

June 11/12, 2022

## Hero or Villain?

*Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series*

**Judges 11:29-12:15**

Pastor Bryan Clark

The greatest baseball players in history who were in the Baseball Hall of Fame, every time they stepped up to the plate, the best of the best failed over 60% of the time. So, when you think about the *Faith* Hall of Fame, what do you think? Maybe a lot of people imagine these great figures of faith had it all together, and always trusted God. But that's simply not the truth. As a matter of fact, all their stories are full of messes. Whether you're talking about Noah, Abraham, or Sarah, or Jacob, or David, or Moses, or Rahab, they have these great moments of faith that leave us breathless. But they also have these moments that leave us scratching our heads thinking, "What were you people thinking?" Their stories are full of messes, maybe like yours or mine. And certainly, like Jephthah's.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Judges, Chapter 11. This summer we're working our way through the book of Judges. We're in the middle of the Jephthah story. We left it last week where the king of Ammon is determined to fight a war with the people of Gilead. So, we pick it up then in verse 29:

**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. Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, 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." So Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. 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. (\*NASB, Judges 11:29-33)**

So, if you've been with us in our study of Judges, this is familiar language. The Spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah in order to empower him to deliver the people of Israel. Then it begins to describe his journey on the east side of the Jordan, from the south to the north, picking up troops, then crossing over to fight with the Ammonites. In the midst of that, then we're told he makes this vow—not that unusual in the Old Testament. The question is, "What exactly did he vow?" Well, we'll get to that, but I'm going to save that more for the end. But he makes this vow before God. And then in verse 32, as a result of that, Jephthah goes to battle with the Ammonites. The text is clear. God—the Lord Yahweh—gives him a great victory. The Ammonites are completely defeated, and the Gileadites win. Verse 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. 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.” 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.” 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.” 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. 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, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year. (Vs. 34-40)

So Jephthah wins this great battle. He goes back home, and the first thing out of the doors of his house is his daughter, his one and only daughter. As a matter of fact, it’s his one and only child, and this breaks his heart. It’s a bit of a mystery, who or what he was expecting, but clearly not his daughter. He grieves probably for a couple of reasons. One is because he loves his daughter, but two, because the daughter is all he had. There’s no mention of a wife. Perhaps she has died by this time. But there will be no one to carry on Jephthah’s family line. This will be it. So probably all of that is a part of the grieving. She responds remarkably and encourages him to be true to his vow. “Yahweh’s given you this great victory; keep your vow. Just let me go to the mountains a couple of months to grieve my virginity.” She’s not married; she’ll never have children, so her dad agrees. She goes away for two months, comes back, and the text just simply tells us he fulfilled the vow. And then it ends with this reminder that for years, once a year the Gileadite women would remember and **commemorate**—not so much to lament. The word means *to retell the story, to commemorate this great victory of Jephthah and what has transpired*. We know that this commemoration did not last a long time, but it did last for obviously some years. Like I said, we’ll come back to that. I want to just finish the Jephthah story first. So, chapter 12, verse 1:

**Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you.” Jephthah said to them, “I and my people were at great strife with the sons of Ammon; when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand. When I saw that you would not deliver *me*, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?”** Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, “You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim *and* in the midst of Manasseh.” The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. And it happened when *any of* the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead would say to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he said, “No,” then they would say to him, “Say now, ‘Shibboleth.’” But he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it correctly. Then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. Thus there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim. (Judges 12:1-6)

So this is somewhat familiar. When Gideon won a great battle, the same tribe—the people of Ephraim—a significant tribe in Israel, in a similar way came forward. They didn't like being upstaged. They didn't like it that Gideon won a victory without them, and they wanted a piece of the action. So Gideon conceded, and kind of smoothed it out. But Jephthah is not Gideon. So the men of Ephraim came and said, “What do you think you're doing? You crossed over into our territory and you went into battle without asking us.” Now they've won this great battle; Ephraim has been upstaged, and they really don't like that. So they say to Jephthah, “You know, we're going to burn your house down.” Essentially what they're saying is, “Jephthah, you're the son of a prostitute. You have no value; you're a loser. What do you think you're doing? You're not one of us. So we're just going to burn your house down.” Now, just to be clear, for eighteen long years, the Ammonites have oppressed all of these people. Life has been miserable. The men of Ephraim didn't do anything, so Jephthah steps up, empowered by the Spirit of the Lord, wins a great victory, and they all live in safety and freedom. And their way of saying thanks is, “We're going to burn your house down.” So Jephthah says, “You know, I did call to you, and we asked you for help. You didn't answer, and when it became obvious you weren't going to help us, then I risked my own life, and we did it ourselves, empowered by the Spirit of God. Yahweh gave us this great victory, so I don't understand now why you're so mad at us.”

The text goes on to say they entered into this civil war, and at the root of this is the people of Ephraim referred to the Gileadites as fugitives. Now for us, that doesn't sound like that big a deal, but in the Hebrew it's a racial slur. It's basically saying, “You are wannabes. You're not from Ephraim, and you're not from Manasseh, you are wannabes. Therefore, you don't really belong.” Of course, this taps into Jephthah's whole story.

It's interesting when you hear people talk, especially in our culture, it sometimes sounds like the only racial tension that has ever existed is between people whose skin color is black and white. But the reality is that there has been racial tension in the world all throughout the existence of people. And oftentimes it's between people of the same skin color, which is what's happening here. These are different tribes, but they're all Jewish. So, you have the people of Ephraim; you have the people of Manasseh; you have the Gileadites—a little bit similar to here where you have people in the Midwest, you have people in the South, you have people on the East Coast, and we all talk a little bit different.

So that's the deal. Jephthah and the Gileadites win a great victory. So there are stragglers, fugitives—kind of used in a sarcastic way—from Ephraim who want to cross back over the Jordan and get back into their own land. But the Gileadites don't want them to because they're going to go back and regroup and attack again. And so they put forward a test. They ask them to say the word **Shibboleth** because they know if you're from Ephraim you can't say the ‘sh’ sound. So when they say **Sibboleth** instead, that is an indicator they're from Ephraim, and they kill them. So the text ends with the Gileadites winning a great victory. What we do know is the tribe of Ephraim never really recovered from all this. It wraps up the story in verse 7:

**Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.**

This ended the Jephthah story. It's followed by three, what we would call, minor judges. Minor because we simply don't know anything about their stories. The details in their stories simply indicate times of peace and prosperity. I'll let you read that on your own for the sake of time, but then in chapter 13, we will pick up the beginning of the next story, of the next very confusing, complicated judge, which we will start next week.

For the remainder of the morning, I just want to go back to Jephthah's vow. Typically, when people hear the story of Jephthah, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Jephthah's vow! So what is it? Just to put things in perspective, there are two verses about the battle with the Ammonites. Most of the chapter is focused on this vow. That's clearly the point of focus in the chapter. So the real discussion boils down to this: "Did Jephthah offer his daughter as a human sacrifice? Or did he offer his daughter to the Lord, to serve at the tabernacle the duration of her days? I would say the majority opinion among scholars is that Jephthah lost his nerve, began to panic, or he was a schemer and a manipulator and was trying to manipulate Yahweh God. Either way, he made a tragic vow, and ended up offering his daughter as a human sacrifice. In my opinion, there are lots of problems with that view. There are many other scholars that take a different view. And that is that what he ended up doing, was offering his daughter to serve at the tabernacle in Shiloh for the duration of her days. So the big question is, "Was Jephthah a villain or a great hero, or something in between?"

As we begin to talk about this, you have maybe looked at your Bible, and there may be a paragraph heading that says something like *Jephthah's Tragic Vow*. It's good to understand that's not part of the inspired Scripture. That was put in there by an editor. That's someone's opinion. But it certainly skews how we interpret the text. So, if you could kindly erase that, at least in your mind, and let's at least give the text a fair shot. What we know, just from the text, is that the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jephthah. He enters into the battle, but there's virtually no mention of him losing his nerve, or becoming fearful, or scheming, or being manipulative. He makes a vow—not so unusual.

As a matter of fact, at the end of the time of the judges, there's a woman by the name of Hannah who makes a vow to the Lord, and everybody praises that vow. And she ends up giving her son to the tabernacle to serve there, the duration of his days. I think that's what Jephthah, at this point does. I think Jephthah just makes a vow. The next thing you know they're in battle. God gives him a great victory, and his daughter comes out. Jephthah keeps the vow, and the next thing you know, chapter 12, and more victories. So, if you're just taking the text at face value, I don't see a single negative word about Jephthah. He doesn't lose the battle. He's not said to be evil, or that he displeases God. There literally is not a negative word about Jephthah anywhere in his story in Judges. One of the things that's very helpful is in verse 31, when it says, "**When I returned in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's and ...**" The Hebrew there also allows the interpretation: *it shall be the Lord's or*. It could be translated either way "**...or I will offer it up as a burnt offering.**"

So Jephthah could be saying, "If it's a person, I will *dedicate* that person to the Lord. If it's an animal, then I will *sacrifice* it to the Lord." One of the things that's a real challenge for me to swallow is, Jephthah is not making this vow to a Canaanite God. There's nothing that says Jephthah was filled with all kinds of pagan idolatry. As a matter of fact, this is a season for the Gileadites where they had put away all their pagan idols and they had repented, and they had surrendered to

God. That's the whole point. That's why God is raising up Jephthah and empowering him to deliver his people.

Last week we learned that Jephthah had a very clear understanding of Israel's history—of Moses coming out of the land, how Moses negotiated with the Edomites and the Moabites, and the whole story of how they ended up with the land, quite impressive, really. So are we really to believe that Jephthah has that depth of knowledge of the history of his people, but is absolutely clueless that Yahweh strictly forbid the offering of human sacrifices? Was he really so clueless and out of touch, that he came to Yahweh thinking the promise of a human sacrifice would gain Yahweh's favor? There is no historical evidence that during the time of the judges, the Israelites *ever* offered a human sacrifice. It does happen occasionally—hundreds of years later—at the end of the time of the kings. It's very difficult to imagine that Jephthah was that out of touch, that he actually thought that's what God wanted, and would gain God's favor.

So he comes home. The way these houses were built, it is possible than an animal or a person could come out the doors of the home. So I don't know who he was expecting, or what he was expecting, but clearly from the text, he wasn't expecting it to be his daughter. So he's grieved. He loves his daughter. As I said before, he loves his daughter and recognizes if he keeps the vow, she will not get married; she will not have children. This is the end of the line of Jephthah. But the way his daughter responds is really impressive. She is clear that Yahweh has given her father the victory. “Keep your vow. Yahweh has avenged the Gileadites over the sons of Ammon.” She goes away to the mountain to mourn her virginity. It's a matter of fact; the text repeats that she's mourning her virginity. She comes back, and all that is said is that her father kept his vow. And then it adds this rather strange line. **And she had no relations with a man.** It seems to me, if she knew she was going to be a human sacrifice, she'd be concerned about more than just her virginity. But it's also a very strange way to end the story. If Jephthah just offered her as a human sacrifice and she's dead, doesn't it seem rather obvious that then she didn't have relations with a man? But think about it in the context of dedicating his daughter to serve the rest of her life at the tabernacle in Shiloh. She'll remain a virgin; she'll have no relations with a man. It's not so dissimilar from Hannah's vow, “God, if you give me a son, I will dedicate him the rest of his life to serve you at the tabernacle at Shiloh.” I think that's what Jephthah did. I think of the **yearly custom to commemorate**, would you commemorate something so offensive and heinous to God as a human sacrifice? Well, I think what was happening is these women would go to Shiloh, and they would visit Jephthah's daughter there, and they would rehearse the story. They'd **commemorate**; they would celebrate that God gave Jephthah a great victory, and it lasted as long as she lived there. Once she died, there was no reason to go, and the commemoration then died off.

You get then to chapter 12, and it's more victories. It's just very difficult to imagine that Jephthah would have done something so offensive to God, and nothing is said. Maybe just a little editorial comment? “What he did was evil in the sight of God?” “What he did, displeased God?” But...nothing! As a matter of fact, everything said in the text about Jephthah is positive.

One more point worth making. If, in his hour of faith, Jephthah became either so fearful or so manipulative that he made this tragic vow, what is he doing in Hebrews 11 *Faith Hall of Fame*? In other words, what was his great moment of faith, if, in that moment, he was so fearful he made this terrible, tragic vow? Jephthah's story is messy. They're all messy. You finally get to the David

story, and the people finally think this is the king we've always waited for, and David blows it and makes a mess.

As I mentioned last week, each of these judges are types. They are little glimpses of the longing for the one true deliverer...savior...hero to come. So right after Hebrews 11, with all these messy stories, you get to chapter 12, with a writer at the beginning of the chapter saying that *You need to fix your eyes on Jesus, the one true Savior, the one true hero, the one true deliverer*. Who is that one true King, that deliverer that your heart longs for? **Fix your eyes on Jesus, the *author and perfecter of your faith*.**

Think about this. Imagine Jephthah is sitting here with us this morning. And imagine the story is as I've suggested. The son of a prostitute ends up having such great faith that the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him; God gives him great victory. He dedicates his daughter to serve at the tabernacle. He ends up in the Hall of Fame, but 3000 plus years later, you have a bunch of people in their air-conditioned offices, and their air-conditioned auditoriums, who have never lived in the ancient world, have no idea what it's like to fight in those violent cultures, have never been through any of that, casting judgment on him and calling him a villain. But that's sometimes how it goes.

So what about your story? Have you ever found yourself misunderstood? You're just trying to do the right thing, but people falsely accuse you; people judge you; people attack you; people say things that aren't true about you. Maybe your story looks a little bit like the situation with the men of Ephraim. You're just trying to do the right thing. But there are other people who are so filled with their own messes and their own insecurities and their own anger, that they turn and they attack you because they don't know what else to do. Or maybe, as we talked about last week, on your resume there are just times when you lost your way, times when you got confused, times when you just really messed up. You left people scratching their heads thinking, "What in the world were you thinking?" What caused people to be listed in Hebrews 11—the Faith Hall of Fame—was not that they didn't have messes. It's not that they weren't falsely accused. It's not that they were misunderstood. It's not any of that. It's that time and time again, they persevered. They got up off the ground, they dusted themselves off, they got back in the saddle, and they chose again to trust God. With remarkable faith, again and again, they get back up, they get back in the saddle, and they believe that God can still use them.

So what about you? Here's what I know. There's nothing about your past, you can change. There's nothing you can undo. You can't go back and change any of that. It's past! You can't do anything about what other people say. You can't do anything about other people's judgments and other people's attacks. And if you get stuck in all that, you just keep wasting one day after another. What we do know is, we have today. Every day is a gift. You don't get it back. Why waste another day dwelling on the past? Why waste another day dwelling on things you can't change? Whatever it is that holds you back, it's time to get up, dust yourself off, get back in the saddle and believe God will be faithful. Trust in His grace and His forgiveness. Trust that your reputation is ultimately in God's hands. And trust that once again, God will be faithful.

So what would it look like for you today, to do the right thing? What would it look like for you today, to trust Him? What would it look like for you today, to finally dust yourself off, get back in the saddle, believe God will be faithful and that He can use you to do something to change the

world? We've wasted enough days. It's time to believe God will be faithful. Let's get back in the saddle. Let's trust him. There's a reason why this series in Judges is called *Messes. Choices. Faithful God*. My prayer is that you will choose to trust Him. Because I can assure you, He's not done with you.

*Our Father, we're thankful this morning for Your faithfulness. God, we read through Hebrews 11 and those stories, they're all a mess. Great moments of faith and puzzling choices that make no sense to us. But not so different than our own stories. God, whatever it is that's been part of our story, may we today be willing to step back into the saddle, to trust You to be faithful, and to use us to make a difference in this world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,  
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.  
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512  
Copyright 2022 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

Video:

Pretty much since I was five years old...wow, I'm crying already. I was pretty much taking care of myself since I was about five years old. And when I mean take care of myself, I mean like brushing my hair and putting it up for school and figuring out what to wear. Sometimes my mom would leave clothes out for me to wear but that was very rare. That was my life as a very little girl.

Going into fifth grade was when it got really bad. I was being ignored not only by students, but by teachers too. Like I was pushed against lockers; rumors were spread; it was just a very hard moment in a little girl's life who's just trying to figure out what's going on. I spiraled into this awful phase of depression and anxiety at 10 years old. And it was really bad. It made me very angry at God. I was involved in Awana as a little girl, and I knew of God, but I was so angry, and I was like, "Why are You putting me through this?"

At that point I was really figuring out what my mom was doing and, to simply put it, my mom was a drug addict. Going into sixth grade, we ended up being homeless for a while and we were living in a car. My mom left me in our evicted apartment. A day went along and I did not see her; I did not hear from her. There was no food or running water in that apartment. So, I was stuck, and I

didn't know what to do. And so I decided to go down to Casey's, and there was a sheriff waiting for me who said, "Hannah, I'm here to help you. Let's try to like figure this out."

After my dad saved me, school got better for me. I was top of my class, and I really felt confident in myself. I felt like I didn't need anybody. But until I got to college, I was making some really bad choices. And when I moved to Lincoln, I started talking to this guy, and he started talking about God. And in my mind, I'm like, "Well, I already know about God." He took me to church. After the sermon, I spoke to the pastor, and he drew me a picture. One cliff had me on it, the other cliff had God on it. And he said, "You can't get to God this way because you have to be perfect." And then he drew a ladder and he said, "This ladder is Jesus and His sacrifice and all you have to do is accept that. Do you want to do that?" And I said, "Yes." And he prayed with me. I repeated his prayer with him, and all my shakiness and my anxiousness went away. It was a type of peace I have never felt in my entire life.

For most of my life, I was never in control of anything at all. And then for part of my life, the feeling of being in control was overpowering. And it was something that I yearn for every day. And then just recently, God said, "No, I'm in control," and basically offered His hand to me and I took it. No matter what you go through, and no matter who you are and what you've done, God loves you so much. He just wants you to take His hand and you will be amazed at where He takes you.