, we're called to put away idols and serve God; but not to earn God's favor. Rather, we serve God because we already have God's favor through faith in Christ. This is the lesson we learn from the second and third section.

⁶ Younger

⁷ Younger

⁸ Keller

⁹ Davis

SECTION FOUR (11:12-32)

Let's now turn to the fourth section, in 11:12-32.

God uses what man has rejected.

The lesson we learn from the fourth section actually builds on what we've seen in the first three. God uses what man has rejected to rescue his people. So far, we've not been told explicitly that God raised Jephthah up. But in 11:29 we're told that the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah. So we know that God is using Jephthah to rescue his people from the Ammonites. And it's an amazing fact that God uses what men have rejected in order to rescue his people. This has been true throughout Judges. God's people have rejected him, but he—the rejected One—still rescues his people. Now we see this principle embodied in Jephthah. The leaders of Gilead go to one despised and rejected by men for deliverance. Later, we'll see that Jephthah is a great sinner. But before he ever sinned, he was sinned against. He suffered at the hands of sinful men. The same was true with Jesus—the Savior of the world. He was scorned by the ones he came to save. He came to his own, but they rejected him. He was tried by sinful men, torn and beaten, then nailed to a cross of wood. But God chose what men had rejected to save us from our sin.

All of us are like the Jews Peter spoke to in Acts 2. We have crucified Jesus (2:23). It was our sin that nailed him to the cross. Nevertheless, if we want to be saved from our sin, we must now repent of our sin and believe in the same Jesus we rejected (2:38).¹⁰ All of us are like the elders of Gilead. We need to call on the one we rejected.

Jephthah's Faith

The fourth section gives the details of what led up to the defeat of the Ammonites. I'm not going to spend much time on this fourth section. I'll simply say a couple of things. For one, in keeping with all of the deliberation and negotiation that's gone on in this story, Jephthah starts out with diplomacy. He tries to solve things with his words instead of with his fists. He tries to reason with the king of Ammon. And through this deliberation, he shows his faith in God. This section is probably the only reason Jephthah is included in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11. But his talk doesn't work. And so, Jephthah leads his army in battle against the Ammonites and the LORD secures the victory. We see this in verse 32. But although Jephthah does display some faith in this passage, his faith is mixed with unbelief and idolatry. And that's where I want to spend the rest of our time this morning.

SECTION FIVE (11:29-40)

Jephthah's lack of faith and idolatry comes out in sections five and six.

Hurt people hurt people.

And these last sections teach us our fourth lesson. So often, hurt people hurt other people in order to find security and significance. This lesson is first drawn out in section five, which is often titled "Jephthah's Tragic Vow." Even though we know the Spirit of the LORD is upon Jephthah (v. 29) and that the LORD will secure the victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah seems to be ignorant of this in verses 29-40. In verses 30-31 Jephthah makes a vow to sacrifice a human being from his

¹⁰ Davis

household, if God will give him victory in battle. He's manipulating God, just like the Israelites! "And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever [or whoever] comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." Some have said that Jephthah is simply offering God an animal sacrifice,¹¹ but I don't think that's the case. Let me offer three reasons why. For one, if that were the case, then why did he actually go through with sacrificing his daughter in verse 39? The law would have let him off the hook for making a mistake in his vow (Lev. 27:1-8).¹² Also, animals wouldn't be kept behind the doors of your house.¹³ Third, the word "meet" in verse 31 generally applies to humans, not animals.¹⁴ I don't think Jephthah was offering God an animal sacrifice. I think he was offering God a human sacrifice. This is what the gods of the Canaanites required if you wanted something big. And Jephthah is treating the God of grace like a Canaanite god. Now I admit, he probably didn't think his daughter would walk through the doors of his house. Maybe he thought it would be a servant.¹⁵ But the point is the same. Jephthah is willing to sacrifice a human being to secure his victory. He's willing to hurt someone in order to be secure, as head over Gilead. He's willing to do whatever it takes to keep from being a loser again. He wants to keep his position as king of the hill!

Application

One of the ways people who've been hurt respond to their hurt is by making a god out of control. If they can just maintain control, they can keep themselves from being hurt again. And that desire for security and control can lead a person to even sacrifice their own children. Jephthah was willing to do so. What about you? How many career-driven men do the same? The most driven people are often people who are recovering from past hurts. Maybe in their childhood they were abused or neglected. And this drives them to succeed, to prove that they're worth something. And this drive can be so intense that they're willing to hurt others to make it to the top, whether that's neglecting their own family or stomping on others who are getting in the way of their success.

SECTION SIX (12:1-7)

Jephthah was not only willing to hurt his own family in order to deal with his past hurts and to secure his place at the top. He was also willing to hurt his fellow Israelites to preserve his pride. This comes out in the sixth section of the passage in 12:1-7. In 12:1, we see that the Ephraimites are pouting because they didn't get a piece of the action (cf. 8:1-3). They were the big shots in that area of Israel and didn't like being left out. So they threatened to burn Jephthah's house down (v. 1). They also mocked and ridiculed the Gileadites. They call them fugitives of Ephraim (v. 4). Essentially, they're saying that the Gileadites are a bastard tribe, an illegitimate tribe of Ephraim and Manasseh. As you can imagine, this hits a sore spot with Jephthah. Jephthah knows what it's like to be called an illegitimate, bastard child. He'll have none of this ridicule. So he slaughters 42,000 Ephraimites.

Hurt people hurt people. And in this situation, the harm done is done to those close to him. He hurts those within his own house when he sacrifices his daughter. And he hurts those within his

¹¹ Younger

¹² Younger

¹³ Keller, *contra* Younger

¹⁴ Webb, *The Book of Judges*.

¹⁵ Webb, *The Book of Judges*.

own country when he kills the Ephraimites. And the harm done to his own people is worse than the harm done to the Ammonites.

Application

Isn't the same true with us? We often hurt the ones we love best. Our selfish ambition leads us to hurt people, even those within our own families and our own churches. When we're sinned against, our tendency is to respond by sinning against others. Maybe we kick the proverbial dog. Or maybe we yell at our wife. Or maybe we slander our co-worker. Some even abuse their children. Behind all of this is a desire to seek vindication for our hurt. But it doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to respond to the sin of others by sinning against others. We can follow the way of Jesus.

He opened not his mouth.

Jesus was also despised and rejected. He was sinned against. Yet he didn't lash out in retaliation. He didn't revile. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth (Isa. 53:7). Jesus looked to his Father, when he was opposed. He looked for the glory that comes from God, not from man. He endured the cross for the crown that awaited him.

John Piper once said that sin is what we do when our hearts are not satisfied with God. Another person has said that the reason we look to idols is to answer the questions that God has already answered: Am I loved? Am I valuable? Am I significant? God has answered all of these questions in Jesus Christ. Beneath the cross of Jesus, we find security. Beneath the cross we find worth. Beneath the cross we find we're desirable. Beneath the cross we find a family that loves us. Beneath the cross we find satisfaction. We don't have to look to security and significance from the things of this earth. We don't have to make our way in this world. We don't have to sin against others when we're sinned against. That's not the way grace works. We simply trust in God and what he's done in Christ. It's beneath the cross of Jesus that we are called to gladly live our lives.