

THE RASH VOW - JUDGES 10:6- 11:40

STUDIES IN THE JUDGES #10

Sir Walter Raleigh's name is usually associated with the tobacco industry. And it is true that Raleigh was instrumental in starting tobacco farms in our country and popularizing tobacco in England as well. But in their focus on his connection with the tobacco industry, many people have forgotten a great lesson to be learned from the latter part of Raleigh's life.

Handsome and dashing, Sir Walter was a favorite in the court of Queen Elizabeth. He reportedly caught her eye as he laid his cloak across a puddle so that the queen could cross over without getting her feet muddy. Elizabeth lavished many expensive gifts on Walter, and he unwisely flaunted her attention. He even wore large jewels on his shoes. But his arrogant attitude alienated many very important people. So when Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, Sir Walter Raleigh was not in an enviable position.

The successor to the English throne, King James 1st, stripped Walter of his royal titles and sent him to the tower of London, accused of a plot to overthrow the monarchy. It was while he was in prison that Raleigh hatched his last plan. He sent word to King James vowing to bring him back gold from the Americas. Raleigh claimed that he knew where gold was - and he would make the King the richest ruler alive if a commission would be given for Raleigh to take one final trip overseas. In his own words, "If I bring them not to a mountain of gold and silver ore, let the commander have permission to cut off my head."

King James could not resist this interesting invitation, and he freed Raleigh to make the voyage that he vowed would make him rich. But unhappily for Walter, the journey did not go as he had hoped. Hurricane winds hindered the ship's progress. And then 40 windless days further dampened the crew's spirits. Finally, reaching the coast of South America, Raleigh himself was so sick that he could not go ashore. His crew searched and searched, but they found no gold nor silver. In their frustration, they burned a Spanish settlement endangering their own lives. So they had to flee the new land without any treasure at all.

Facing the prospect of returning to King James empty-handed, Raleigh tried to convince his crew to attack some foreign vessels on their way home so that he could at least return with some booty. But his men refused, and the once braggadocious man slunk back home to face the consequences of his rash vow.

During the last days of his voyage, Raleigh wrote an apology that he hoped would save his head. But his end was doomed by his vow. So on October 29, 1618, Walter Raleigh was lead to the chopping block. Raleigh's body was buried in a London churchyard. But his wife had his severed head embalmed, and she kept that head with her in a red, leather bag for the remaining 29 years of her life - the head that was lost because of a vow that was made.

It is a very serious matter to make a vow to a king, isn't it? When someone has both the position and the power to imprison us or even take our

lives, a vow or promise made to him should be made very cautiously, with full realization of the consequences that could occur. For the king would demand the vow to be fulfilled and would have the power to enforce the vow if need be.

As serious as it is to make a vow to a king, it is a far more serious matter to make a vow to God. For while a king might be powerful, God is all-powerful, He is omnipotent. And while a king might have the ability to imprison or take a life, God has the power to not only take the physical life but he also has power over our eternal life as well. The judge that we come to study this evening is best known for a rash vow that he made to God - a vow that made a great impact upon his family. And certainly we want to look at this vow that Jephthah made concerning his daughter and see the consequences of it. But we need to do more than just look at his vow - for there is much more to the story of Jephthah's leading the Israelites against the Ammonites than just the rash vow that he made.

There are many similarities between this period in Jewish history and the day in which we are living.

- *lack of respect for authority

- *relativistic view of truth

- *structure of society disintegrating - families falling apart

- *sexual promiscuity

- *rise in the crime rate - breakdown in law and order

Now in this story of the 5th major judge, we see 3 major ills of the society of Jephthah's day that contributed to the weakness of Israel's condition. We are

battling these very ills in our day - and they are producing consequences detrimental to the society in which we live. Notice these 3 ills with me.

1. THE EVIL OF WORSHIPING FALSE GODS - Read 10:6-9

JDG 10:6 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, ⁷ he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, ⁸ who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. ⁹ The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress.

We see here a tragic commentary on Israeli life. Jehovah God had miraculously brought them into a land of promise. He had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt by bringing 10 plagues which humbled the most powerful nation in the Middle East at that time. He had sustained them during the trip through the wilderness by giving them food from heaven and water from rocks.

And then He had given to them possession of the land which he had promised to Abraham by causing city walls to fall down and raining hail from the heavens. You would think that the Israelites would be convinced by now that Jehovah God was the true and living God, wouldn't you?

But the Israelites no sooner possessed the land then they began to covet the gods of the Phoenicians, and Moabites, and Ammonites, and Philistines.

Baal, Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Dagon - these were the gods who were luring the Israelites to their altars. Part of the attraction was no doubt a natural desire to fit in, to be accepted. After all, these people had been in the land for centuries, they had roots here. The Israelites were the new kids on the block, trying to please and be accepted. Part of the attraction was the blessings that worshipping these gods promised. For all of these gods promised great advantage in the agricultural economy of the Middle East. Baal was the god of the storm, Ashtoreth the goddess of fertility, Chemosh the god who would give strength in war, Dagon the god of agricultural plenty - all valuable commodities in the Middle Eastern world.

But the point is Jehovah God had already proved himself to be all that the Israelites needed. He was the great God of military strength - he had delivered his people from the Egyptians. He was the God of the storm - bringing water from the rock and hailstones from the clouds. He was the God of agricultural plenty bringing manna from the dew of the ground in the desert. The Israelites didn't need any other gods for Jehovah's name meant "I will be all that you need for me to be".

When the Israelites prostituted themselves in worshipping other gods, the true and living God was predictably upset with them. So his chastening hand brought oppression into their lives. For 18 years they served the nations whose gods they were pursuing, until finally, in desperation, they cried out for deliverance.

Now it is important for us to see what was necessary from God's

standpoint to grant them deliverance. And we find this outlined for us in verses 10-16. READ Judges 10:10-16

¹⁰ Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."

JDG 10:11 The LORD replied, "When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, ¹² the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? ¹³ But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. ¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!"

JDG 10:15 But the Israelites said to the LORD, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now." ¹⁶ Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer.

a. First, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help. They were willing to acknowledge their need for deliverance. This was an act of humility on their part. They humbled themselves before the Lord.

b. But God was not ready to deliver them just yet, was he? Many times people cry out to God for a temporary deliverance in times of distress without a true heart change. So God demanded repentance from his people. They had to forsake the foreign gods and commit themselves to serve the Lord alone again. The theological term repentance simply means a change of mind which results in a change of direction in life. The Israelites came to the place where they realized that these foreign gods could not help them, so they got rid of their idols and committed themselves to only worship Jehovah God again.

I like Lloyd Ogilvie's commentary on the repentance of the Israelites. "The reality of their repentance is demonstrated in verse 15 in the request, "Do with us whatever you think best." That reveals a heart change. While recognizing the justice of what God has said, they would still rather cast themselves upon his mercy than be left in the misery of their sin, without him. They realize that they have no grounds on which to appeal for mercy, but they determine nevertheless to commit their cause to their gracious covenant Lord. There are no extenuating circumstances."

The Israelites here model true biblical repentance. Many times when we sin, we are tempted to negotiate or bargain with God. Yes, I sinned, but . . . God you have to understand the circumstances I was in. This is not biblical repentance. Biblical repentance is a complete humbling before the righteous hand of God, without excuses, admitting that we deserve the worst - Do with us whatever you think best - casting ourselves upon the mercy of a gracious and forgiving God. And it is interesting that it is only as the Israelites come to this place that God delivers them.

I needn't belabor the point that we have many false gods in our culture that are luring us to their worship. The gods of hedonism and pleasure, the gods of material prosperity, the gods of lust and promiscuity, recreational gods that rob our time and energies. And these and many other gods can oppress and even imprison us. Jehovah God can be all that we need in life. We must turn from false gods and repent of our sins is freedom and personal liberty is to be ours.

2. THE EVIL OF PREJUDICE - 11:1-11

JDG 11:1 Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. 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." ³ So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him.

JDG 11:4 Some time later, when the Ammonites made war on Israel, ⁵ the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."

JDG 11:7 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?"

JDG 11:8 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 our head over all who live in Gilead."

JDG 11:9 Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me--will I really be your head?"

JDG 11:10 The elders of Gilead replied, "The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say." ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

Jephthah was the son of Gilead and a prostitute so he was at first rejected by the other members of the family in prejudice and driven away from the household.

Now many of us might at first think "Well, it was wrong and devastating to the family to have this extra marital affair - perhaps there is justification for prejudice here." And certainly it was wrong for Gidead to have this sexual union with a prostitute. The Bible couldn't be clearer in saying that sexual

intimacy is to be limited to the bounds of married people alone. The sexual union that God has created is a beautiful expression of love. When expressed between a husband and wife, it is a sacred and beautiful thing. Sexual intimacy is always wrong outside of the bounds of marriage. And it always brings heartache and guilt and destruction outside of these boundaries.

But admitting the sin and the wrong done here in the family, let's look at the situation further. Who did the wrong? Who committed the sin? Was it Jephthah? No, it was Gilead, the father. He was the one who committed the sin. But nobody exhibits any prejudice against him. Rather, the town is named after him - the elders are called the elders of Gidead here. But Jephthah - what did he do wrong? He was just the consequence of this sinful act. A weak and innocent baby. And Jephthah becomes the target of all of the hateful prejudice of the family - so much so that he is driven away from the city to live in another place.

The story of Jephthah illustrates why prejudice is such a destructive force. Almost always the weak are targeted for prejudice. The ones who cannot defend themselves and fight back are the ones who are despised. But one day, they grow up and become mighty warriors like Jephthah - and then there is great potential for serious conflict.

One of the tragic results of prejudice is the loss of potential that occurs with it. Jephthah was the most capable of all of the children of Gilead. He was the mightiest warrior, he had the best leadership abilities, he was a man of courage and action, he was a wise diplomat. But the family and city suffered

because they had alienated their best resource.

Yes, prejudice is a terrible curse to any society. But this passage is important for it models how prejudice can be rectified. The prejudice must be admitted and confessed. And then those who have prejudice must go in humility to those who have been despised and confess the wrong and invite them back into fellowship again. It was only as the family of Gilead went to Jephthah and admitted their wrong and invited him back to help them that any reconciliation was restored.

Prejudice is one sin that we try our best to cover up and ignore in our society. But it is there - and we all know it is there. There is prejudice between races, there is prejudice between social classes, there is prejudice between political ideologies, there is prejudice throughout our land. If anyone is to break down the walls of prejudice it is going to have to be the Christian community. For Christians know that God created all people. Christians know that God loves all people. And Christians know that Christ has broken down the wall of partition between races and genders and social classes.

Yes, we see in the story of Jephthah the evil of worshiping false gods and the evil of prejudice. But there is one more evil that we must look at and that involves the commitment of the word, wisdom in making verbal promises.

3. For this story ends on a sad note with Jephthah making a RASH VOWS - 11:29-40

JDG 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. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD:

"If you give the Ammonites into my hands, 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, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

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

JDG 11:34 When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. 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."

JDG 11:36 "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. ³⁷ But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry."

JDG 11:38 "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. ³⁹ After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

From this comes the Israelite custom ⁴⁰ that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

In the heat of the emotion before battle, Jephthah made a rash promise to God, one that he would later regret. In return for victory, he promised to give to God whatever first walked out the door of his house to meet him. He didn't have to make this vow. God didn't ask him to make it. And the Bible clearly says that the Spirit of the Lord had come upon him already. The Spirit of the

Lord comes upon him in verse 29 - Jephthah makes the vow in verse 31. So Jephthah would have had victory whether he made the vow or not. But in the heat of emotion, he made this promise to God that he would later regret.

Now before we move on, we should look at this vow that Jephthah made for there are some who misunderstand it. There are some who assume that Jephthah ended up sacrificing his daughter to the Lord as a burnt offering. Although some commentators hold this position, most don't - and there is good reason from the text to deny any human sacrificing here. In Jephthah's own words, "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 (not him or her) as a burnt offering." vs. 31 Jephthah simply promised to give whatever came out of the door first to the Lord. In his day, this would naturally mean to give the person in service to the Lord.

At the tabernacle, there were those who were serving who had been given in service to the Lord. Samuel is such an example. Hannah made a vow to God, and when God answered her prayer, she gave Samuel in service to the Lord at the tabernacle. When a person was dedicated in service for the Lord, a burnt offering would be made as outlined in Leviticus. This was an offering expressly for the purpose of dedicating or consecrating someone for service. God's law was very clear in prohibiting human sacrifices. And Jephthah seems to be a spiritually sensitive man in making the vow to God. And the pronouns indicate that Jephthah's daughter was not the sacrifice. "I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering", Jephthah said - not her. So the indication from the text is that

Jephthah promised the first one to meet him in service for the Lord. That service would be sealed with a burnt offering. But he was grieved when he realized that his vow was fulfilled in his only daughter. So she grieved her virginity, because she would never be able to marry being given in service for God at the tabernacle, but to Jephthah's credit, even though the vow was perhaps rash and he was sorry that he had made it, Jephthah honored his word and fulfilled his vow before the Lord.

One of the most foundational evils in society today is the lack of commitment that people generally have in the trustworthiness of their word. Promises are made rashly without thinking, commitments are often neglected, it is a common thing for people to break promises.

We need to remind ourselves that God takes vows and promises that we make to him very seriously. We should not make promises to God lightly, in the heat of emotion. God keeps every promise that he has made to us without fail, and he expects us to honor our word to him in return.

And as people of God, we need to reflect His divine character in being people of our word. We should take our commitments seriously. That means that we have to learn to say "no" at times when we know that we can't honor a promise. That means that we shouldn't make promises rashly without thinking through the consequences. And when we make a promise, we should honor it.

Three evils that will gnaw at the foundations of any society - the worship of false gods, prejudice, and being careless in making promises.

But let me end with a note of encouragement. For all of the problems in

Israel's society, and for all of Jephthah's weaknesses, God used this man to bring about a great deliverance for his family and nation. God historically has used common people coming from difficult backgrounds to make an impact on the world - and this gives great hope to all of us in changing the world in which we live.

I like a memo that Jim Graham read at the Keswick Convention in England in 1989:

To: Jesus, Son of Joseph, Woodcrafter's Shop in Nazareth

From: The Jordan Management Consultants in Jerusalem

Regarding: A Staff Aptitude Evaluation

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the 12 men you have picked for management positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests and we've not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant. It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education, and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability. Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The 2 brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you

Matthew has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus definitely had radical leanings and they both registered a high score on the manic depressive scale. One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and has contact in high places. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All the other profiles are self-explanatory. We wish you every success in your new venture."

12 average, normal people with frailties and weaknesses - the Lord Jesus Christ not only chose them, but then equipped them with his grace to change the world.

Jephthah, a person coming from a poor background, rejected, from the wrong side of the tracks - God chose him as the 5th major judge to deliver his people from the bondage of the Ammonites.

What could God do through you if you would just allow him the freedom to work in your life to combat the evils in society around us?