

STRONG FAITH, FATAL THEOLOGY

13th August 2017

Readings: Judges 10:6-16

Jessica Ann was 5 weeks old when she came down with pneumonia¹. Her father, John was a man of prayer. Now the press described him as a fundamentalist preacher and no one could deny John had faith. He believed God was the God of healing. He believed God would answer prayer. He believed God would come through. So instead of going to the hospital just across the road from their home he prayed. He prayed night and day. He prayed fervently. He prayed until he could pray no more. Then Jessica Ann died.



John was tried for child neglect and found guilty of manslaughter. The judge presiding over his case felt justice wouldn't be served by putting Jessica's father in jail. Why? Well, he'd nine other children, and from all accounts was a good father. So John was sentenced to five years community service working as an orderly in the hospital across the road from his home.

When the trial was over, a reporter stopped John and asked him what he thought of the verdict. John responded, "Well, God is my judge. I'll give an account to him."²

In a sense, Jessica's father was right. Like us all, one day he'll stand before God's judgment seat and give an account for how he's lived. In that day, when God comes to judge the father of Jessica Ann, what do you think his verdict will be?

As you try to answer that question, let's consider the story of Jephthah. Now, who's Jephthah? Well he's one of the main characters in the book of Judges but not as well known as Samson, Deborah or Gideon. And by the time we're finished you'll know why! Remember the book of Judges is full of despicable people doing deplorable things. Remember the book of Judges finishes with the words, "And everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And Jephthah is one reasons why this is true Jephthah also represents the downward spiral of Israel. After each judge, Israel's next rebellion got worse and the next judge is more flawed.

¹ This sermon draws on a sermon by Hadden Robinson. Hadden Robinson's preaching text book was what we used at Knox and as Robinson passed away a couple of weeks ago this sermon is a nod to a great man of God who is now with his Lord in glory.

² <http://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/08/27/Convicted-fundamentalist-will-answer-to-higher-court/3949399268800/>

So today we'll see

- I. Jephthah was a man of his times
- II. Jephthah's faith pleased God
- III. Jephthah still screwed up

And then will try and make sense of the mess Jephthah got himself into and the implications for us today.

Let's pray

I. Jephthah was a man of his times

Now, we first meet Jephthah in Judges 11:1. In the opening verse we see he's well qualified to rescue Israel.

Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. Judges 11:1a

However, he certainly didn't have the advantage of a stable upbringing

His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman." So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him. Judges 11:1b-3

Gilead was unfaithful to his wife and got a prostitute pregnant. The prostitute was tolerated until she gave birth to a son and then given the boot. Now, imagine how Gilead's wife felt. Put yourself in her place as little Jephthah was a constant reminder of your husband's unfaithfulness. Eventually Jephthah's step mum had children and what followed was a concerted effort to make his life miserable. Verbal abuse and in all likelihood beatings until Jephthah fled the family home and set himself up as the leader of a group of adventurers - in other words a "gang".

Not a great start. But, you see Jephthah was a man of his times. For Israel had rebelled against God, turning from his ways. So, not only was Jephthah surrounded by idol worship but wholesale rejection of God's laws. Laws that warned against sexual misconduct and laws promoting healthy families. Sadly, Jephthah was a man of his time because he was a victim of his time. And so it's a bit of surprise that he's also a man of faith - a faith that pleased God. Let's see how this plays out.

II. Jephthah's faith pleased God

Fast forward a few years and Jephthah's hometown is bearing the brunt military oppression from the Ammonites. The town elders meet to discuss how best to defend themselves. After much discussion someone puts his hand up and says, "What about Jephthah. He's a mighty warrior." Another chips in. "Look what he's been doing with his band of adventurers". One after the other call out, "He's our man". So, the leaders of the town send for Gideon...

Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."

Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?"

The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be our head over all who live in Gilead."

Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me—will I really be your head?"

The elders of Gilead replied, "The Lord is our witness; we will certainly do as you say." Judges 11:6–10

So Jephthah becomes commander in chief - and the first thing he does is present himself to the Lord. He goes to his home town, where he had been rejected, and presents himself to God. You see, despite growing up in a country lost to idols, and rejecting God's ways, Jephthah had faith.

So, the Spirit of God comes on Jephthah and he leads his troops into battle. And in doing so we admire his faith. As does God. For in Hebrews 11 - where the mighty heroes of the faith are listed - Adam, Noah, Moses, and the like - we read

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. Hebrews 11:32

There's Jephthah's name - right up there with David and Samuel. Why? Because like them Jephthah had a strong faith. A faith that pleased God. This is why we cannot understand, we cannot fathom, we cannot come to terms with what Jephthah does next. How could a man of faith screw up so monumentally and so tragically?

III. Jephthah still screwed up

For as he advanced against the Ammonites he makes a solemn vow to the Lord

“If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.” Judges 11:30–31

Can you see where this is going? Let me explain. Jephthah doesn’t have a dog called Rover or a cat called Blaze to meet him at the door. Neither did they keep animals in their homes that might wander out the front door as he rode up. How’s this going to work out?

The outcome of the battle hardly seems to matter after this unexpected vow - not for us anyway? Anyhow, God gives Jephthah and his troops a mighty victory. The enemy is devastated, completely subdued. The man of faith wins the day and God’s people are rescued. Yet, we hardly notice as we want to know who’s going to meet him at the door! And it’s not good.

When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” Judges 11:34–35

And we’re staggered. Surely there’s an “out” clause. Some wiggle room here. “Call the best lawyers of the land. Consult the High Priest. Surely his child, his only child whom he loves, does not have to die.”

But his daughter accepts her father’s vow but pleads for two months to spend with friends. Heartbroken, her father grants her request. So...

She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. Judge 11:38–39

The book of Judges - despicable people doing deplorable things. So, how on earth are we to make sense of this dark story. Here’s a man of faith, commended by God, yet screwing up monumentally. Well what we learn is. and this is the take home for today...

4. Strong faith needs good theology

Let me explain. If Jephthah had good theology, what I mean by this is good Biblical teaching, he would've never made that vow³.

For God's Word is clear, and we've just time for two references. Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God gave Moses these instructions...

Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. Deuteronomy 12:30–31

This was so important that Moses repeats it again a few chapters on.

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire Deuteronomy 18:9–10

This is was exactly Israel's sin. While worshiping God they're looking over their shoulder to the other nations and saying, "How do they serve their gods?" They began imitating other nations, including child sacrifice. So even though Jephthah had a genuine on faith - a faith that pleased God - he had bad theology. In the heat of the moment he did what other nations did and vowed to sacrifice his daughter. Now this doesn't excuse what he did but it reminds us that faith in God is not enough - we need good Biblical teaching. We need sound theology. That's you and I.

You see some people argue that having an experience of God is all that counts. That you encounter God - at a worship service, out in nature, or in a life changing "Aha" moment and that's all that counts. But no. No matter how genuine our encounter with God we need to back it up with good teaching. Now Jephthah didn't have access to the Bible like you and I do - but if did and he did read it he would know that such a vow was wrong.

This then is why we too need to read our Bibles and sit under good preaching. It's why we read Christian books that stretch us and listen to sound teaching through podcasts, streaming and on TV. But be discerning - for every good teacher online or on TV there's a good number of dodgy teachers. Which is why reading the Bible for ourselves vital.

³ Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord. Lev 18:21

This is also why I go to China. The underground church has been growing exponentially for decades. Conversions occur faster than new leaders can be trained. So new Christians find themselves leading Bible studies, even house churches before they've had a time to mature and grow in God's Word. Now, there is no doubting their faith - genuine, heart felt, pleasing to God, but all sorts of bad teaching and local superstitions are being incorporated into the underground church. So, when we the church in the West ask how we can best help the common cry is, "Send us teachers to teach God's Word to our leaders." So last year Ben and I spent two weeks in central China. One week with an underground Bible College hidden in industrial area and the next with leaders of a thousand strong underground church. Their faith is strong - way stronger than mine no doubt -, but their theology, their thinking about God, needs building up. They need equipping in God's Word for their own protection but also for the believers they teach.

And so how are we to please God in this matter. Well, faith is essential. Without faith Jephthah would never have rescued Israel from the cruel oppression of the Ammonites. And without faith we too cannot please God.

But alongside our faith we need to build a robust Biblical understanding of who God is. The last thing we want is a strong faith and a fatal theology. No, we want a strong faith and a sound theology - which only comes as we soak ourselves in the Word of God.

And to close Jephthah's story I want to return to our Bible passage and it's sad footnote. For in Judges 12:7 we read...

Jephthah led Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in a town in Gilead. Judge 12:7

You know, this is the shortest reign of any judge. And though it's speculation I believe Jephthah died of a broken heart. You don't have to be a parent to put yourselves in his shoes and feel something of his pain.

And as I was reading Jephthah's story I couldn't help think of another Father who also gave up - not his daughter but his son, his only son, whom he loved. Like Jephthah this Father sacrificed his only child to rescue God's people. But... this was different - oh so different. Whereas Jephthah's sacrifice was a mistake making him wretched and miserable and ending in death - his own and his daughters - this Father's sacrifice, dark and grim at the time, brought great joy to both Father and Son. For of course this Father is the Lord our God and his only Son - Jesus. Jesus who sacrificed his life to rescue you and I from slavery. Not from the Ammonites but from sin and death. Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who...

... for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2

This is God we worship - our Heavenly Father. Who gave up what he treasured so that you and I might become his dearly beloved children. This then is the Christ we worship, who gave up his life that we might live. Let's pray