

Jephthah Part 2: The Agony of Victory

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 11:29-12:7; Matthew 5:33-37

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • September 11, 2016 (BSCC)

Congregation of Christ: Do you remember the TV program Wide World of Sports? It was the most popular sports program from the 1960s to the 1990s, and its byline was “The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat.” What could be more thrilling than winning an Olympic gold, or a championship game? And what could be more agonizing than losing a championship, even if it means being second? Our culture is a culture of No. 1, all or nothing.

Our study of the Book of Judges today continues with the victory of Jephthah over the Ammonites. What could be more thrilling for Israel than being delivered from 18 years of oppression by the Ammonites? But this victory was very short-lived. The thrill of his victory was soon followed by two extremely tragic events.

So our theme today is “The Agony of Victory,” under two headings: first, **Because of a Sinful Vow**; and second, **Because of Anger and Pride**.

Because of a Sinful Vow

Our text begins with a promising verse, “*Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah.*” The Old Testament often speaks of God's Spirit being with persons to empower them for a special task for his people. We have learned previously that Othniel and Gideon were both Spirit-empowered. Now the Spirit came upon Jephthah so he may defeat the Ammonites.

With the Spirit of God, he marched his army from Gilead to the camp of the Ammonites. There, before the battle, he made a vow to the LORD. If the LORD gives him victory over the enemy, “*then whatever 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.*”

This is bad. Really bad. In times past, Israel offered animal sacrifices and prayers to God before a battle. Then after a victory, they would offer sacrifices of thanksgiving to God. His vow is nowhere commanded in the Law of Moses. Burnt animal sacrifices were commanded for thanksgiving, penitence, vows, and self-dedication, but never using a human burnt offering. Human sacrifice is an abomination to God (Lev 18:21; 20:2; Deu 12:3). Only pagans did this detestable act (2 Kgs 17:31).

Some people try to soften Jephthah's rash vow by saying he did not intend to sacrifice a human being. They argue that Jephthah said, “*whatever comes out*” not “*whoever comes out.*” But the Hebrew word here for “whatever” can also be translated as “whoever.” Also, isn't Jephthah's vow more applicable to a person when he says that he would sacrifice anyone or anything that “comes out from the doors of his house *to meet me*”? A dog or a cat can surely be so excited that it would come out of the house to meet his/her master. But Jephthah surely knew that dogs and cats are not used for animal sacrifices to God! Again, he was manipulating God, but what he did not understand is that God would have defeated the enemy even without his vow.

Still others say that Jephthah did not really sacrifice his daughter. He only dedicated his daughter to a lifelong service to God, saying that a man might offer another person to the LORD, serving in the tabernacle (Lev 27:1-8). But these verses have nothing to do with temple

service. They also say that Jephthah's daughter and her friends mourned over her virginity, not her impending death. But since she was an only child, they were probably mourning the loss of her ever bearing children and continuing the line of her family. Furthermore, there is no requirement for lifelong celibacy for those serving in the tabernacle. Lastly, why would she request a two-month period of mourning, if it was not for her coming sacrificial death?

So all of these arguments against Jephthah actually burning her daughter as a sacrifice are most unconvincing.

Are all vows or oaths sinful? To take an oath is both solemn and serious, as our Heidelberg Catechism reading (Q&A 101-2) says. When we make an oath by the name of God, we are “calling upon God, that He, as the only searcher of hearts, may bear witness to the truth, and punish me if I swear falsely.” God is Truth, and we are swearing by his truth. In the church, we make oaths to God when we make profession of faith, when we or our children are baptized, and in our wedding ceremony. We make these vows before God and before the congregation.

When a witness testifies in a court trial, he first swears by a Bible and in the name of God to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” The charge for lying in court is perjury. But this is also a religious vow, calling upon God to punish us if we testify to a lie.

In the Old Testament, there are many examples of people taking oaths by God's name. In fact, the LORD commanded Israel to take oaths in his name (Deu 10:20). So Abraham (Gen 21:22-24), Jacob (Gen 31:53-54), Boaz, Ruth's husband (Ruth 3:13), and David (1 Sam 24:22; 1 Kgs 1:29) all swore by the name of the LORD.

In the New Testament times, it was common for Jews to make vows, but not in the name of God. They would not even speak the name of God for fear of dishonoring him. So they swore by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem, or the temple. They even swore by their own head. This is why Jesus told his disciples, “*Do not take an oath at all*” (see also Jas 5:12). He was not saying he has changed the Old Testament law commanding oaths, but that taking oaths other than the name of God is unlawful. Instead, he was telling them to be just true to their word.

Jesus taught that the right use of vows or oaths is by invoking the name of God and no other. Not even in the name of any “Saint,” such as Mother Theresa or Pope John Paul II. They should be grounded on God's holy Word alone. So Paul testified in his letters by the name of God (Rom 1:9; 9:1; 2 Cor 1:23).

But some people, due to zeal or excitement or do make rash or hasty vows. Joshua, Israel's faithful leader, made a rash vow not to attack the Gibeonites (Jos 9:15, 19). But it turned out that the Gibeonites lied to Joshua so Joshua would not attack them. Joshua and the Israelites realized they made a rash vow without investigating or consulting the elders, but they still honored their vow because it was made in the name of the LORD (Jos 9:19).

In our text, Jephthah made a hasty vow before a battle. It was a sinful vow, because the Law of Moses did not ever command it. And since it was an abomination to offer human sacrifices to God, it was despicable before the eyes of God. What should Jephthah have done? Instead of a vow, he should have offered animal sacrifices before the battle against the Ammonites. This is what Israel did before him. But since he had already made his vow, should he have fulfilled his vow, even if it meant burning his daughter? Or should he have retracted his vow? I say yes, since it was sinful, against God's commandments, and human sacrifice was

an abomination to God. When he fulfilled his vow, he piled up sin upon sin. If he repented of his unlawful vow, God would have been pleased and would have forgiven him of his sin.

A sinful vow: this is Jephthah's first agony of defeat. There is a second agony of defeat, and that is, the anger and pride of Jephthah and the tribe of Benjamin resulted in a civil war with thousands of deaths.

Because of Anger and Pride

In the first seven verses of the next chapter, Chapter 12, the tribe of Ephraim was again in focus. Back in Chapter 8, after Gideon defeated the Midianites, the men of Ephraim complained to him, *“Why did you not call us when you went to fight against Midian?”* Gideon was diplomatic in his answer, even flattering them that they were better than Gideon's army because the Ephraimites killed the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. Gideon did not even tell the Ephraimites that he actually called them to war against the Midianites, and they did not respond to his call. So the anger of the Ephraimites subsided at Gideon's soft answer.

Here in Chapter 12, these pesky Ephraimites were at it again. Instead of rejoicing and congratulating Jephthah for his victory against the Ammonites, they were angry again, and crossed over from the west of the Jordan river to confront him. In their arrogance, pride and anger, they even told Jephthah, *“We will burn your house over you with fire.”* They also vowed that they were going to war against the Gileadites, *“You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites.”*

Did Jephthah respond in a conciliatory manner like Gideon? No, he met anger with anger. He said that he called out the Ephraimites, who by the way, were also being attacked by the Ammonites, but they again rejected another call for help from their countrymen. Unlike Gideon, Jephthah told them to their face that they were lying. And now that the Gileadites were victorious, the men of Ephraim were angry that they were not part of the glory of victory. So Jephthah went to war against the Ephraimites, defeating them, and capturing all the fords or shallow crossing places of the Jordan river.

In his anger, Jephthah and the Gileadites devised a plan to capture and kill Ephraimite stragglers who wanted to go back to their homes across the river. All men crossing over to the west must say a password, “Shibboleth.” Obviously, the different tribes of Israel were familiar with the different accents and pronunciations of each tribe. Everyone knew that the Ephraimites could not pronounce the “sh” sound, so they would say “Sibboleth.” Here, we know who's from “New Yawk,” or from “Loo-a-vul,” or where Peggie Sue or Jim Bob comes from, or if someone is Canadian, eh? [my best imitations] In the Philippines, almost everyone knows how to speak the Tagalog language. But we Tagalog speakers can detect a non-Tagalog speaker by just a few words. For example, the word for “grandmother” in most dialects is “Lola.” But there are Filipinos in areas that are not Tagalog speakers, so they would pronounce “Lola” as “Lula.” And by this word alone, Tagalog speakers will be able to detect a non-Tagalog speaker.

So this was Jephthah's password to eliminate all the Ephraimite warriors. In the end, the Ephraimite men were decimated: 42,000 were killed by the Gileadites, never again to play a prominent role in Israel. All these lives were lost because of anger, bitterness, jealousy, pride and all kinds of selfishness. And as we continue with our study of the Book of Judges, we will see Israel's descent into more bitter civil war because of this selfishness stemming from unbelief.

Perhaps because of this, Jephthah's rule as judge was the shortest among all the judges—only 6 years—compared with the earlier judges who ruled for 22-80 years. The judges who followed Jephthah also ruled for short terms: Ibzan for 7 years, Elon for 10 years, and Abdon for 8 years. The LORD was more and more displeased with the people and the judges.

Dear Friends: The agony of victory for Jephthah and Israel is rooted in the people's sin. They were in rebellion and unbelief against God. Jephthah made a sinful, abominable vow. The story ended in a civil war because of pride and anger on both sides.

The beginning of our text says that the Spirit of God empowered Jephthah, but just like all believers today who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we still make unwise, unholy, ungodly, sinful decisions. The only difference between us and Jephthah is we confess and repent of these sins.

In dire situations, we're inclined to make hasty vows. We forget that God is in sovereign control of all things, and he would do as he pleases, without regard for our vow. We lack the faith and patience to wait on God's direction, and we think that we could hasten his will for our lives with a vow or two. And often these vows are impossible for us to fulfill. But God is gracious and merciful that even when we make vows with selfish motivations, he forgives us when we confess and repent of them.

For Jephthah, the result of this sinful vow was unspeakable tragedy. It is a tragedy of our times as well, because for many women today, hundreds of thousands of unborn children are sacrificed on the altar of selfish convenience, career, and money.

The second tragedy in the story of Jephthah is the result of anger, jealousy and pride. His anger is rooted all the way back from his days as an outcast, even a fugitive. So in revenge, he lashed out against the Gileadites at first, and then against the Ephraimites after his victory. Anger and pride always produce bad outcomes. How many times do we reflect on our angry words and wish that we could take them back because it hurt others? How many families and churches have been destroyed by angry words and by jealousy and pride? James says that bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are rooted in human wisdom, which is *“unspiritual and demonic.”* The result is *“disorder and every vile practice.”* The tribe of Ephraim was slaughtered by Jephthah because of this (Jas 3:14-17). This is always true: *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger”* (Prov 15:1).

Jesus made vows to his Father in heaven, and he fulfilled all his covenant vows. He came down from heaven, giving up his glory in heaven to assume a humble human existence. Despised and rejected by his own people, he was compassionate even to those who killed him, praying, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”* He was angry once at the merchants who dishonored his Father's house, but did not hurt anyone. And then he fulfilled his vow to willingly offer his body and blood for the sins of his people, those whom his Father had given to him from eternity. He was able to do these things because of the heavenly wisdom given to him by the Spirit of God.

So James exhorts us that to seek this divine wisdom from God's Word. This wisdom is *“first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace”* (Jas 3:17-18). Let this be our wisdom in our families, in our communities, and not the least, in our church.