

What Will It Take To Bring Us Back?

When Brian, Matt and I were planning this preaching series on Judges, Brian assigned me chapters 9 - 12. I don't know if Brian had read through Judges Chapters 9 -12 before he gave it to me, but chapter 9 covers the life of one of Gideon's sons named Abimelech.

Abimelech

Abimelech is remembered for several things in his short three year reign as governor of Israel. He hired mercenaries to kill his 70 brothers so that he could be the ruler without any family competition. Only his youngest brother survived this mass murderer. His other claim to fame was that he captured the city of Shechem and burnt alive 1000 men and women who were sheltering in the city tower. When he tried the same trick again at the city of Thebez, a woman dropped a millstone from the top of the tower, which landed on Abimelech's head and cracked his skull, which led to him asking his armour bearer to kill him so that he wouldn't have the stigma of being killed by a woman. You might have already guessed that I'm not planning to bring you an uplifting sermon about Abimelech. Although men, there are some lessons for us from the book of Judges. If you are way overweight, watch out for left handed men named Ehud. Don't go camping with any woman named Jael. And if you see a woman carrying a millstone up a tower, stand well clear.

Jephthah

Judges chapters 10 – 12 covers the life of Jephthah. Now he seems like a much better prospect to talk about, because Jephthah is mentioned in Hebrews Chapter 11 in the catalogue of heroes of the faith. His name is in there with some of the big names of the Old Testament. This is what it says:

“And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and 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.” (Hebrews 11:32-34 NIV)

Jephthah was another of those unlikely people that God used. He came from a really dysfunctional family. His father's name was Gilead, which was a region of Israel. That's like naming your child "Bay of Plenty". It may have been a Jewish way of saying that his father could have been anyone, for his mother was a prostitute, an outcast of society. Here's how Judges 11 describes Jephthah's upbringing:
“Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. 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.” So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.” (Judges 11:1-3 NIV)

Jephthah was scorned by people because of what his parents had done. He was rejected by his brothers, kicked out of home and stripped of any rights of inheritance. Rejected by his family and society, Jephthah gathered around himself a group of hard men like himself who spent their time raiding neighbouring tribes and kingdoms that were enemies of Israel. Jephthah became the hard man – the enforcer. Now, here's the unlikely bit:

“Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. “Come,” they said, “be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites.” Jephthah said to them, “Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?” The elders of Gilead said to him, “Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead.” Jephthah answered, “Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me—will I really be your head?” The elders of Gilead replied, “The Lord is our witness; we will certainly do as you say.” So Jephthah went with the

elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them.” (Judges 11:4-11 NIV)

From Reject To Ruler.

What Jephthah didn't know was that the Elders of the region of Gilead had offered the job of leading an army to attack the Ammonites to anyone who would take it, but no one would. He was their last hope. But Jephthah wasn't stupid. He knew they were desperate. So he negotiated a deal whereby he would not just be leader of Israel while he was attacking the Ammonites, but that after the battle was over, he would remain as leader.

Surprisingly, Jephthah turned out to be a wise leader. Instead of charging off into battle with the Ammonites, he tried diplomacy to prevent a fight. He sent messengers to the Ammonite King, and set up a series of talks to try and resolve the situation. But every proposal he put forward was rejected by the Ammonites. Here's the next part of the story:
“The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him. Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. 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.” 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.” (Judges 11:28-33 NIV)

The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah and in the power of the Spirit he won a great battle. But there is a major problem contained in those last verses I have just read. Jephthah foolishly makes a vow that has disastrous consequences. He vows to the Lord that if he wins the battle, whatever comes out of the door of his house to meet him when he comes home, he will sacrifice to the Lord. It was at best, misguided devotion to the Lord. But let's not dress it up in spiritual language. It was downright stupidity. What did he expect to come out of the door of his house? An oxen? Two pigeons? A sacrificial lamb? Sacrificial animals don't live in houses. People live in houses. People we love and cherish.

Here's what happened:

“When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” (Judges 11:34 -35 NIV)

Ignoring The Word Of God.

The final part of the chapter is tragic. Jephthah did what he had vowed to do, and sacrificed his daughter. It was a tragic result of not knowing, or not obeying the word of God. The law of the Lord in Deuteronomy 21:31 describes how God hates those who sacrifice their children to their gods. These were the practises of the surrounding pagan nations that were an abomination to the Lord. God commanded Israel never to do it, and expressly forbade what Jephthah did. And the added tragedy of this story is that had Jephthah known the scriptures, he would have known that his situation is spelled out in Leviticus 27. When Jephthah committed his daughters life to the Lord, that life could have been redeemed by the payment of a certain amount of money. Ignorance of Gods ways, or a rejection of Gods ways, often results in tragedy.

When We Abandon Gods Ways, Tragedy Results

It was the Nazis belief in the theory of eugenics that encouraged those who were strong and blond to have many children. But there was a dark side. Those who the Nazis deemed to be subnormal were

either sterilised or killed. Then the policy was extended to those with mental and physical disabilities, and those with low IQ's. Anyone who couldn't contribute to the master race were considered to be of no value and were often quietly killed off. Ultimately, Jews, Gypsies, and anyone deemed undesirable were sent to the Nazi killing factories. Millions died because God's ways were rejected. The rejection of God's value on human life in our society has resulted in the killing of thousands of unborn children. Be ready people. The next rejection of Godly values that is coming in our country is the promotion of euthanasia.

It was the express rejection of Godly values in Marxism that allowed Stalin's reign of terror to flourish in the Soviet Union. Under the rule of Stalin and Hitler, 14 million people were murdered in central Europe in a twelve year period between 1933 and 1945. Not one of those 14 million was a soldier on active duty. None were carrying weapons. Most were women, children and the elderly. That's what happens when people do what is right in their own eyes.

Today we are living in days like the days of the Judges, where every man does what is right in his own eyes. Militant Islam is on the rise. Don't be fooled by those who selectively quote passages from the Koran that Islam is a religion of peace. There is much in the Koran about peace, but in Islamic teaching, the latter teachings of the Prophet Mohammed always have more authority than the earlier teachings. It's the latter teaching of the Prophet that calls for a Jihad against infidels who do not believe. Fundamentalist militants like Boko Haram, and Islamic State and Al Qaeda are convinced they are holding to the true teaching of the Prophet. Their barbaric reign of terror is projected to increase in the coming years.

What Will It Take To Bring Us Back To God?

We in the West are ill prepared for what is to come, for we have largely abandoned belief in God and his ways. There is a growing ignorance of what God requires of us. Our days are like the days of the Judges, where every man does what is right in his own eyes. You and I may read the book of Judges and wonder at the barbarism of society then, but we are seeing the same barbaric practises in our world today. When nations turn their backs on God and his ways, the results are predictable and inevitable.

Hold On To Truth

How should we live in these days? Should we cower in fear and retreat into our Christian ghettos?

There are several underlying truths about God that come out of the book of Judges that we should hold on to in these days.

1. God is Righteous.

Judges paints a sombre picture of what happens to a nation when they turn away from the righteousness of God. God is a God of righteousness and in these chapters we can almost hear the voice of the Holy Spirit warning us not to forsake our righteous God. God's ways are good. If we neglect them, evil will come upon us.

2. God is Sovereign.

He works his purposes out in his own ways. In the scriptures he sometimes uses pagan kings and nations to accomplish his purposes of bringing his people back to himself. Balaam the prophet wasn't an Israelite, but God used him. Nebuchadnezzar was a heathen king, but God used him. Even though the Persian king Cyrus didn't know God, God used him. So how is it that someone as flawed as Jephthah makes it into the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11? The focus of the book of Judges is that our faithful God will do anything, and use any anyone, to bring us back to himself.

3. God is Gracious.

A pattern in Judges keeps repeating itself. Sin, slavery, shout and salvation. A downward spiral into sin. A realisation that sin has led to slavery. A shout out to God for help. God coming to the rescue with salvation. Why does God put up with this? Why doesn't he give up? Why does he believe us when we promise we won't do it again? It's the same pattern that repeats in our lives. We promise God but don't follow through. Why does God put up with us? It's because he loves us, and believes that we can be more than we are now. He's like a loving parent who never gives up on their disobedient kids. If you

don't remember anything else from our study of the book of Judges, remember this. Our God is a faithful God who has a stubborn love for his children. He will not give up on you. Hold on to that.

4. The importance of faith.

If you look at the lives of these Judges, in most cases their character was deeply flawed. Jephthah was responsible for the deaths of 42,000 of his fellow Israelites from the tribe of Ephraim. Gideon did great things for God, but at the end of his life he failed God by setting himself up as a king, with a harem and a concubine. Samson, also achieved great things for God, but his marriage to a pagan Philistine woman led to his downfall. Yet in these deeply flawed characters, there was a spark of faith in God that enabled them to do amazing things. And that's all God is looking for in you and me. In a day when everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes, God is looking for people who will hold on to his truth, and live by faith.

Power Point

What Will It Take To Bring Us Back?

Abimelech

Jephthah

"And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and 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." (Hebrews 11:32-34 NIV)

"Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. 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." So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him." (Judges 11:1-3 NIV)

"Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites." Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?" The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead." Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me—will I really be your head?" The elders of Gilead replied, "The Lord is our witness; we will certainly do as you say." So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them." (Judges 11:4-11 NIV)

From Reject To Ruler.

"The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him. Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. 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." 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." (Judges 11:28-33 NIV)

“ When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.” (Judges 11:34 -35 NIV)

Ignoring The Word Of God.

When We Abandon Gods Ways, Tragedy Results

What Will It Take To Bring Us Back To God?

Hold On To Truth

1. God is Righteous.
2. God is Sovereign.
3. God is Gracious.
4. The importance of faith.