

Jephthah, The Outlaw King

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 00] We are in a series called the Gospel according to Judges. So we're working our way through each of the Judges in the book of Judges. It's a cycle. And tonight we look at the Judge Jephthah.

As we move toward the end of the Judges, Jephthah shows up in chapter 10, chapter 11, and chapter 12. And we read just from chapter 11. John Calvin, the great reformer, he never preached on Judges.

He never preached through Judges. And he preached almost the whole Bible, but never through Judges. And you know, you read a passage like Jephthah, and it's hardgoing. You read about the tragic vow that Jephthah makes at the very end.

And you start to see, well, maybe I could get what John never tried. This passage is tricky because of the tragic vow that shows up at the very end of Jephthah's life.

And it's a passage. It's a narrative story that's got a lot of paradox in it. So paradox. What's a paradox? A paradox is a seeming contradiction, two things that seem to bump together in friction and tension, but actually have a way of working themselves out.

[1 : 04] And this passage is full of that. And so let's think about it. Four brief things tonight. Let's look at what the book, the author teaches us about the end, what happens in idolatry, about God's paradox, the paradox of the outlaw king, and then finally the real sacrifice that set the heart of this passage.

So first, very briefly, two minutes to think about the end of idolatry, what happens in idolatry. And the reason I want to be so brief is because this is really just to say that this story, like every other story we've looked at, communicates the whole message of the book of Judges.

Judges in the cycle, the 12-fold cycle, says to us the same things over and over again. And so we can say this very quickly. But if you have a Bible, you just back up a chapter from what we read to chapter 10.

And in verse 6 and chapter 10, we learn that the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and they served the bells and the asheroth again. So idols, gods that are not the real God, they're bowing down before false gods, and it lists five different types of gods there that they worshiped.

So this is new in the book of Judges. We haven't seen a list like this of so many different gods. And then we learn that at every stage, the God that they served, the people, who's that God it was.

[2 : 27] So for instance, the God of Philistia is the God Dagon. And when they bowed down in the south to the God Dagon, they became oppressed by the Philistines. In the north, they served the God Kamosh.

And the God is Kamosh is the God of Moab and Ammon. And so when they did that, they became slaves oppressed by the Ammonites and the Moabites. And this is just communicating the very plain and simple message across the whole book of Judges.

And that's that idolatry, our idolatry, any human idolatry always leads to enslavement. That the gods in our lives that we serve will oppress us.

They will enslave us. It's a consistent thing throughout the book of Judges and throughout the whole Bible. And so it says that God sold them, He gave them over to the hands of their oppressors because of the gods they worshiped.

And so just to move on from this point, because we've made it every single week to make it real life for us, whatever we love, whatever we love more than God, whatever idols that we are chasing in our life and putting our trust in will become our oppressors, will master us.

[3 : 35] And so if you worship money in your life, money will possess you. It will take over your heart. It will take over your life. It will take over your soul. It will demand from you all your emotions. It will oppress you. Our idols oppress us. Whatever you treasure will become your ultimate master. And we all have an ultimate master. And that's the message of the book of Judges in short. Secondly, when it comes to this story, it's all about paradox. And so first week or second, we learn about God's paradox here. So again, in chapter 10, this is background to Jephthah, but it's really important.

The paradox that shows up in chapter 10, and I'll show it to you because we didn't read it. The people are under the oppression of the Ammonites, and they cry out for help to God after years and years of being enslaved to Ammon.

And God gives two replies, and these two replies seem to be contradictory. They seem to bump up against one another. And you can see them after 18 years of slavery in verses 11 to 14 of chapter 10.

[4 : 38] The Lord said to the people of Israel, when they cried out, did I not save you from the Egyptians and the Amorites and the Ammonites, the Sidonians? And if you come down all the way to verse 14, he says, go and cry to the gods whom you've chosen to worship, let them save you.

So the first thing God does is when they say, Lord, please save us. He says, why don't you go and ask the gods that you're worshiping to save you? And he says, I'm not going to. I'm not going to save you.

Why? Why does he do that? And when they've cried out in the previous cycles of judges, he has come to rescue them. And now they cry out and he says, go ask the gods that you're bowing down before right now to save you.

And there's a couple of answers. But one of the first things to say about this is that they are worshiping the God of Ammon, which is why they're oppressed by the Ammonites. And the God of Ammon we learn in the Old Testament in multiple places is the God called Kamosh, also known by another name, Molech.

When the Moabites worship him, he's called Molech. When the Ammonites worship him, he's called Kamosh. And we learn in the Book of Kings that Kamosh and Molech were gods that were worshiped by way of human sacrifice.

[5 : 48] And so in the Book of Kings, worshipping Molech or Kamosh, the Book of Kings refers to as the abomination of Moab over and over again. This very horrific act of ritual worship.

And so it's very possible that the Israelites have been engaged in something like this. And God is saying, you're crying out to me while you're bowing before Kamosh.

And we learn here that God is holy. And our God, the true, the absolute God, the God who created all that is good is a God that demands justice.

And you remember when Moses went up to the top of the mountain on Sinai and encountered the burning bush, God said, Moses, Moses, come to me. And as soon as Moses took that step forward, he said, stop right there.

Take your shoes off. This place is holy and you're not worthy. And we learn that every single human being tries to approach God and we do so in a way where we do not meet the demands of justice.

[6 : 46] We are not who God made us to be. And boy, God is saying, you cry out to me while you're worshiping Molech. Kamosh. And so he says, go cry out and see if those gods will save you, will help you.

Now, this is where the paradox comes in because the second thing God says is in verse 16, he says, the people said to the Lord, we've sinned. This time they say, we have sinned.

Sorry, this is in verse 15. And due to us, whatever the Lord, whatever seems good to you. Now, the first time it says they cried out for help and he said, go cry out to the gods you're worshiping.

The second time they said, we have sinned, Lord, you do to us whatever you think is right. And God says, now I'll save you. And you see, at first you say, why is God, has he changed his mind?

Is this emotions on God's part? And not only also one of the commentators, Michael Wilcock, this is what he says. He says, the first cry of Israel is one of recognition, recognition that they were being oppressed, that they were suffering, but recognition is not the same as repentance.

[7 : 52] As we see from the Lord's reply, go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen. It's as though God was saying to them, I know what your cry is about. It's merely a cry for help, which might just as well be addressed to any God.

You just want out of this situation. But in the second time, it's very different. You see, he's saying, first, God will not be used as a puppet.

That's what he's saying. God is not a get out of circumstances free. God, he's absolute. He's just, he can't just be cried for to pull you out of a bad circumstance. And instead, in verse 16, Michael Wilcock says, God could tolerate their misery no longer.

Why? Because they cried out and said, we are sinners, Lord, due to us. What is right? They cried out for justice. They cried out in repentance. And so he says this, well, God's holiness and his demand for obedience to his command, his demand for obedience to his commands override his promises to Israel, or will his gracious promises mean that he will somehow overlook their sin? Now here it is. Here's the heart, the tension, the paradox of the passage. As much as theologians may want to establish the priority of God's law over God's love, or God's love over God's law, the book of judges will not settle this question.

[9 : 13] Is God going to demand justice of Israel, his law, the God of justice, or is he going to show mercy to them? And what Michael Wilcock says is when you read across the book of judges, you realize judges recognize this tension but never solves it.

Is God a God of justice or a God of mercy? And the answer that you get is yes, but how? Yes, but how? And the answer is you have to wait.

The book of judges never fully tells you. Now third, that means we have to look at for the judge. And then we enter chapter 11 and we read about Jephthah, the outlaw king.

Who will save Israel? This guy, Jephthah, will save Israel. And he is a paradox in himself. One of the reasons for that is that throughout the book of judges so far, when God raised up a deliverer, a mighty savior, a deemer, which is what the word judge really means, it says that the spirit moved to raise up a deliverer.

The Holy Spirit came down and raised up a judge to save Israel, but that is not at all what happens when you come to the Jephthah story. This is the one time we don't see that happening at the beginning of the passage.

[10 : 21] There's no mention of the spirit coming to help at the beginning. And so on the one hand, Jephthah here is, we're told a mighty warrior, we'll look at his resume in just a moment, it says, but he was the son of a prostitute.

And we learn later that he was an outlaw. He was some type of leader of an organized crime unit in the mountains. That was who he was. And the men of Gilead call him to be their leader, to be their judge.

And in most ways, when you look at Jephthah's resume and you say, this guy was not a good man, not a good person, he was living a wildlife, a life of organized crime.

And then you turn to Hebrews 11 in the New Testament. And it says, by faith, Jephthah saved Israel and conquered kingdoms. And so on the one hand, you read about Jephthah and you say, this is an outlaw.

This is a man that's leading an organized crime unit. On the other hand, the New Testament says, and by faith, his faith, God used him to conquer kingdoms. What's going on?

[11 : 20] And the tension, the paradox here in the book of Judges. And one of the ways to get at that is to look for a second at his CV. We all have a CV. We all have a resume. We all have marketable skills that we like to put on paper and just look for a second at Jephthah's.

He's sort of an Achilles figure in this passage. It says, very first verse, Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. This guy did not lose a fight, but he was the son of a prostitute.

And the reason that it's mentioning that is because Deuteronomy 23.2 says that the son of a prostitute or the child of forbidden marriage cannot be a citizen of the people of Israel.

That person cannot even enter the holy assembly, the temple, God's temple, Deuteronomy 23.2 says. And the Gileadite men want to make him king of Israel.

So he's not even allowed to be a citizen and they say, we want you to be our king. Right. And then here there's something a little tricky in verse two. It says in verse one, I should say, it says Gilead was the father of Jephthah.

[12 : 26] And Gilead's wife bore many sons. And so what's happened here is Jephthah is a son of Gilead. But Gilead, while it sounds like a specific person here, it's not. It's talking about Gilead the tribe.

So Gilead is a tribe, one of the half tribes of Israel. And he's a son of Gilead. And he's part of the brothers of Gilead. And his dad, his father is Gilead.

And what that means is nobody knows who his dad is. That's what it's saying. So it's very likely the case that he was born in a brothel, something like that. One of the ways to translate the word worthless, he was worthless or part of worthless fellows, is impoverished as well.

So he's poor. He's very strong. He's very powerful, but he's poor. And he's the child of a dad that nobody knows. Nobody knows who his parents are.

And so he's probably living on the streets. He's probably somebody that he is clearly somebody that the men of Gilead hated. And so what they do is the men of Gilead gather up and they say, we've got to get this guy out of our territory.

[13:29] He's dangerous. He's ruffraff. And so they send him away and he lives in the land of Tove. And when they send him to the land of Tove, it says he becomes the commander of an outlaw, a company of worthless fellows, as the old translation puts it.

It's talking about some type of organized crime living in the mountains, something like that. Now, let's take just two minutes for a quick story.

When you go to seminary, they teach you don't tell unrelated stories in a sermon that don't help you further the point of your sermon. And this is sort of that. So not a good way to start the story, but it's just worth it.

Okay, it's worth it. Because in the end of the first century, the apostle John, we have writings from the second century about this story.

The apostle John, by tradition, he settled in Ephesus. This is the one who wrote the Gospel of John, wrote the book of Revelation, and he was preaching in Smyrna, probably in the 80s or early 90s.

[14:32] And he noticed a boy in the congregation he was preaching in. And he turned to the minister there and he said, I'm leaving. John was traveling.

He says, I'm entrusting you with this youth in the presence of the entire church. And I call you to witness before Jesus Christ. So John had led this young man to faith in Christ.

He had disciplined him. And as he's leaving Smyrna, he says, I give this young man's life to you, the pastor. And John leaves for many years. And he comes back some years later after the young man was baptized.

He was raised in that local church. But in the meantime, the young man had left the faith, left the church, and gone out to live in the mountains in an organized crime unit amongst outlaws.

And John comes back, we're told, in some of the writings we have from the early church, years later, and he meets with the pastor and he says, where's the boy? Where's the young man that I had disciplined and ministered to?

[15:32] And the man tells us, we're told in the text that we have this from the second century, that the pastor said he's dead. And he said, you know, explain to me more. How did he die?

All these sorts of things. And the guy tells him, well, no, he's not physically dead, but he's left the faith. And he's living in the caves. He's very dangerous. And John says, return to me the pledge with which Jesus Christ and I entrusted you to care for the soul of this man.

He, and then he says, what kind of father are you to him? Go and get me my horse. So John got on his horse and he went out into the mountains. He was captured by the outlaws and he said to the outlaws, take me to your leader.

And they beat him and they knelt him before and he looked up and the leader, the outlaw king of this little gang was the young man that he had brought to faith.

And we're told in the second century writings that this young man dropped his sword and ran. And John called out for him and said, why are you running? I'm an unarmed old man.

[16:37] I would die for your soul just as Christ died for me. I've been sent by Christ to claim you and the young man stopped and he wept and he asked Christ and he asked John his teacher to forgive him.

Now, the Jephthah story is the exact opposite. So it does relate. It's the exact opposite. John, the apostle John went to go capture the soul of an outlaw king and bring him back to faith.

The Gileadite men created an outlaw king. They looked at a poor impoverished man who was born in a brothel and said, we don't want you around here. We don't want this ruffraff and they kicked him out of the land.

And he became even more a mighty man, a man of crime, but a man of deep and great strength. And so when they wanted free from the Ammonites, they said, we know where we can turn. The Gileadite men who had once hated him said, we will go bring him back because we know he does not lose a fight.

And so they go and they get Jephthah and they say, if you can defeat the Ammonites, we will make you king. Even though we hate you, even though you're not meant to be a citizen in every way, we will make you our king.

[17 : 41] And so that's exactly what happens. And we skipped over the text where Jephthah writes a letter to the Ammonites and says, leave the land or I'm going to come and fight you.

And we pick back up in verse 29 and we learn exactly that Jephthah did by the power of the spirit defeat the Ammonites. And God used him. And Hebrews 11 says by faith he saved Israel, he conquered kingdoms.

What is the story of Jephthah about? What is the paradox of the Jephthah narrative? He's got no right to be king. He's an outlaw.

He's villainous. He's not called initially by God, not at all. He's called by evil men, evil men who even hated him. And then there's Hebrews one.

He was full of the spirit and he judged, he redeemed, he saved Israel. And the meaning, I think of the Jephthah story as this, when the Holy Spirit comes down into a person's life and gets a hold of them, he can use very, very bent sticks and very, very, very broken reeds to do great things.

[18 : 47] He can take people who have very difficult pasts, very difficult and use them mightily, powerfully. Right? And so that might be true for some of you tonight. You're full of regret, maybe.

You've got a tough past. And maybe right now you're walking through a season of deep sin and you say, could God really love me? Could God really use me? And the Jephthah story is here to say God takes bent reeds, bent sticks, broken reeds, and he sends the Holy Spirit into their life and he uses them.

He uses them mightily. You know, just think about Jephthah. He was a poor man. He was despised and rejected by men. He was born among his own, but his own people did not know him, not really. They despised him. They rejected them. He was rejected by the every man Gileadite, every single one of his brothers. They hated him. They wanted him to die. And he saved Gilead through his marginality.

It was the very fact of his marginality by which he was able to save. And they rejected him, so the Holy Spirit came and used him to save them through that rejection.

[19 : 56] And that means that every single judge in the book of Judges is a broken stick and a bent reed and every single one of them points to Jesus Christ, who is despised and rejected by men.

And yet God used him powerfully to save the Spirit. The Holy Spirit can take in any one of our lives a troubled past, patterns of sin, and turn it around by the Holy Spirit and God's grace and use it powerfully in other people's lives.

And many people have talked about this before, but there's a place in Romans 12 where God tells us, Paul tells us that when the Holy Spirit comes into your life, he will break a hard heart, an outlaw's heart, and turn a person who once hated God and people, and they will become a person who weeps with the weeping.

He does that. And there's nobody better to minister to the imprisoned than a person who's been through that. There's nobody better to minister to an orphan than a person who's experienced that. There's nobody better to weep with the weeping than a person who has known deep, great sorrows and troubles. God uses bent reeds in really powerful ways. Lastly, that leads us to the real sacrifice.

[21 : 13] What do we do finally with this paradox? Hebrews 11 and this outlaw king and this vow, the vow that he makes. So, Jeb the at the very end of the passage says, Lord, if you will use me to save Israel from Gilead from Ammon, when I come home, I will sacrifice the very first thing that walks out of the door of my home.

And so, the Lord does give Jeb the victory over Ammon, and he comes home, and it's his daughter that comes out of the door. And so, we have here what's been referred to historically as the tragic vow of Jeb the.

And commentators are split on how to talk about it, how to interpret it. And it's in verse 30. It seems like he's vowing to commit a human sacrifice to the Lord here.

And a number of people say different things. Darrell Bock, who's a really hopeful commentator, but he says God is essentially out of the picture here entirely at the end of Jeb the story.

One of my favorite preachers says, Jeb the's problem is that he doesn't know scripture. And so, he's willing to give God anything. But is that what's going on? Is that really the case here?

[22 : 31] The section that we did not read in chapter 11, verses 12 down to 28, is Jeb the writing a letter to the king of Ammon recounting the deeds, the history of the book of Numbers.

And so, one of the first things we have to say is Jeb the knows the law, because he quotes the law multiple times in this little letter that he writes to the king of Ammon. So, it can't be that he doesn't know what God thinks about something like a human sacrifice.

The second thing I think to mention is in verse 29, we read that Jeb the was anointed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came upon Jeb the, and then in verse 30, he made a vow to the Lord.

And one of the difficulties I think of saying, this is just a rash vow, is the fact that in verse 29, it says the Spirit fell upon Jeb the, and in verse 30, it says, and he vowed to the Lord.

And so, what's the relationship between the Holy Spirit and verse 29 and the vow in verse 30?

That's the second thing to think about. Perhaps the vow is not so tragic, but is being led or opened up to a bigger purpose.

[23 : 40] The third thing, just a few little details I want to point out and we'll close, is that the vow itself in verse 30 is ambiguous. And so, this is another boring detail like this morning, but it's actually important.

In verse 30, the vow that he makes about offering the first thing that comes out of his door as a sacrifice, is it about an animal?

So, somebody said, well, he was hoping a lamb. He was hoping something like an animal would come out. But the Hebrews strongly suggests or implies that it could say, whoever comes out of my door, not whatever, not a thing, but a who.

That's possible, at least, to say. But Robert Alter, even more importantly, he's probably the most important, the best Hebrew translator in all the world right now. He says, it's very unlikely that any suggestion of an actual human sacrifice is being made in this passage.

And the reason for that is because when the ESV translates it, like many other passages, a burnt offering, the very little Hebrew is just, I will sacrifice the sacrifice that comes out of my door.

[24 : 47] And sometimes we translate that burnt offering, sometimes not. It's ambiguous. It doesn't have to be a burnt offering. It's just a gift. I will sacrifice the sacrifice. It's a common word sometimes for burnt offering.

The fourth thing is, as soon as he makes the rash vow after that, the Lord gives him victory. So he makes this vow about a sacrifice, potentially of his own daughter, but then the Lord gives him the victory.

And that's not typically the logic in the book of Judges, that in the midst of idolatry, the Lord does not give victory to the judge. So that's interesting. And then fifth, we learn here that he is willing, when he comes back and he says, I will keep this vow.

And his daughter says, Dad, you should keep the vow. She tells him that. And we learn that both he and her are willing to lose what is most precious to them for the sake of the vow, for the sake of the promise.

For him, we're told three times, this is his only child. And his only child says, yes, you should keep the vow you've made. And then lastly, in verse 36 and 38, what is it that she is weeping over?

[25 : 56] She says, Father, before this happens, give me two months to go and weep. And what does she say? She doesn't say weep for my life, which if you're going to die, that's probably what you're going to cry over.

She says, I weep for my virginity. And then the very last verse the passage tells us, the last couple, is that she never knew a man or never got married in Hebrew.

And so the whole tenor of the text is about her not ever being able to get married. She weeps over her virginity for two months. What's going on here? And the commentators are split about it, and this is what I'm offering you is definitely a minority reading.

But I think actually the details lead us to see something different than a sacrifice in the traditional way of reading this. And actually what's happening possibly is that in Exodus 38 and 1 Samuel 2, we learn about a group of women who were dedicated to the service of the tabernacle and temple.

And he would go as young women and serve minister at the temple alongside the priest. And they would stand at the threshold of the door, the place that people would come in.

[27 : 03] And Jeb that makes the vow, the next thing that comes out of the threshold of my door. And I think that he's saying that he's going to give her to the Lord for all of her days to serve at the temple to remain unmarried.

Which is why she goes out and weeps for her virginity. She cries, I'll never marry. He's giving her away to the temple to the service of the Lord all of her days. And instead of being a sacrifice in the sense that it's often taken, she is a sacrifice, but she's a sacrifice that remains alive and is ultimately a symbol.

A symbol of what? And here's the last thing. He makes a vow about that which will come through his threshold. And the thing that comes through his doorway, his threshold, is his firstborn, his only child.

And you might remember in the Passover story, the story of the Exodus, that the angel of death came down upon the land. The people of Israel and Egypt, it didn't matter what ethnicity you were, the angel of death was coming and the angel of death was coming for the firstborn of every household.

And what did you need to do if you were going to be saved from death? You need to sacrifice a lamb and spread the blood of the lamb over the threshold of the door so that the firstborn would not have to become a sacrifice.

[28 : 22] You see, she is the firstborn who walks through the threshold. And then where does she go? She goes to the threshold of the temple. And what's the point of this service, these women who would serve at the threshold of the temple?

A lot of commentators will say this ministry was about being a person who would never marry a maiden in the old language in order to say the bride is waiting for her groom to come.

You see, she stands at the threshold of the temple and says, if you want to come and meet the Lord, the real way to do that, she's a symbol as you look for the true groom that has yet to come. She's a woman waiting and saying, there's someone coming who will really show you the temple, who will really show you the presence of God.

You see, she's pointing us to a lamb whose blood would be slain and placed upon the threshold to a groom that would open the true doorway to allow the bride to actually enter into God's presence. That was the symbol, that was the sign, that's what she was pointing to. And in the New Testament, we have the paradox, right? Is God full of justice? Is he going to punish idolaters or is he full of mercy?

[29 : 35] And when Jesus Christ comes, he says, I am the door. I am the threshold. I am the way. I am the lamb of God who takes away the Son of the world. I think she was pointing to Christ. She was a symbol, a sacrifice, the true sacrifice, the one who was ultimately going to come.

And Jesus Christ says, if anybody enters into God's presence by Him, by Him as the door, the real threshold, they will be saved and they will find pasture forever.

May the better than Jephthah, the true judge, Jesus Christ, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, be our ultimate hope this week.

Let us pray. Father, we thank You that You preach the gospel to us throughout the whole of the Bible. And we thank You for the beauty of Your Word and how it speaks of the true firstborn, the lamb of God, the door Himself, the great groom.

And we thank You, Lord, for the hope that we have in that judge, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. I pray tonight that You would just set our eyes back on Jesus, which is what this book does, in the midst of our idols.

[30 : 46] And I do pray tonight that every single one of us would walk away from this place knowing I am a bent, I'm a broken stick, I'm a bent reed, and yet Jesus uses me by the power of the Spirit like He used Jephthah.

So give us power, gospel power as we go out from this place into the city this week to serve. And I pray this in Christ's name. Amen.