

*And now, the end is near  
And so I face the final curtain  
My friend, I'll say it clear  
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain  
I've lived a life that's full  
I've traveled each and every highway  
But more, much more than this  
I did it my way  
Regrets, I've had a few  
But then again, too few to mention  
I did what I had to do  
And saw it through without exemption  
I planned each charted course  
Each careful step along the byway  
And more, much more than this  
I did it my way*

We're continuing our series on the book of Judges, called the Gospel According to Judges. If you remember as Rick and I have mentioned, the book of Judges is a unique form of narrative literature. It's not your typical play-by-play recounting of events. The book of Judges is intensely theological. It's a series of events and historical information organized in such a way as to make a theological point. That point is that God's people have a problem that no human being can solve and without a God-sent solution, they will just get worse and worse.

The way the author of Judges makes this point is by organizing the narrative into cycles. Each cycle begins with Israel in trouble because of their sin, pleading for help, God's raising a deliverer who rescues them from their enemy where they then enjoy peace for a few years before falling back into sin again. The cycle we're tackling this morning is contained in chapters 10-12. The enemy that is oppressing Israel is the Ammonites and the judge that God uses to deliver his people is Jephthah.

Now, before we get into the details, I want to draw attention to what sets this cycle apart from the others. We're used to these cycles centering on big battles, unusual people, miraculous signs – you know, the things that make for great VBS lessons. But this one is different in that it centers more on the dialogue than the big battles and God is almost completely absent. He speaks at the beginning and is made reference to on a number of occasions, but there is no sense that God raised up Jephthah or that Israel got counsel from God to do anything that they did. And this gives us great insight into what Judges 10-12 are all about.

### **Intro (10:6-18)**

In chapter 10, we find Israel in trouble again because they had forsaken the Lord.

[read vs. 10-16]

So the Israelites cry out to God. And then God replies. This is the only time in this story that God speaks and what he says is surprising. He recounts in the greatest detail in the book of Judges how expansive their rebellion is. And then he tells them to cry out to the gods they have chosen because they have more chance of saving you than I do. Now this is the last word Israel gets from God, though we know from verse 16 that God is beginning to get impatient with the oppression of his people. This comes into play more later.

Well then, what do the people do?

[verse 17-18]

They come together and begin making plans for their own salvation, which indicates that the repentance they gave lip service to earlier was probably not sincere. Israel now, faced with a difficult scenario, opts to not trust God's promises or do what he says but to take matters into their own hands.

The rest of the narrative is a demonstration of what happens when we take matters into our own hands, when God does not factor into the equation of our decision making or sin fighting. Really, Israel lives out in front of our eyes what anyone's life apart from God becomes: a series of negotiations, or a mixture of common sense, logic, intelligence, and experience that bring us to a conclusion that seems to make the most sense. It's the secular solution to our problems. And too often we as Christians are guilty of a secular Christianity where we go through life just doing what is logical without ever factoring God into our decision making or sin fighting.

## **SECULAR CHRISTIANITY**

Israel's story plays out around 4 different negotiations. I'm going to take us through each of them briefly, make a few comments along the way, and then bring us to 3 concluding observations at the end.

### **Negotiation 1: A mutual agreement (11:1-11)**

Israel, faced with a difficult scenario, says, "If God's not going to help us, than we've got to help ourselves. The first order of business: we need a leader." So they go to a man named Jephthah.

Jephthah is an interesting character. His story is laid in the first 3 verses of chapter 11. He's from a prominent family, but his mother is a prostitute. So he's an illegitimate son. It doesn't take long before his half brothers put two and two together and kick him out to make sure he doesn't get any of the family's inheritance. But Jephthah is a strong warrior and leader and he quickly rallies around himself a band of worthless men.

It's to this man that Israel goes: a man who has no credentials spiritually, but is a logical choice because he's a great leader and warrior.

[read vs. 6-9)

A mutual agreement is made. Israel gets what they want (their land and freedom back) and Jephthah gets what he wants (acceptance and blessing). Win-win, right? It seems that way.

### **Negotiation 2: A logical argument (11:12-28)**

Now Jephthah is faced with his first hurdle: the Ammonites. His first order of business is to send them a letter and see if he can work things out.

[read vs. 12-16]

Then Jephthah goes on a very long explanation of how Israel tried to go peaceably through Edom and Moab, but they wouldn't let them through. So they went around the long way and came to the Amorites (not to be confused with the Ammonites), who answered the request with all-out war. God gave Israel the victory, the land was theirs. Then Jephthah says...

[read vs. 23-28]

So Jephthah brings a solid argument to bear here. He makes the case that Ammonites have no right to attack Israel for these reasons: God gave us this land and your god gave you your land and nobody (including the Ammonites) has had any problem with us being here for the last 300 years.

By all accounts, this should work. But logic has no effect on sinful hearts. The heart wants what the heart wants. The Ammonites wanted more land. It didn't have to make sense. This is true of our sanctification, it's true of evangelism, and it's painfully obvious in our culture. We don't grow up into Christ by filling our heads with knowledge, but by daily repentance and reliance on the Spirit.

Well, too bad Jephthah didn't get the memo because next he tries to negotiate with God and it ends very badly.

### **Negotiation 3: A tragic misstep (11:29-40)**

[read vs. 29-35]

This has to be one of the most tragic mistakes in all of Scripture. The wording in Hebrew in verse 31 is more literally understood to be "whoever." Now, Jephthah didn't know that it would end up being his daughter, but he did intend for it to be a person. So Jephthah makes a deal with God: you do me this big favor and I'll give you a big sacrifice. Win-win, right? Without trusting in the promises of God and just relying on his own logic, Jephthah has made a terrible mistake.

### **Negotiation 4: A real mess (12:1-7)**

This last negotiation shows the fruit of a life lived with God factoring into our decision-making. I won't read it to save time, but, to summarize, Ephraim is angry that Jephthah didn't include them in the battle against Ammon. Jephthah again tries to appease the situation with a solid argument, but again it doesn't work. They go into battle and Jephthah absolutely destroys them.

Because Israel did it their way, they got rid of their foreign enemy but ended making an enemy of their own nation. They ended up with an effective leader, but one whose line couldn't continue because he killed it off. They ended up in a worse situation than when they started. You can't fight infection with infection. The blind can't lead the blind.

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## 1. Secular Christianity doesn't work

If being a Christian does not merely mean being religious or believing a certain set of theological ideas or having a conservative political position or just coming from a certain tradition but means being changed at the level of identity, then being a Christian means that God defines every part of your being and every moment of your life. I fear that we fall into this trap of being Sunday morning Christians, where God is our God on Sunday mornings but not Monday mornings or God during our quiet times but not throughout the rest of the day or God during the big things of life but not the small ones.

- *1 Peter 2:9-10 – “<sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

Does such an identity-changing reality leave any room for us to “go it alone”? Is it not clear that a go-it-alone mentality is not only disobedient but senseless?

*Proverbs 3:5-6 – “<sup>5</sup>Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not lean on your own understanding.*

*<sup>6</sup>In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.”*

## 2. We will always get the raw end of the deal when we try to negotiate

That's what happened with Jephthah. The real tragedy of his negotiations with God wasn't that he lost his daughter or that his daughter lost her life, but that he didn't understand grace. In an effort to win the favor of God he sacrificed his only child without realizing that he already had God's favor because God would one day sacrifice his only child so that Jephthah wouldn't have to. Jephthah didn't need to negotiate with God! God had already promised to deliver his people.

And you don't need to make deals with God either. You've got a whole book filled with promises from God that say, "Your best is my first priority." God's dealing days were over when his Son signed his life on the dotted line, said "it is finished," breathed his last, and rose from the dead. The thing is, we keep trying to weasel our way out of this deal, weaseling our way out of the pain and discomfort and questions that God says are working in us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

- 2 Corinthians 4:17 – "17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison"

### **3. God is still sovereign**

The most amazing thing to me about this story is that God is not thwarted at all by our stupidity. At the beginning of the narrative, Israel asks God for help and he tells them no. That's the last they hear from him, but we know something more. The narrator lets us in on a little secret: God was becoming impatient over the misery of Israel. Later, just as Jephthah is going into battle, it says that the "Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah."

- Romans 8:28 – "28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

What sweet comfort this brings, that even when we make a royal mess of things, God's promises are still promises. Oh, we may have lifelong consequences, we may grieve God deeply, we may make fools of ourselves, but God still works all things together for good (Romans 8:28). This means that even our mistakes can become the very tools God uses for his good purposes.

*For what is a man, what has he got  
If not himself, then he has naught  
To say the things he truly feels  
And not the words of one who kneels  
The record shows I took the blows  
And did it my way*

Don't take the blows. Trust God.