

Jephthah – Deal or No Deal

Have you ever tried to make a deal with God? We all like good deals. We recently had to buy a car. We worked very hard to get a good deal. We went all the way to Joplin to get that deal. I try to get good deals on eBay. My wife goes shopping and comes back with all this stuff and she tells me how much money she saved. Funny. When I buy stuff, it's always how much did that cost? She never asks how much I saved.

It's good to get a good deal, but sometimes we try to make bargains with God. We treat him like he's the Howie Mandel of the universe asking, "Deal, or no deal?" Sometimes the deals are blatant. "God, if you get me out of this jam, I promise I will go to church the rest of my life." "Lord, just help me get this job, and I'll start tithing every week. Just get me out of this terrible, self-induced headache, and I'll never over-indulge again. God, just let the tests come back clear and I promise I'll volunteer to teach children's Sunday School class.

Our deals with God aren't always so explicit, however. Sometimes they're subtle expectations. We imagine some sort of quid pro quo exists between us and the almighty. We scratch his back and he scratches ours. We go to church three times a month and expect God will bless our finances. We take care of our children for 18 years without killing them, God will grant us good health.

It is true that Scripture teaches the principle of sowing and reaping. Galatians 6:7 says, "*A man reaps what he sows,*" or as the NLT puts it, "*You will always harvest what you plant.*" God also promises to honor those who honor him (1 Sam. 2:30). But this doesn't mean we get to dictate the terms of the agreement. God may define honor and blessing differently than we do.

Scripture also promises that the world will hate us if we love Jesus. It also tells us, "*For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*" How do these realities factor into our supposed deals with God?

Is God the sort of god who could be moved, or even manipulated by playing, "Let's make deal" with him? If you do this for me, I will do this for you. Is God some cosmic vending machine, where we put in the right prayer, the right church attendance, the right religious performance, and the right tithe, that he will dispense earthly rewards and blessings?

As we continue our study of Judges, we come across a Judge who stumbled into this same trap more than 3,000 years ago. He fell in, and in a big way. His name is Jephthah. He was the eighth judge of Israel, and his story is one of the most tragic contained in all of the Bible. We find his story contained in chapters 10, 11, and 12 of the book of judges.

We will be focusing mostly on the last several verses of chapter 11, but we begin in 10:6. Once again we read that sad refrain repeated so many times throughout the book of Judges, Judg 10:6, *“Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD.”* Again and again, Israel had turned her back on God, and worshipped the false Gods of the nations around them. Each time Israel rejected God, He removed his blessing, and Israel fell into ruin at the hands of her enemies. Yet each time, when Israel cried out to God, He sent a deliverer to rescue them. Look at Judg 10:11-12, *“The Lord replied, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites[c] oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands?”*

God has been so patient and forgiving. This time, though, was a little different. When Israel cried out to God for help, listen to what he says, *“But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”* (Judg 10:13-14)

Go cry to your idols, God says, I'm not listening anymore. But Israel persisted. She quit worshipping the idols, and began serving God, and verse 16 says, *“He could bear Israel’s misery no longer.”*

Then we come to the story of Jephthah. He is not your typical hero. He is the illegitimate son of a Jewish father and a Canaanite prostitute was forced from his family and from his hometown of Gilead. As it turns out Jephthah is a man of great military skill and leadership ability, and a group of rogues and bandits gathers around him, much like David's band of mighty men.

But when his hometown became oppressed by the Ammonites, guess who they turn to for help. He agreed to help, on the condition that he would become the leader of Gilead. He then began a series of unsuccessful negotiations with the Ammonites. It was obvious he would have to negotiate with the blade of a sword. God's Spirit came upon

Jephthah and empowered him for battle against the Ammonites. This brings us to the tragic events of the closing verses of Judges 11.

I. A Foolish Vow

Things began so well for Jephthah. God's Spirit had come upon Jephthah. God's hand was with him to give him victory, but Jephthah makes a foolish vow. Judges 11:30-31:

And Jephthah made a 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."

What would inspire Jephthah to make such a foolish vow? This was not the action of a faithful Jew. This was the act of a pagan idol worshipper. This is how the Canaanites interacted with their gods.

Consider the following. Human sacrifice was forbidden under O.T. Law. God said it was an abomination. It was for practices such as this that God had commanded Israel to wipe out the Canaanites. Also, under O.T. Law, Jephthah wasn't even allowed to offer a sacrifice. Only a priest could do this. We see here how thoroughly corrupted Israel was in idolatry. It was so bad that even one of her Judges makes a pagan vow, thinking it was a godly thing to do.

Jephthah's mind had been filled with the thinking of Idol worshippers. Remember, his mother was a Canaanite prostitute, and if you go back to 10:6 where we are told that Israel once again did evil in the eyes of the Lord, look how bad it was, *"They worshiped images of Baal and Ashtoreth, and the gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia."* In the past it had only been one or two false Gods that Israel worshipped, but this time there are seven groups of false Gods. They were completely swamped in idolatry.

Making promises to a god, in exchange for certain blessings was a pagan practice. Pagans believed they could manipulate their gods for human purposes. Pagans viewed their idols as fickle, vain, and selfish deities. They could be appeased, motivated, bargained with, and even manipulated.

In 2 Kings 3, Mesha, the king of Moab, does a similar thing. In the course of heated battle, he offers his oldest son as a human sacrifice to his God, believing this would obtain the elusive victory. Classical literature tells us of Idomeneus, the King of Crete, made a similar vow when a storm threatened to sink his ship on returning from the sack of Troy. He promised his

god that if he survived the storm, he would offer his child as a sacrifice. Upon his safe return he sacrificed his son.

Jephthah was likewise trying to manipulate God. He was making a deal with God in an effort to control Him. If you do this for me, I will do this for you. He actually thought such a sacrifice would be pleasing to God. This is the tragic result of Israel's being so steeped in idol worship that the lines between true worship and false worship have become so blurred that you can no longer tell the difference. And so Jephthah makes a foolish vow, a pagan vow in the name of God.

II. A Tragic Realization

After his foolish vow, Jephthah then has a tragic realization. Jephthah is successful in defeating the Ammonites. God gives him the victory. This doesn't mean that God was honoring Jephthah's foolish vow. God promised him victory before Jephthah ever made his stupid vow. God's Spirit had already come upon him. Jephthah made a vow to get blessings that were already his.

Following the successful battle, Jephthah returns home, and a heart-wrenching scene ensues. Judges 11:34-35

34 When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter--his only child--ran out to meet him, playing on a tambourine and dancing for joy. 35 When he saw her, he tore his clothes in anguish. 'My daughter!' he cried out. 'My heart is breaking! What a tragedy that you came out to greet me. For I have made a vow to the LORD and cannot take it back.'

As tragic as the scene is, just what or who did Jephthah expect to come running out the front door? A Cow? "Moooooo, Good job Jephthah. All the barnyard animals and myself want to congratulate yoooooooo." It was going to be either his daughter, or his wife, or one of his servants. No matter who it was, it was a foolish, wicked, evil vow. Now Jephthah has the tragic realization of just how foolish he had been.

III. A Misplaced Commitment

As foolish and ignorant as Jephthah's vow was, his big mistake was in keeping the vow. He had a misplaced commitment. He could have realized his mistake. He could have read the Law and learned that human sacrifice was an abomination to God. He could have repented of his wicked vow. He could have had a priest offer a burnt sin-offering on his behalf. Yet even

now, Jephthah is ignorant of God's law, for the Law of Moses contains provision for vows made rashly, or without full thought and reflection.

We read of his misplaced commitment in Judg 11:36-40:

36 And she said, "Father, you have made a promise to the LORD. You must do to me what you have promised, for the LORD has given you a great victory over your enemies, the Ammonites. 37 But first let me go up and roam in the hills and weep with my friends for two months, because I will die a virgin."

38 "You may go," Jephthah said. And he let her go away for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never have children. 39 When she returned home, her father kept his vow, and she died a virgin. So it has become a custom in Israel 40 for young Israelite women to go away for four days each year to lament the fate of Jephthah's daughter.

The story of Jephthah is a heroes journey with such a tragic ending. All the good he did will forever be clouded by his foolish vow. However, Jephthah is far from the only one that suffers from mistaken ideas about God. We probably all misunderstand God in one way or another, and these false views of God can cause serious problems. This story is an opportunity for us to grow in our understanding of God, and there are two lessons we need to learn.

Do Not Confuse Cultural Values with Biblical Values

And we as Christians can fall into these same to traps. Christians can confuse cultural values with biblical values. Just like Jephthah's paganism, our cultures sinful values have a way of sneaking into the church and corrupting our lives. We put our own spiritual spin on it. We reinterpret the Bible to make everything fit. We let the world tell us what God is like.

We spiritualize all sorts of things. We do it with our sexual ethics. We justify premarital sex and cohabitation. We've done it with divorce and remarriage. We've tried to baptize same sex relations with some sort of biblical legitimacy. I've even heard Christian attempts to normalize porn because it has become so commonplace. We are letting our culture define for us what is acceptable, not God and His word.

We've put a spiritual gloss on our greed and materialism. We justify our indulgence. Some do it with their racism or destructive politics, and it happens on both sides of the political divide. I've heard Christians excuse all sorts of sin with the idea that God just wants me to be

happy. Show me the book, chapter and verse on that one. That's our culture speaking, not God. Do whatever makes you happy. God wants you to be holy. He wants you to be His. Happiness comes after that.

We have swallowed the lies of secular psychology hook, line and sinker. Philosophies and theories based in atheistic and evolutionary views of life are glossed over with some religious lingo and spoon-fed to hurting Christians as biblical counsel. How can you take a view that says that people are born innocent, and are basically good, and that our fundamental problem is our self-ignorance and our psychic trauma, and square that with the biblical view that we are born with a sinful nature and that our basic problem is deliberate disobedience against God?

We are just as vulnerable to cultural corruption as Israel was in Jephthah's day. Even to the point of Human sacrifice. Oh, we don't call it that. We call it abortion. We call it freedom of choice, but in reality it is nothing more than human sacrifice to the false gods of personal comfort, convenience, wealth and education.

Sadly, a growing number of Christians are justifying the practice in the name of God saying, "Surely, God wouldn't want children born into such a world as ours, so full of violence and cruelty. Surely, God wouldn't want a mother burdened with a child she is not prepared to care for." And so we sacrifice our children.

We confuse cultural values and Christian values with music and worship styles, with congregational voting. I'll stop here before I step on any more toes. How is it that a man used so mightily of God, could do something so wicked and so evil, and never realize it? All of us are capable of doing extremely sinful things when we let our culture define our values, instead of the Word of God. That's what happens when we let the values of the world around us determine our values, instead of the Word of God. We can't interpret Scripture according to what our culture thinks is right or acceptable. Truth is not defined by a survey, an opinion poll, or what all your friends think. Right and wrong cannot be determined by following your heart or doing what feels right. That leads down a dangerous path.

Do Not Try to Manipulate God

The second lesson we can learn from Jephthah is don't try to manipulate God. God will

never be your genie in a bottle. When we make such deals, the promises we make are often things we should be doing anyway— things like going to church and giving our time and money. For many Christians, prayer has become a way that they try to pull God's strings. But there is no magic formula. There is no secret way to pray. "In Jesus' name" is not a spiritual abracadabra, but it is a call to pray all things in accordance with the nature and truth of Jesus. It is not the equivalent of "pretty please with sugar on top." Ultimately, all of our prayers must be done under the umbrella of "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*"

It is an unfortunate commentary on the modern church that *The Prayer of Jabez* became such a huge seller several years ago. It promised that if you prayed a particular prayer every day, it will deliver amazing results. The book even promises that this is a prayer that God always answers. This is nothing more than another attempt at manipulating God. It is the same mistake that Jephthah made.

Prayer is the communication of a relationship. It is intimate, personal, and it is real. God hears prayer, and he answers prayer. Prayer brings us closer to God. Prayer opens our lives to the Spirit's leading. I believe this relationship is real and dynamic. It is give and take. We see in Scripture God responding to and changing his plans because of the prayers of Moses, and Abraham and others. But there comes a point at which God does not answer prayer- prayer that is at its root manipulative. The object of prayer is that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, not for our will to be done in heaven as it is on earth. God is not a marionette and we cannot pull His strings.

Instead of trying to manipulate God, we need to trust God. We need to grow in that relationship of trust. Don't make a deal with God, because God doesn't want your deal. He wants your love. He wants you to worship, to serve, to give because you love him. Don't make a deal with God, because you probably making promises you can't keep. As soon as you get out of whatever jam you're in, you'll slip back into old habits and old routines. You'll either redefine your promise or it will be quickly forgotten. Instead, seek to deepen your faith during life's trials. Honor God in the ways that He's called you to do anyway, and trust that he will bless and honor you in the way He knows is best, not just in the short-term, but for eternity.