

Title: Theology, a matter of life and death
Text: Judges 11.12-12.7
Theme: Your view of God
Series: Judges
Prop Stmtnt: What you really believe about God matters forever

Read Text:

In a recent debate at a mosque with some Muslim friends an Imam told me that he was Islam and Christian. What he meant was, since Mohammed respected the teachings of Jesus, that he too respected the teachings of Jesus. And since he followed Mohammed, he was a Muslim and as a Muslim who respected the teachings of Jesus, he tried to follow those too, so, he was a Christian. After all, isn't a Christian someone who follows the teachings of Jesus? I explained that while he respected Jesus, he was not actually a Christian, because he did not accept the claims of Jesus to being God. He was a Christian as he defined it, but not as the Bible defined it.

In a word, our debate was about theology. Theology can mean the study of God and all of the truths related to that in a broad sense. Or it can be used in a tigher sense that focuses specifically on who God is; nature, character and attributes. Whose view of God was right? Now, you might get into a debate as to whether Prince or Michael Jackson was a better entertainer and who did more to change pop culture, or if Princess Bride is actually the greatest movie of all time, or if the Lions are going to win 2 or 10 or more games this year. But debates about cultural icons, movies and football teams do not determine your standing before God and your eternal destiny. But there are theological issues that do. Not all do, but definitely some do. Your view of God (your theology) matters because the stakes are high. The stakes are high because your view about the very existence and nature of God is the basis from which everything flows. What you really believe about God matters forever.

Every nation had their gods and therefore, battles were viewed as a war between gods. God's plan was to use Israel to make himself known the world. For example, God exposed the Egyptian gods as frauds in the plagues and exodus. God exposed the Canaanite deities as fakes and frauds in the conquering and settling of Canaan by Israel. However, now Israel is really creating a mess. These people who are supposed to belong to and represent Yahweh are following gods who are fakes and frauds. It is one thing if they said, "We formally denounce all previous association with Yahweh and now publicly devote ourselves to Molech or Chemosh, Baal or Asherah, etc." But that is not what happened. They retained some of the language and traditions of following Yahweh, but they did not actually follow God. There were 2 major reasons for this:

1) Practically speaking, they did not have access to God's Word.

The Levites (in many ways, forerunners of elders and pastors) were supposed to be spread throughout the tribes in order to teach the law to the people. (Cf. 2 Chronicles 17.7-9) On the whole, they failed to do so, so many of the people were ignorant of what God actually said about himself. Some of the stories and laws from the Pentateuch were passed down, but over time they were altered and corrupted in the minds of the people. The people retained some of the language, ceremonies and traditions but they became mixed and confused with the practices of the nations

around them. This is called syncretism. Syncretism is the attempt to blend different beliefs and practices into one system. Syncretism has a cousin called pluralism. Pluralism, as it relates to theology is the idea that all beliefs are equally valid and therefore, truth is a matter of personal preference. When you say what you believe and someone responds by saying, “well, that is just your view, or your interpretation, or what is true for you” they are embracing pluralism. Both syncretism and pluralism are self-contradicting and are therefore self-defeating and cannot hold up under the weight of life. You cannot be a Muslim and a Christian without redefining what it means to be a Muslim or redefining what it means to be a Christian. Syncretism and pluralism comes from the absence of, or the failure to understand or follow what God says about himself in his Word. But, that is what is going on in the book of Judges. The people of Israel had embraced so many aspects of Baal worship, even as they continued to call themselves followers of Yahweh, that neither you nor they could tell where the line was in their thinking between following Baal ended and following Yahweh began. It all blended together. Without access to and clear teaching from the Scriptures, people come up with their own beliefs about God and about themselves. This is called theology. Everyone has theology. Everyone is a theologian.

E.g. the transgender debate is not a debate about gender. It is a debate about theology. Who has the right to have the final word about my life? Is it the Creator who created people as male and female and wrote the coding for that in our DNA (general revelation) and explained the purpose for gender distinction in his Word (special revelation) OR will the creation have the final word and say, “I get to overrule God and determine my own identity.”? We live in the midst of many in the cultural elite who attempt to write God out of history. It is laughable, preposterous and absurd, yet tragic and grievous. Seriously, how can you, as the creation decide that the Creator does not exist? There is a major and obvious problem with that. It is called – Death! What is rather interesting to me, is that I am accused of being on the wrong side of history because my beliefs are so counter-culture in many ways, but, history is actually His story and being on the wrong side of history actually means having the wrong view of or the relationship to God and what he says. Some people openly reject God’s Word, others, attempt to reinterpret it and get it away with that as long as people do not know God’s Word or have access to it.

So, what I want you to see is that our days are so very similar to the days of the Judges. Because people are ignorant of the Bible, they do not know what God says about himself, so people are creating their own view of who God is and what it means to follow him. Without access to, reading and understanding God’s revelation (law)

2) The Leadership of the nation had an even greater influence upon the nation.

The Leader was the law (practically). If he was good and he followed God, he could exert a good influence on the people, but even then, the devotion of the people might have been to the leader and not actually to God. If he was bad and he followed other gods, then with the power of influence and the power of might, taxation, influence and trendiness, he could send the nation into the manure pile in a hurry.

So, what is happening here in Judges? If Judges had a tombstone, (pic 1450-1050 BC) It would say, “In those days, Israel did not have a king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” What was “right” was rarely right. What was done in the name of God was usually not actually

from God. There are times when a leader says or does something that is right. But, hold the phone. That does not mean that everything that he does is right. There are also times when he does something that is wrong, which does not mean that everything he does is wrong. In some cases, like Jephthah, the fact that God uses him as a means to keep his people from being destroyed (even though they deserve it) does not mean that God is endorsing him. The very leader that God uses to protect them from their enemies may be the same leader that God uses to judge them for their disobedience. And God may be doing that all at the same time.

Looking at the “good” that a leader does is not a reason to gloss over his wickedness. At the same time, recognizing his wickedness does not mean that we shouldn’t be grateful for any “good” that he may have done. Do you remember the poem from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – *“There was a little girl, who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good, she was very, very good, but when she was bad, she was horrid.”* That could almost describe Jephthah. When he was good, he was very, very good and that is wonderfully displayed in his communication with the King of Ammon.

1. **Here is a good apologetic.** (11.12-28)

An apologetic means, a reasoned defense for what you believe. What we learn about Jephthah here is that he provides a well-reasoned defense for his position. Let me explain. The Ammonites have gathered for war against Israel and Israel scrambles for a leader and finds one in Jephthah who agrees to come to their aid for a price that he will exact later. But now, first things first. He has to deal with Ammon. So, Jephthah sends a delegation and asks, “What exactly is your problem?” The King of Ammon responded by saying, “You took my land when you came from Egypt and I want it back. So, give it back peaceably and thins will be fine (11-12). Jephthah says, “hold the phone” you are practicing some revisionist history. Let’s at least get the facts straight, which is what he reviews in verses 15-22. He starts with an argument from history. When Israel came up from Egypt, Israel asked permission from Edom and from Moab to go through their respective lands. Both Edom and Moab refused. But, Israel did not retaliate, but instead asked Sihon, the king of Amorites if Israel could go through his land. Sihon responded by bringing an army and attempted to destroy Israel, but instead suffered such an overwhelming defeat that it basically ended the Amorites as a nation. That defeat was so stunning that it rocked the world of all of the other countries in that region. So, what Jephthah is saying is that the land you want us to return to you was never yours. It belonged to the Amorites whom we defeated when they attacked us. So, we got their land.

That argument from history led into an argument of theology. Yahweh gave us this land and so, we took it. You take the land that your god gives you and we take the land that God gives us. Besides, even Balak didn’t claim that we stole land from them. So, why are you brining this up 300 years later? No one else has. You do not have a right to this land.

Now, I think Jephthah did a great job responding to the King of Ammon, but it’s not like the King of Ammon was going to listen to this and say, “Oh yea, you’re right, sorry, my bad, I had forgotten about that. Let’s pretend that none of this ever happened.” and go home. So, why do you think Jephthah went through all of this trouble? For one, he could have certainly been buying some time in order to organize this army that was hastily called up. And that would have

certainly been important, but I think there is more to it. What right did Jephthah have to be the leader of Israel? His success in battle was, humanly speaking, completely dependent upon his ability to command respect, obedience and build morale. He wasn't an idiot. He knew there were plenty of guys who were wondering who he was, where he had come from and why he was the leader. I think that his argument to the King of Ammon was brilliant because this provided him with the opportunity to give Israel the proper motivation and perspective to go to war.

Jephthah's explanation was a very useful and needful reminder to Israel of how they got to this point in their history. Why are we in this land? We are here because Yahweh gave it to us. And if Yahweh gave it to us, he can certainly take it away from us if we do not honor him. So, at this point I'm thinking: Way to go Jephthah! That was a good defense. That was some good apologetics. And if you are a soldier in Israel wondering if you ought to put your life on the line for this guy, who came from Tob, and whose mom was a prostitute, then this argument of his would give you some confidence in his thinking and therefore in him. But, what happens when someone who says the right things, does the wrong things?

Some of the most powerful and well-known words ever written about personal liberty were authored by Thomas Jefferson. "*We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*" Some of us hear these words, and we want to place our hands over our hearts or wipe a tear from our eyes as our minds start to play "God bless America". But, the man who wrote those words, owned slaves, whom he did not treat as being created equally and had a long-term relationship with one of them Sally Hemings, that could not in any way be considered as consensual. What happens when someone who says the right things, does the wrong things? What do you do with Thomas Jefferson? What he said was really good, what he did was really bad, just like Jephthah.

2. **Here is a mess!** (11.29-40)

The rest of the account about Jephthah is significant for what it doesn't say. What I mean is that all of the information about the battle between Israel and Ammon is summarized in two verses (32-33). The LORD gave Ammon into the hands of Jephthah and he whooped them. There is nothing about strategy, movement and other military details. But, the rest of the account focuses upon two things: Jephthah's vow and Jephthah's reaction. Both of them are utterly tragic.

A. Tragic decision

In his zeal for victory, Jephthah makes a foolish vow. He promises God, "*If you will give me the Ammonites into my hand, 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.*" What did he mean by that? What did he think would come out to meet him? Servants? Animals? We don't know. But stop here for a second. If someone wanted to offer God a special sacrifice as a thanksgiving or an act of worship, there was provision in the Law for that. What Jephthah did was add to the Law, his own practice that he came up with that sounded a whole lot more like Baal worship than it did Yahweh worship. This foolish decision became a huge problem when after his victory, his daughter was the first out of the door to greet him.

B. Grievous consequences

Now Jephthah believes that he is caught in between a terrible rock and a terrible hard place. Does he break his vow to God and spare his daughter or does he keep his vow and sacrifice his daughter? He made a bad vow to God and now he wrongly believed that he had to keep that bad vow because he had a wrong view of God. His view of God was more like the culture's view of Baal. We have to sacrifice what we believe is valuable to make him happy. This is what the worship of Molech was like. Parents would offer their children as human sacrifices to appease the gods and now, Jephthah was doing the same thing when this was explicitly forbidden by the Law (Lev. 20.2-5). Jephthah was treating Yahweh the way the nations around him treated Molech. His bad theology led to a tragic decision. (Illus. Man who told his daughter that if she did this one thing that he forbid her to do, that he would put her out of the family and refuse to treat her as a daughter. But what he forbid her to do was not his right as a dad. And what he forbid her to do was not something that was wrong. His authority as a Dad goes as far as God's Word gives him that right. Now what could he do? He thought he could not go back on his word.

What should he have done? He should have repented over his foolishness and thrown himself at the mercy of God. His utterly foolish vow was only made worse because he thought that he had to keep it. This is different than making a legitimate vow and then trying to get out of it later on. What Jephthah did was treat Yahweh like one would treat Molech. And so, after giving his daughter and her friends two months to mourn the fact that she would never marry and have children, she was killed as a sacrifice. This is not a postscript on the story of Jephthah, this is a main point which is intended for us to read and feel the weight of this tragedy in our gut. If your stomach is turning right now and your heart is heavy, then you are understanding this account correctly. This is what happens when people attribute things to God that do not belong to him, because they are allowing their theology to be formed by their hearts or the culture instead of by God's Word. Theology is a matter of life and death

3. Chaos (12.1-7)

And then it happens again. The arrogance of Ephraim (the dominant tribe of Northern Israel) is on full display. We've been disrespected! How many times have you heard that as a reason for someone doing some really stupid things? A few years ago, a local funeral home called me to see if I could do the funeral service for a family that did not have a church or minister. I showed up only to find out that half the family had arrived a few hours before and were tailgating in the parking lot of the funeral home with their friend Jack Daniels. By the time we got through the service and to the cemetery, these guys were utterly plastered. At the cemetery they decided that they were going to dig the grave by hand, with shovels because it was a matter of honor. To let anyone else do it, would be disrespectful. I was looking at the funeral director and saying, "I don't remember signing up for this." This is nuts. And it was. These guys were acting like Ephraim.

We should have been called to fight in this war. How come you didn't call us? This same sort of thing happened with Gideon and Ephraim but whereas Gideon was able to deftly diffuse the situation Jephthah took them head-on. Their accusation of being disrespected was viewed by

Jephthah as being disrespectful and he attacked them and the result was Ephraim lost 42,000 men. That is huge! That devastating civil war essentially wiped out Ephraim. And Ephraim never really recovered her former strength. The final verse simply says that he was judge for 6 years and then he died (probably rather young). What are we supposed to do with that? Jephthah could save Israel from Ammon, but he couldn't save Israel from Israel. Our heroes are not worth worshipping because they cannot really save you. Only Jesus can do that.

Years ago, I told the story of John Griffith, who, in 1937 was the operator of a drawbridge over which the Memphis Express would travel. On this fateful day, his 8-year old son who had come with him to work had gotten his leg caught in the giant cogs of the drawbridge and John had to decide whether to save his son and kill the 400 passengers on the train, or lower the bridge, save the passengers, but sacrifice his son. I was attempting to explain how God the Father, sacrificed his Son in order to save us and how much that cost him. But, while it is a traumatic account, of a father's worst nightmare, I don't think that I should have used it for that purpose. Unlike Jephthah or John Griffith, God was never caught on the horns of a dilemma. The cross was not the Father's worst nightmare. God was not trapped with no other choice. Our salvation was planned before creation and set into motion when he hung the stars in space. God designed you. He knows you. He chose to set his affection upon you and call you his own. He sent Christ to pay the debt you could not pay and Christ was not caught in the cogs of a cosmic clash. Christ laid down his life because he was all in for your redemption. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter and it did not accomplish a thing. Christ laid down his life and he accomplished it all.