

A STUDY OF JUDGES & RUTH

A TALE OF TWO

Son of a prostitute, disinherited, reject, mercenary—and that's just the first three verses about Jephthah. When the invading Ammonites made war against Israel, the men who rejected Jephthah returned, hat in hand, asking for his help. They didn't want him, they wanted him to rescue them. That attitude is how they seemed to feel about the Lord as well. Shamefully, that's often our attitude as well.

Dedicated to the Lord from birth, Samson didn't possess Jephthah's family problems. Jephthah did the best with what he had—or at least it seems like he tried to. Samson had no excuse. He was the son of two parents who knew the Lord. Yet, he rebelled spectacularly. Again, we can relate.

JUDGES 11:30–35; 13:3–5; 14:7–9

³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ 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." ³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand...

³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow."

³ And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. ⁴ Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, ⁵ for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

⁷ Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes. ⁸ After some days he returned to take her. And he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and behold, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. ⁹ He scraped it out into his hands and went on, eating as he went. And he came to his father and mother and gave some to them, and they ate. But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the carcass of the lion.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Cross my heart and hope to die" or a pinky promise when I was growing up served as unbreakable bonds. A promise didn't mean much, but a pinky promise may as well have been a blood oath.

What does the Bible say about such promises? Jephthah certainly didn't provide a great example to live by for many reasons. He made a vow of reciprocity to God (not a good idea), he vowed something evil, and then he carried it out. Scan the QR code to learn what the Bible says about vows.



DISCUSSION

We're at the mid-point of the study. What's something God has challenged you with so far?

ICEBREAKER

1. What did Jephthah promise the Lord in exchange for victory? (30-31)

2. What was Jephthah's response to his own vow? (35)

3. How did Samson break his Nazirite Vow by making himself unclean? (8-9)

4. In what ways are these stories morally problematic?

5. On a scale of 1-10, how consistently does your life align with God's character?

6. What do you need to start doing or stop doing to see that number go up?

OBSERVATION

INTERPRETATION

APPLICATION

In both stories, the personal sin of the judge impacted others. Perhaps you've been deeply impacted by someone else's sin. Need someone to talk to? Talk to your Coach today!

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STUDY NOTES BIG FAN

Fanatic: “A person who is extremely enthusiastic about and devoted to some interest or activity.” Maybe Webster’s definition describes your passion for sports, music, or some other hobby. For me, it’s Dallas Cowboys football. Half of you reading this agreed, the other half groaned in disapproval. Everybody reading this knows something I don’t; namely, if the Cowboys won the Super Bowl. Like every Cowboys fan every season, I think we got a shot!

Here’s a weird thing about being a fan, I know a lot about Jerry Jones, Dak, Zeke, and a host of others that I actually feel guilty not mentioning because they’re awesome. I know them, but they don’t know me.

As we continue this Week in *Judges*, we’re spiraling down in the caliber of God’s judges. Both Jephthah and Samson “served” God, but didn’t seem to know him. In a way, they represent where Israel was spiritually. Israel knew God. They were fans. They knew the history and boasted in the great victories. However, these men and Israel completely misunderstood God and his character.

GODLY LEADERS UNDERSTAND GOD’S CHARACTER

In the introduction, we read of Jephthah’s misfortune of his early life. Despite that, God raised up Jephthah to fight the Ammonites and free Israel from the oppression of her enemies. While traveling to war, **Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return... I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”**

The Lord gave Jephthah victory over the Ammonites. **Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him... She was his only child... And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow.”**

So much is wrong with this story. *First*, God despises bribes (Deuteronomy 16:19) and no one should ever offer him one (Deuteronomy 10:17). *Second*, the original language strongly suggests Jephthah did intend a *human* sacrifice. He likely expected a slave rather than his daughter. The Lord had outlawed such practices (Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10). However, Jephthah’s ignorance, and the corruption of pagan culture, led him to think this is what the

Lord desired. *Third*, instead of repenting from his hasty vow, Jephthah didn’t think God would forgive him, so he went through with it.

Jephthah might have been disastrously ignorant of God’s character. Samson wasn’t. We’ll study Samson’s story more in-depth next Week. However, he was a child promised to his parents by an **angel of the Lord**. He was dedicated as a **Nazirite to God from the womb**. Usually, the Nazirite vow was something undertaken by a willing participant, but in this case, Samson was selected at birth. Among other things, this meant no alcohol and maintaining ritual cleanliness.

In the next chapter, Samson was betrothed to a Philistine woman. This seemed wrong, but the Lord had inspired it. While retrieving his bride, Samson broke his vow. He touched a dead **lion** that he had previously killed to get **honey**—and he ate it. This is ceremonial uncleanness in the extreme! Not only that, but he gave some to his **father and mother** making them unclean without their knowledge. He corrupted others for fun.

MISUNDERSTANDING CAN LEAD TO PAIN & HUMILIATION

Jephthah’s sacrifice of his only child and Samson’s sickening dismissal of God’s call on his life illustrate the effects of misunderstanding God’s character. Both stories end in great pain and humiliation. Jephthah’s pitiful pedigree meant that he may not have known better. Samson probably did. Both stories result in extreme tragedy and loss of life.

What does this story mean for us? First, some of you reading this are like Samson: Christian parents, Christian home, know about the Lord, and maybe won some stickers growing up in Sunday School. Others of you are like Jephthah: you’ve had a hard road, this study is the first time you’re learning about God, and maybe you’ve done some things you’re not proud of. What we need to understand is that God can use you no matter where you started.

Secondly, both men made massive mistakes, but the Lord used them even *after* these events. Your mistakes do not define you. There may be severe consequences. Getting right with the Lord doesn’t mean you may not spend time in the county clink for breaking the law.

Finally, these men illustrate the chasm between knowing *about* the Lord and knowing *him*. Don’t just be a fan. As we surrender to him in obedience, we begin to love obedience. We begin to know him and depend on his character more and more. As a mentor used to say often, “Things just work better when you do them God’s way.”