

When Good Promises Go Bad

Last week Rob talked about making a vow to God. It's funny because these days it's almost looked down upon. You're not supposed to "make a deal" with God. You're just supposed to be obedient. You don't say "Hey God, if you do this for me, I'll do this for you.". And yet, if we look at the Old Testament we see that people have done it and God has honored these agreements.

I think we still try to bargain with God today. When we're desperate and in a bind we can't get out of we'll call on him to fix it for us and we'll try to bribe him with something we think he'll like. Ironically, we may find ourselves trying to bribe Him with improving ourselves. An alcoholic may pray "Lord, if you'll just get me home safely tonight I'll never drink again." You're asking for help from God on both sides of the equation. It's not really sacrificing, is it? Or how about, "Lord, if you will grant me a child, I'll be the best father there is." Here I'm trying to bribe Him with something I would have tried to do anyway. Let alone the fact that I can't really uphold my end of the bargain because He's already the best father there is.

Does God have the right to say no to a deal? Of course He does. Here's the real catch though. He already knows if you can and will keep your end of it. It makes me wonder about those times we've tried to bargain with God and wondered why He didn't do what we asked. Maybe He already knew we couldn't or wouldn't hold up our end.

This brings us to the story of Jephthah. His father was a warrior but his mother was a prostitute. When he grew up his father's legitimate sons drove him away. Jephthah was forced to leave the safety of the cities and fend for himself. Jephthah managed fairly well and gathered around him what the bible calls worthless men or adventurers depending on which translation you use. The word used to describe these men is also used to describe an object as empty. He had managed to surround himself with men who were willing to do whatever had to be done.

Some time later, the Ammonites attacked Israel and the elders from his home town came to him and asked for his help to fend off the Ammonites. They offer to make him the head of the region if he is successful. It's a rags to riches kind of story, and yet, you know that if they are willing to come to someone who was kicked out and offer to have him be their leader if he's successful that this is no small task they're asking him.

It's interesting that the first thing Jephthah tries to do is actually negotiate a peace treaty with the Ammonites. He doesn't just jump into war. But, the Ammonites weren't going to change their minds. In fact, after a lengthy letter he sends to the King of Ammon, Judges 11:28 tells us "The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him." The King of Ammon wasn't worried about losing and didn't see it worthwhile to even acknowledge Jephthah with a response.

So here is Jephthah, about to go against the Ammonites who don't see him as any threat and at stake isn't just his life but a chance to be seen as respectable in the eyes of his own people. But he has to do something that odds are, nobody really thinks he can do. So what does he do? He makes a deal with God. In Judges 11:30 we read "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 is Jephthah offering to sacrifice? Even he doesn't know. It's hard to tell what his intent was. Was he thinking about a favorite pet that usually greeted him from the house? Was there a servant he didn't like? Who knows. What we do know is this. The word “whatever” that he used is a word that means not just whatever but also whoever. It's a very general and vague term that is used to refer to animals, people, objects, you name it. Think about that for a bit as you hear how this ends.

Judges 11:32-33 reads “Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands. He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.”

Note that it states clearly that God gave the Ammonites into his hands. It's obvious and clear when God is giving a person victory. He makes sure of it. He makes it so glaringly obvious that no man could possibly accomplish the task in the manner he did without God's help that people look and say “God is behind this”. God had accepted Jephthah's vow and had held up his end of the bargain.

When Jephthah returned home who should come out of his home to greet him but his only child. His daughter. Judges 11:35 “When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” He never saw it coming. Somehow, when he made his vow he hadn't thought it through. He obviously hadn't planned on this. He was shocked. And yet, he had made a vow to God and God had given him what he asked for. What should he do? What would you do?

On TV I've often seen a scenario that goes like this. “God if you help me get a cab quickly I'll go to church.” Then the person suddenly sees a cab come around the corner and comes up with one of two responses. It's either, “Oh, never mind, I found one.” or “Ha, fooled ya' again!”. Now, obviously we know where the writer of such a scenario is coming from. There's no real relationship with God being shown here. As children of God, when we make a vow to God, He takes it seriously. This is something Jephthah **did** understand about God. But God has never asked us to sacrifice children in his name and in fact destroyed entire nations over the practice of sacrificing children to false Gods. This was something Jephthah didn't seem to understand.

Judges 11:39 reads “... she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. ” He chose to fulfill his vow. Was he right to do this? It's a hard question because in Hebrews 11:32-34 we read “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.” Here Jephthah's faith is being compared to David, Samson, Samuel, even the prophets as a whole.

There is also the white elephant in the room that God already knew that Jephthah's daughter would be the one to greet him and that Jephthah could and would fulfill his vow. God could have let Jephthah be defeated and yet, he accepted the vow and fulfilled his end of the deal. I think it shows us something that is both wonderful and terrible. We have the ability to enter a contract with God, and He will even do his part first already knowing that we will do our part.

What would you sacrifice for God to give victory to you over something you can't fight alone? What does it look like to sacrifice today? Is it fasting? Giving away something you cherish more than God? Whatever you deal you try to make with God, if you do, make sure you have thought and prayed about it first. God takes his promises to you seriously, and you should take your promises to him just as seriously.