

BROKEN SAVIORS

THE BOOK OF JUDGES



JEPHTHAH AND SELF-RIGHTOUSNESS.

The Israelites have forsaken God for foreign gods and have reached what one commentator calls “the climax of the process of her Canaanization.” This means the people of Israel have become indistinguishable from those around them through their idolatry. As a result, when the people cry out for deliverance after being sacked by their enemies, God responds sarcastically by telling his people to seek salvation in the gods they have chosen. Finally, the Israelites confess their sin and “[become] impatient over the misery of Israel” (Judges 10:16). The next two verses tell us that the Israelites then began to search for a leader who would deliver the people from the encamped Ammonites, thus the stage is set for **Jephthah**.

At the start, Jephthah appears to be a godly leader since he declared God’s faithfulness to his people, pointed to God as the ultimate Judge, and was an effective military leader.

However, on his way to make war on the Ammonites, Jephthah makes a rash vow to God, promising that he will sacrifice whatever first comes out of his house if he is able to defeat his enemies. Tragically, upon returning home, he is greeted immediately by his daughter. Scholars have debated whether or not Jephthah actually killed his daughter or “sacrificed” her by forcing her into a life of virginity.³ Those who say she did not die have trouble with the duplicity of the man who had just declared the faithfulness of God so eloquently (Judges 9:16-27). God was clearly on his side, so how can he be committing such a heinous

act in the very next moments? But Jephthah's duplicity is precisely the issue throughout the entire story. He knows the scriptural history of Israel down to a "T" in his long speech defending his actions to the Amorites (Judges 11:16-27), but he doesn't know enough of God's law to refrain from child sacrifice? He was once a rejected brother who now is complicit in massacring thousands from a brother tribe? The Israelites cannot commit to the covenant vows they made to God in any form, but this one vow is the vow that Jephthah made sure to follow? This is the action of a man that needs to feel that God is on his side — but he does so on his own terms, according to his own set of morals. One commentator in particular thinks Jephthah may have been wishing to be closer to God, thinking that through a sacrifice he might be able to gain special favor. However, Jephthah's worry was unfounded, as the Spirit was already with him (Judges 11:29). Jephthah was trying to be righteous in his own eyes by doing something that would make God love him more, but he often failed at many other simple commands that God had already clearly given. His own failures coupled with the failures of those he tries to lead make for a sad ending to this broken savior story. The contrast to Jesus, our True Judge, is stark. Instead of being self-righteous, Jesus selflessly laid down his life for others. He responded to offenses and ridicule by absorbing them and paying for them on the cross, rather than repaying his enemies. In his death, he provided the basis for unity among all races and ethnicities in the world, rather than presiding over tribal hatred.

IN THE BIBLE.

Philippians 2:5-11

5 You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

6 Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.

7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form,
8 he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.
9 Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

QUESTIONS.

- 1.) What did you take from Jephthah's story?
- 2.) What does it mean to be "self-righteous?" What are the dangers of self-righteousness?
- 3.) How can Christians know that the Holy Spirit is always with them? What are some things you can do to focus your heart and mind on Christ when you don't feel the Spirit's presence?

Whenever you read the Bible, ask yourself these three questions:

1. What does this tell you about God?
2. What does this tell you about yourself and the world?
3. How is this going to change who you are and how you live?