

Jephthah Part I: Using God

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 10:1-11:28; Philippians 2:1-11

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Congregation of Christ: Last Sunday, we studied the ascension to power of Abimelech, another evil oppressor of Israel. Abimelech was not a foreign oppressor, since he was the son of Gideon. After he oppressed Israel for three years, the LORD raised up two judges, Tola and Jair, the sixth and seventh judges. Since we know very little of these two men, they and Shamgar back in Chapter 3 are called “minor judges.” In this series, we are only studying the “major” judges: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, and today and next Lord's Day, Jephthah.

Jephthah is another flawed judge. With each judge, Israel is seen in a downward spiral of unbelief and rebellion against. We see this in Ehud, Barak (Deborah's general), and Gideon. Jephthah was even more flawed than Gideon, and Israel during his time was more rebellious during the previous judges. In Jephthah's rule as judge, both him and the Israelites used God for their own selfish motives. They rejected God, then tried to manipulate God by their pretentious repentance. Then both of them also sold God to each other and to their enemies.

So our theme today is “Using God,” under three headings: first, **Rejecting God**; second, **Manipulating God**; and third, **Selling God**.

Rejecting God

Verse 6 begins with the familiar refrain after a judge dies, “*The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.*” But this time, the accusation is the most serious of all. The people “*served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines.*” They did not serve only the Baals and the Ashtaroth, but served a multitude of other idol-gods. I'm sure if there was more space in the book, the list of idol-gods would occupy a whole chapter! “*And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him.*”

As with the other narratives, the LORD was wrathful against them. So he sold them to the Philistines and Ammonites, who “crushed and oppressed” them for 18 years. They oppressed the tribe of Gilead to the east of the river Jordan. But they also crossed over to the west of the Jordan and oppressed the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim.

So the people of Israel were in great distress, and they cried out to the LORD, “*We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals.*” And the LORD answered, “*Seriously? Have I heard this ‘confession’ before?*” And the LORD condemned his people, reminding them that he has delivered them all throughout their history, from the hands of the Egyptians, Amorites, Ammonites, Philistines, Sidonians, and the Amalekites. “*Yet,*” the LORD rebuked them, “*you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore 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.*”

God can be sarcastic in his dealings with his people. When Israel refused to enter the Promised Land because of fear of the “giants” there and their fortified cities, they said to God, “*Did you bring us here to die? We would rather go back to Egypt as slaves again!*” So God gave

them their wish. He turned them back towards Egypt for 40 years, and all of them died in the desert. So he tells the Israelites under the Philistines' and Ammonites' oppression, "Since you trust and serve you idol-gods, why don't you cry out to them to save you? Surely, they are more powerful than your oppressors!"

Manipulating God

But Israel continued their pretentious repentance, "*We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you.*" But what was their only motive? "*Only please deliver us this day.*" They were not repenting of their sin, but only wanted deliverance from their distress. And they strengthened their pretense by putting away their idol-gods.

However, the writer says that the LORD "*became impatient over the misery of Israel*" (ESV). The real meaning of this verse is lost in the English translations. The NIV and NASB translations say, "*And he could bear Israel's misery no longer*"; and the KJV says, "*his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.*" Were the Israelites so contrite in heart that Yahweh was again overcome with pity and compassion on Israel to deliver them? The better translation is actually, "*his soul/person was short because of the efforts of Israel.*"¹ The LORD was actually frustrated, exasperated, angry and displeased with Israel's repeated, unceasing unbelief and idolatry. His patience was running out. This is why he answers with sarcasm and silence; he does not promise to raise up another deliverer.

Israel did not demonstrate true repentance. But what is true repentance, and how is it demonstrated? Our Heidelberg Catechism answers this question in Q&A 88-90 that we read. True repentance means that a person is heartily sorrowful for his sin, turning from it more and more in his life. His heart is so broken and contrite that he mourns over his sins (Joel 2:12-13). He puts to death the works of the sinful nature (Rom 8:12-13). At the same time, and in addition, true repentance produces "a new creation," a new man (2 Cor 5:17), because he now takes pleasure in living according to God's will, doing good works that please God (Rom 7:22).

Israel had no true repentance. They did not mourn over their sin; instead, they mourned over their oppression by their enemies. They did not show delight in serving the LORD alone, and instead worshiped idol-gods. Their "repentance" is what Paul called "worldly grief," not "godly grief." And this ungodly grief produced death in them, not true salvation (2 Cor 7:10).

The people of Gilead did not pray to the LORD for a deliverer. Only the LORD could guide them and give them wisdom in choosing a deliverer, for it is he alone who raises up deliverers. And for Jephthah, the Gileadites' desperate plea was an opportunity to grab power, riches and fame. It was also an opportunity to get even with those who had rejected and exiled him. For both Gileadites and Jephthah, pride and selfish ambition drove them into manipulating one another, and even God himself.

They thought that they could manipulate God into saving them. Yes, God delivered them from their oppression, but they were not delivered from their sins; they continued in their sin. And we often do the same with God. We want God to perform for us in ways we want him to. We treat him like a "divine butler" who does our bidding at our beck and call. We think of

1 K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges/Ruth, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 244.

God as a heavenly vendo machine that dispenses whatever we choose with tokens of our money. Whenever we sin, we think of God as a dispenser of endless mercy and grace, so we can sin and sin as we please. And when we reap the consequences of sin, we want God to deliver us immediately, as if he owes us.

When we want something really bad, such as riches or love, or we find ourselves in dire straits, we make vows to him: “If you give this thing or that thing, I will do this and that.” As if God needed something that he lacks from his creatures. Do you know how Martin Luther came to be a monk? He was studying to become a lawyer, but one night when he was traveling, a thunderstorm lightning struck the ground very close to him. In terror, he prayed to St. Anne for help, and vowed, “I will become a monk!” His was a “thunderstorm conversion.”

But God is not manipulated. He knows our hearts. He sees through our pretentious, insincere repentance. Jephthah and Israel rejected God and tried to manipulate him. They even “sold” God to others.

Selling God

After it is said that God became exasperated with Israel's rebellion, the next verse says that the Ammonites prepared to go to war against Israel. So the people of Gilead looked for a leader to fight against the Ammonites.

At this point, Jephthah is introduced as a mighty warrior. But there was one problem. He was the son of a prostitute, and his half-brothers drove Jephthah out of the city. He became an outcast, surrounding himself with “worthless” men in the land of Tob. So the elders of Gilead, knowing that Jephthah was a mighty warrior, asked him to lead Israel in the war against the Ammonites. Like God, he answered with sarcasm, “Did you not reject me? Why are you now asking me to help you?”

So Jephthah made the elders of Gilead vow before God to make him their head if *“the LORD gives them over to me.”* So the Gileadites vowed, *“The LORD will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say.”* Having rejected God, manipulated God, and pretended to repent, now they use the name of the LORD in vain. They seem to be pious, but they are only using standard godly words which meant nothing to them. But they are swearing falsely, just like witnesses who swear by the Bible, but then proceed to tell lies.

This was how the Israelites tried to use God, and how the Gileadites manipulated Jephthah. When the Israelites were in big trouble, they cried to the LORD to bail them out. So did the Gileadites ask Jephthah to rescue them. The LORD replied to the Israelites with sarcasm, knowing that they were trying to use him. So did Jephthah's reply, because he knew the Gileadites were manipulating him.

When the Ammonites accused Moses and the Israelites of a land grab, Jephthah again used the name of the LORD. On their way from the wilderness to Canaan, the land of the Amorites was on the way. They asked Sihon, the king of the Amorites, to give them safe passage through his land, promising not to attack them. Instead Sihon attacked Israel, so God gave the land to Israel. This land, therefore, was not the possession of the Ammonites, but of the Amorites. Jephthah argues that the Ammonites had no right to claim the land. And

Jephthah also asked the Ammonites why, after 300 years that Israel had lived in the land, that they are now saying that it was their land.

Then in verse 24, Jephthah goes into a theological argument, *“Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess.”* Chemosh, the god of the Ammonites, has the same power as the LORD of Israel in giving whatever land he wants, and in dispossessing whoever he wants. This, of course, is bad theology, because Chemosh is nothing but a lifeless idol; he cannot see, hear, think or speak. But Jephthah uses God's name to sell his point to the Ammonites. Only God can give or dispossess nations, and he alone fixes the borders of peoples (Deu 32:8). Jephthah pretends he knows the Law of Moses, but he is ignorant of it. This will lead to even more sin, including a most sinful vow, as we shall see in the next sermon.

Dear Friends: We see all around us today people who sell God. Political candidates who have no business with God and our Savior Jesus Christ always end their big speeches with, “God bless America” or “God bless us all.” Followers of non-Christian religions use the name of God for their own selfish motives. In “inter-faith” events, Christian leaders, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists alike use God's name and say that they all believe in the same God.

Radio and television are full of hawkers selling Jesus. They even sell snake oil claiming that they would heal all kinds of diseases. Many churches are selling Jesus as the one to solve all your problems. Accept Jesus into your heart, and all your problems with your finances, relationships and worries will be banished in the cloud. Give more, and Jesus would give more. Entertain more, and more people would come, and your church budget would prosper.

Blind ambition and pride drive many celebrity and megachurch pastors today. How many Jim and Tammy Faye Bakkers and Jimmy Swaggarts have fallen because of greed for money, power and fame? How many Mark Driscolls and Robert Schullers have disgraced the name of our Lord Jesus Christ because of their pride, ambition, greed and other gross misconduct?

But our Lord Jesus Christ would not be used, manipulated and sold. Jephthah reminds us of Christ who was despised and rejected by men. But the deliverance that Jephthah gave to Israel is not the salvation Christ gives. The salvation Christ gives is not salvation from emotional or physical distress, or oppression by others, but from sin and God's coming wrath. He invites us to reject all the idols of our hearts that consume our lives, and believe in him. He gives us rest from our spiritual battles against sin through the Spirit. He gives us joy and peace that surpasses all understanding.

How is he able to give these benefits to us? By conquering kings, as Jephthah did? No, but rather, by coming down from heaven, humbling himself before his Father and before men. By dying on the cross, he saved his people from the tyranny of the devil and the oppression of sin.

So when we are beset by sin, by all kinds of spiritual distress, Christ invites us, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matt 11:27). *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid”* (John 14:27).