



March 16, 2014  
Judges 10 - 12  
"Words Matter"  
Pastor Gary Hamrick

So far in Pastor Gary's series in the book of Judges, we've looked at five judges of Israel: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, and Gideon. Succeeding Gideon, not including his son, Abimelech, who was self-appointed versus God-appointed, were Tola<sup>1</sup> and Jair.<sup>2</sup>

In this study, we'll take a look at Jephthah, whose name means, "Yahweh [God] will set free." Valuable life-lessons can be learned from Jephthah, including the reasons why we shouldn't make rash vows or hasty promises, why we need to refrain from trying to make conditional deals with God, and keeping our promises, unless we've promised something unbiblical, illegal, or unethical.

### Historical Background

1. Once again the nation of Israel has gone through the cycle of sin (see diagram), and we read in **Judges 10:16**, that the Lord "*could bear Israel's misery no longer.*"<sup>3</sup>
  - a. This is noteworthy because it shows how the Lord grieves over our misery, even when we bring misery upon ourselves.
  - b. The truth of Scripture is that he is a loving, compassionate Father who is burdened for his children!
  
2. Jephthah can be counted among the biblical characters, like Lot and Balam, who are complex and hard to figure out.

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<sup>1</sup> In Hebrew, Tola means, "red worm."

<sup>2</sup> In Hebrew, Jair means, "God enlightens."

<sup>3</sup> **Judges 10:16** KJV - "The Lord's soul was grieved for the misery of Israel."

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.jairmeans.com/eng/eng\\_source/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0011\\_0\\_10074.html](http://www.jairmeans.com/eng/eng_source/judaica/ejud_0002_0011_0_10074.html)

<sup>3</sup> **Judges 10:16** KJV - "The Lord's soul was grieved for the misery of Israel."

- a. He was from Gilead, which was a mountain range on the eastern side of the Jordan River, in what today is the country of Jordan.
  - i. Of the 12 Tribes of Israel, 2½ lived on the east side of the Jordan River: Reuben, Gad, and the ½ tribe of Manasseh.
  - ii. Some Bible scholars believe Jephthah was from the tribe of Manasseh, but there is no biblical evidence to support this opinion.
- b. Jephthah's father had an encounter with a prostitute, and Jephthah was a product of that encounter.
  - i. Ancient Rabbinic writings indicate his mother was an Ishmaelite.
  - ii. The well-known Jewish historian, Josephus, believed her to be a Gentile.
- c. His father took Jephthah into his home, but his brothers never accepted him, and when his brothers grew up they rejected him.
  - i. **Judges 11:2** - *"Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. 'You are not going to get any inheritance in our family,' they said, 'because you are the son of another woman.' "*
- d. The fact that he was an illegitimate child adds to the remarkable nature of this story, because we often have an image of the people God uses, which doesn't usually include children of prostitutes who were rejected by their families and banished from their homes; but that's who Jephthah was, and that's who God used.
  - i. None of us has a say when it comes to the family we are born into, and we have no choice when it comes to who are parents are, where we are born, or who is in our family tree; these things are decided for us.
  - ii. Some of us are thankful for these things, but others have a hard time dealing with the where, what, and whom they've come from.
  - iii. We can take heart, because God used the child of a prostitute who was rejected by his family and from his home, to lead a nation.
  - iv. Where we've come from is not as important as where we are going!
  - v. We can't rest on our pedigree if it was good and we're not limited by it if it was bad; we are new creatures in Christ!
    - 1. **2 Corinthians 5:17** - *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"*
- e. Jephthah's brothers wanted nothing to do with him that is until they needed a warrior to help deliver them from the Ammonites.
  - i. His response to their request says something about his character, because he was basically saying: "Oh, first you drove me out, and now that you're in trouble, you want me back. Isn't that convenient!"
  - ii. Most people would say, "Do you take me for a fool? You kicked me out and now you want me to lead you?"

### 3. Diplomacy with the Ammonites

- a. **Judges 11:12-13** - *“Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: ‘What do you have against us that you have attacked our country?’ The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah’s messengers, ‘When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably.’ ”*
- b. A paraphrase of **Judges 11:14-26**, might read like this: “What are you talking about? We never tried to take the land of the Ammonites or the Moabites; we just wanted to pass through Edom and Moab, but the Amorites attacked us. And when we defeated them we took their land, not your land. We’ve been living here 300 years, so why haven’t you or your ancestors complained before? This never was your land, and yet you want to fight us for it!”
- c. **Judges 11:27-28** - *“ ‘I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the Lord, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites.’ The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.”*

### 4. War with the Ammonites

- a. **Judges 11:29** - *“Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.”*
- b. Like Jephthah, when we have the Spirit of God and he has equipped us, we’ll never be in a place in which we need to try make any deals with God; but that’s exactly what Jephthah did!
- c. For some reason Jephthah thought the only way to guarantee success in battle would be to make a deal with God, but this mindset only exposes his spiritual immaturity.
- d. According to Jewish literature and rabbinical writings, Jephthah is counted among “the least worthy judges of Israel,”<sup>4</sup> and was labeled by the ancient Rabbis as being “foolish” and “ignorant.”<sup>5</sup>
- e. The “deal” he made with God is the thing he’s known for; not his valiant victory of the Ammonites or the way he overcame a terrible childhood.

### 5. The Vow - **Judges 11:30-40**

- a. **Judges 11:30-31** - *“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.’ ”*

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0011\\_0\\_10074.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0011_0_10074.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8584-jephthah>

6. Question #1 – Who or what in the world was Jephthah thinking might come out his front door?
- a. It seems obvious that unless he kept sheep, goats, cattle or some other kind of livestock in his house, the likelihood was that any legitimate sacrifice that might come walking out his front door would be nil.
  - b. The chance of some one greeting him on two legs was far more likely than some thing greeting him on four legs.
    - i. There are those who believe he did intend for the sacrifice to be an animal, i.e. “it” (masculine tense), and since [Leviticus 1:3](#) instructs that a burnt offering was to be a male from the flock or herd, he may very well have been thinking about an animal.
  - c. The fact is, we really don’t know what he was thinking, but the reality is that most of us, like Jephthah, aren’t thinking right when we make a rash vow.
    - i. [Leviticus 1:3](#) – *“If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the Lord.”*
7. Questions #2 – Did Jephthah really sacrifice his daughter?
- a. Bible scholars are divided on this question, with many saying, “Yes,” and others saying, “No.”
  - b. Those who say “No” point to the word “and” in the vow, and say it could be translated “or.”
    - i. [Judges 11:31](#) – *“... 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, [or] I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”*
    - ii. The understanding for this point of view is that he would either dedicate it or sacrifice it, and since his daughter was not an animal, he wouldn’t have sacrificed her to the Lord, he would have dedicated her to the Lord.
    - iii. A similar example in the Bible would be Samuel’s mother, who took him as a boy and gave him to the priest in the Temple, because she made a vow to dedicate him to the Lord.
    - iv. In this understanding, Jephthah would have taken her to the Tabernacle where she would live out her life in service to God.
    - v. The reason for the terrible grief was two-fold, in that she was his only child, and giving her up would be painful, plus she was a virgin, which meant she would never marry or have a family of her own.
    - vi. Pastor Gary emphasized that the idea that Jephthah dedicated his daughter to life-long service in the Tabernacle is an almost exclusively Western interpretation.
      1. This viewpoint appeals to our rational sensibilities because, after all, no father in his right mind would do such a thing,

which makes us work the Scripture in such a way as to appease our offended conscience.

- vii. Almost all Jewish literature and rabbinical views on this account indicate Jephthah did in fact sacrifice his daughter, and even though it was a rash vow that he regretted, he followed through on it, which is why Jewish literature views him as foolish, ignorant, and among the worst of Israel's judges.
  - viii. The Jewish Midrash <sup>6</sup> (a commentary on the Old Testament by ancient rabbis) says it was God's punishment on Jephthah, that his flesh decayed and his limbs fell off! <sup>7</sup>
  - ix. Pastor Gary said he thought the original language seems to indicate that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, and that's why there was a lasting memorial to her that every year the young women of Israel went out to commemorate <sup>8</sup> her life.
  - x. The real hero of this story is Jephthah's daughter, because whatever was done to her, she demonstrated incredible courage and was willing to allow her father to keep his word, even though it meant she would give up her future or her very life, because she wanted her father to honor God with his word.
8. Question #3 - Whether he sacrificed his daughter or dedicated her, what can we learn from Jephthah's vow?
- a. Don't make rash vows or hasty promises.
  - b. Don't try to make conditional deals with God.
  - c. Don't fail to keep your promises.

### Don't Make Rash Vows Or Hasty Promises

- 9. **Matthew 12:37** - *"For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*
- 10. **Luke 12:3** - *"What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs."*
- 11. Words matter to God, and that's why marriage vows are so sacred to him, because we are promising that we will love, honor, and cherish, in sickness and in health, to forsake all others until the day we die.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0014\\_0\\_13846.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0014_0_13846.html)

<sup>7</sup> <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jephthahs-daughter-midrash-and-aggadah>

<sup>8</sup> The KJV uses the word, "lament."

- a. We must never forget that God hears the words we use to pledge our love, loyalty, and fidelity to our spouse.
  - b. Unfortunately, in our day, many people treat these vows like an order change at a fast-food drive-in window!
12. **Proverbs 20:25** - *"It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows."*
  13. **Ecclesiastes 5:2-3** - *"Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words."*
  14. **Ecclesiastes 5:5** - *"It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it."*
  15. **Ecclesiastes 5:6a** - *"Do not let your mouth lead you into sin."*
  16. We need to learn to not make promises we're not sure we can keep, especially with our spouse, children, family, and friends!
  17. We need to say things like "We'll see" or "Maybe later" or "Let me think/pray about it."
  18. The bottom line is that we need to mean what we say and say what we mean.

### Don't Try To Make Conditional Deals With God

19. In **Judges 11:30-31**, Jephthah made the conditional statement of *"If you," "then I will."*
20. Many people try to enter into similar negotiations with God, by saying: "Lord, if you'll just get me this job, then I'll start living for you, and if you do this, I'll stop drinking!" or "Lord, if you just get me out of this mess, I'll serve you as a missionary anywhere in the world!"
21. God is not motivated to bless us because of what we can offer him, because we will never be able to offer anything to God that would make him better off or improve his condition!

22. God does what he does for us not because of what we offer him, but because of the love he offers us!
23. What the Lord wants from us is not negotiations, but obedience, so we would do well to stop the “deal-making” and simply obey him.

Do What You Say  
Unless You Promise Something Unbiblical, Illegal, Or Unethical

24. Was there a way out for Jephthah or was it the case that once he made the vow he was obligated to keep it?
25. He was not obligated to keep his vow because it was unbiblical, according to [Deuteronomy 12:31](#), which makes clear that human sacrifice was a pagan practice that was completely unacceptable to God.<sup>9</sup>
26. Jephthah knew the Law, because [Leviticus 27:1-5](#) tells us that he could have made good on his vow by paying a monetary value of ten shekels to the priest in exchange for her life.
27. In [Numbers 30](#), God made provision for a husband to be able to nullify an inappropriate vow.
28. We are not obligated to do everything we say if it is unbiblical, illegal, or unethical, because we would do double damage by sinning with our actions and our words.
29. Since we are under the New Covenant of grace, we need to:
- a. Ask God for forgiveness for saying something in haste.
  - b. Ask the person or persons involved for forgiveness for saying something that we can't follow through on because it would be an unbiblical, illegal, or unethical promise.
  - c. Remember that just because we promise something that might be inconvenient or costly or time-consuming, we are not relieved of our responsibility to fulfill our promises.
    - i. [Psalm 15:4](#) – God will honor the person *“who keeps his [her] oath even when it hurts.”*

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<sup>9</sup> “You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.”

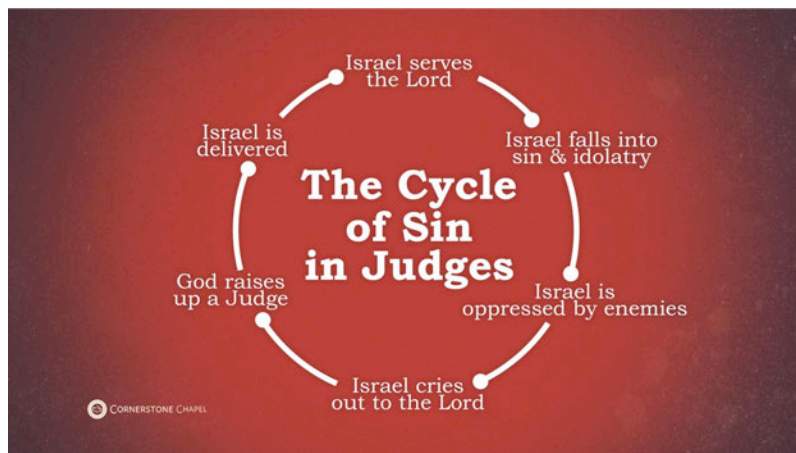
- d. [Deuteronomy 23:23](#) - *“Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth.”*
- e. [Matthew 5:37](#) - *“Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”*
  - i. When we obey the Lord’s instruction in this way, we model the character of God, because God keeps his promises and his faithful to his Word.
    - 1. [Psalm 145:13b](#) - *“The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.”*

### Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read [Judges 10:6–11:11](#) to provide an overview for this study.
3. Allow the people in your group to share their personal experiences regarding their family background. (See #2f above)
  - a. What are some of the ways your story is similar or dissimilar to Jephthah’s?
  - b. Do you agree with Pastor Gary’s statement that where we’ve come from is not as important as where we’re going?
  - c. How does [2 Corinthians 5:17](#) encourage you in your walk with the Lord?
4. Provide an overview of Jephthah’s vow. (See #5 above)
  - a. What are some of the situations you’ve found yourself in in which you made a promise you couldn’t or wouldn’t keep?
  - b. Read and discuss [Matthew 12:37](#) and [Luke 12:3](#).
  - c. Read and discuss [Proverbs 20:25](#) and [Ecclesiastes 5:2–3, 5–6](#).
5. Spend time sharing examples of situations in which the people in your group tried to “negotiate a deal” with the Lord.
6. Are you a person of your word, even when it costs you something?
  - a. Read and discuss [Psalm 15:4](#), [Deuteronomy 23:23](#), and [Matthew 5:37](#).
7. Close your time in prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to help each person: avoid the temptation to make a rash vow or a hasty promise; avoid the temptation to



try to negotiate a deal with God; remember that God wants us to keep our promises, even when it costs us something, so long as the promise is not unbiblical, illegal, or unethical; thank the Lord for the fact that he is *"faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made."*



\* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New International Version (NIV 1984).