

When Winning is a Tragedy

5th Weekend after Pentecost – June 18/19, 2005
Sermon Background Study

Judges 11:1-6, 30-35 (New Living Translation)

Now Jephthah of Gilead was a great warrior. He was the son of Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute. ²Gilead's wife also had several sons, and when these half brothers grew up, they chased Jephthah off the land. "You will not get any of our father's inheritance," they said, "for you are the son of a prostitute." ³So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Soon he had a large band of rebels following him.

⁴At about this time, the Ammonites began their war against Israel. ⁵When the Ammonites attacked, the leaders of Gilead sent for Jephthah in the land of Tob. They said, ⁶"Come and be our commander! Help us fight the Ammonites!"

[Jephthah agreed to lead the forces of Gilead but only if they would also make him the tribal leader, and they did. After failing to make a diplomatic peace with the Ammonites, Jephthah prepared for war.]

And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, ³¹ I will give to the LORD the first thing coming out of my house to greet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

³² So Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites, and the LORD gave him victory. ³³ He thoroughly defeated the Ammonites from Aroer to an area near Minnith—twenty towns—and as far away as Abel-keramim. Thus Israel subdued the Ammonites.

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."

How many of us have never lost sight of what is most important in life? How many of us have never tried to bargain with God?

Today, we consider one father's tragic story.

Stories. The Bible is filled with lots and lots of stories. Our God is a God of stories and relationships, not lists and propositions. Today's story will surely prompt some long talks in your household!

Context

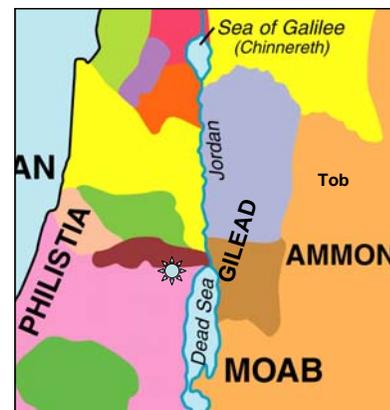
It was more than a thousand years before Jesus. Though God had promised the land to the tribes of Israel, getting it and keeping it had not been easy. For the twelve tribes, it had not been so much a military problem as a moral one. Time after time the tribes had wandered away from God, doing "what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (Judges 10:6), worshipping the Baals and Astartes (local Canaanite gods). Though God was angry with his people over their choices, he respected their freedom to choose wrongly and suffer the consequences of those choices. And so the Philistines pushed in upon the Israelites from the west and the Ammonites from the east (see the map on page one). This fell particularly hard on the Israelites who lived in Gilead on the east side of the Jordan river. With the river at their back, the Gileadites faced the Ammonites alone. Desperate, they appealed to God who, at first, told them to lie in the bed they had made for themselves – let them appeal to their new gods. However, as we'd expect, the

Map of Ancient Canaan

The book of Judges is set more than a millennia before Jesus, during the time when the tribes of Israel were consolidating their conquest of Canaan (ancient Palestine). It was a time when survival often seemed doubtful. The tribes were not ruled by a king, for god was to be their king. Instead, their chief administrators, such as Deborah and Samson, were known as judges.

The various shadings on this map represent the areas settled by the twelve tribes of Israel. You can see that the land of Gilead is east of the Jordan River.

I've put a sun symbol on the map just west of the Dead Sea to mark the site of Jerusalem. David would conquer Jerusalem more than a century after the time of Jephthah.



LORD relented, for “he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer” (10:16). God would rescue the Gileadites – but how?

Jephthah

At the time, a man named Gilead had several sons. All but one of his sons were born to Gilead’s wife. Jephthah, however, was Gilead’s son by a prostitute. All the boys seem to have gotten along fine when they were kids. But as they grew up, the wife’s sons turned on Jephthah, eventually driving him from the house. One can only imagine what all this was like for Jephthah. An outsider from the beginning, the one about whom all the folks would gossip – the product of an illicit union.

Jephthah fled northward to the area of Tob where he gathered around himself a band of raiders and marauders, soon earning for himself a reputation as an effective military leader.

Thus, when the Gileadites need rescuing from the Ammonites, they turn to Jephthah, hoping to take advantage of his experience and expertise in warfare. At first, Jephthah can’t believe that the Gileadite leaders have the nerve to come to him after chasing him away. But the tribal elders persist and Jephthah drives a bargain with them. He will lead them into battle with the Ammonites so long as they make him the tribal leader as well. The Gileadite leaders agree.

A bargain with God

At first, Jephthah tries diplomacy with the Ammonites. However, “the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent him” (11:28). With war imminent, Jephthah tries to strike yet another bargain – but this time it is with God! It seems so foolish, but who hasn’t tried it.

Jephthah vows that if God gives him a victory, then he will offer up as a sacrifice whomever or whatever first comes out of his house to welcome him home. The Hebrew in Jephthah’s vow is a little ambiguous. It is possible that he expects a “what” to be the first out of the door, as we know that animals often lived in the main house with the people. But, Jephthah might also be expecting a servant or other “who” to be the first out the door. Though the Israelites never practiced human sacrifice, perhaps Jephthah picked up the idea during his time away. Whichever it is, Jephthah makes the vow.

An unspeakable and self-inflicted tragedy

Jephthah gets his victory. The Gileadites are saved. It is a big win all the way around. As Jephthah arrives home ready to celebrate, his only child, his beloved daughter, races out to meet him. She is the first out the door!! Believing that he cannot take back his vow, Jephthah plunges into despair. He even manages to get angry at the poor girl, when it was his own misguided attempt to bargain with God that brought them to this place.

The first question to ask yourself is what God would have Jephthah do. He thinks that he cannot break his vow. But surely, God would prefer that Jephthah break his vow than kill his daughter. Read Micah 6 and ask yourself what it is that God really values – sacrifice or mercy. Or imagine what Jesus would have to say about Jephthah’s vow.

But Jephthah’s daughter knows that her father will keep the vow. She doesn’t ask him to break his vow but only that she be given some time to prepare. Jephthah allows her two months to go off with her friends to the mountains and prepare for her death. She will die so young. She will die a virgin. After two months, the girl returns home so that her father could do “with her according to the vow he had made” (11:39). The writer of Judges tells us that a custom arose from this. The young girls of Israel would go out for four days each year “to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite” (11:40).

In his reflections on this story, Ellsworth Kalas¹ notes that tragedy begets tragedy. The people of God are themselves locked into a cycle of tragedy. Every time they are rescued by God, they soon turn away again, descending deeper into darkness each time. For his part, Jephthah is born into tragic circumstances, the child of his father’s visit to a prostitute. Chased out of his home by his half-brothers, Jephthah reinforces the cycle of tragedy as he embraces a lawless life, eventually making and fulfilling a tragic bargain with God. Jephthah wins his victory but loses what is most precious to himself. In our own lives, how many of us lose what we value most in our attempt to get the big win? How many of us set ourselves up for tragedy.

¹from Kalas’ *Old Testament Stories from the Backside*

Daily Bible Readings

(more on Jephthah)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Judges 10:6-18 The oppression by the Ammonites</p>	<p>Day 2 Judges 11:1-11 We meet Jephthah and learn of the bargain he makes with the Gileadite leaders.</p>
<p>Day 3 Judges 11:12-33 Jephthah tries to strike a bargain with the Ammonite king and ends up trying to strike a bargain with God.</p>	<p>Day 4 Judges 11:34-39 The full story of Jephthah's daughter</p>
<p>Day 5 Judges 12:1-7 After Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites, the Israelite tribes still manage to turn on one another.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

June Book Recommendation

What's So Amazing About Grace, by Philip Yancey

Here it is in a nutshell: "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less." Grace is one of those words that we throw around a lot, but I wonder how much we really understand it. Yancey writes, "Grace is our last best word . . . it contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the sun." Like the other Yancey books I've recommended, I'm confident that you will both enjoy this book and get a lot out of it.

You can pick up a copy at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for God

A new Sunday morning four-week teaching series with Scott Engle

9:30 in Wesley Hall – begins July 17th

In April, Rev. Hasley asked the congregation to write on an index card the one question they would most like to ask God. We had nearly 150 responses. We've reviewed and organized the questions. Beginning July 17th, Rev. Halsey will preach a four-week sermon series in which he will begin tackling some of the questions. Also, Scott Engle will teach a four week series at 9:30 in Wesley Hall on the questions for God. We hope that you'll join us for this exciting series as we seek to understand better God, ourselves, and our world.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

What a story. It is pretty tempting to race ahead to Jephthah's vow, but you might begin by talking about Jephthah's own life story. His birth to a prostitute. His expulsion from his home. His life as a marauder and raider. How might all of this have helped to shape his bargaining – with the Gileadite leaders, the Ammonite king, and with God? How might Jephthah's earlier tragedies have contributed to his later ones?

I suspect that all of us have tried to bargain with God. If only God will do [fill in the blank] then we'll do [fill in the blank]. You might share some of your own stories of times that you've bargained with God. Some of them may be rather funny; some may be tragic. What do you make of Jephthah's vow? Is it rash? Is he so focused on winning that he doesn't even care about the consequences? What are some parallels in our own lives? When can we be so intent on winning that we ignore the price paid for our victory? Kalas draws our attention to the demands of the corporate world and our own ambitions.

Finally, you might share some of your thoughts and feelings about the daughter's response. Did it surprise you? How do you think you'd respond?

How did the whole episode make you feel about God? Was your first reaction to blame God for the daughter's tragedy? What lessons do you think we are to draw from this story – if any? Bear in mind that there is not a moral to all the Old Testament stories – sometimes they simply tell us what happened.