

March 21

Judges 10 – 12

Hello again, this is Alex Ehly, bringing you the March 21th edition of Project 4:4.

Today you read Judges 10-12 and encountered six more judges of Israel: Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. About five of the six we know almost nothing at all; their names, the length of time during which they led Israel, in most cases the number of children they had -- that's all. The great majority of the passage, however, is given over to the tragic story of Jephthah.

I don't know about you, but as I re-read this passage today I could not help but remember the equally tragic story of Lot back in the Book of Genesis. Both Lot and Jephthah were so degraded in their own thought processes, and so far from God, that in an attempt to honor God and do the righteous things they proposed (and in Jephthah's case carried out) despicable acts.

If anything, Jephthah's level of spiritual perception, and his understanding of what will honor God, is even worse than Lot's! Make no mistake though. Jephthah has a kind of honor that is as striking as it is tragic. He is not a godly man. The evidence is quite clear. Rejected by his family and driven from his community because society then, like now has a terrible habit of punishing children for the misdeeds of their parents, Jephthah gathered around himself a group of "adventurers" -- we would call them mercenaries, soldiers of fortune or even outlaws. They lived by making war and were not terribly particular about who their victims were. This is not a holy man. Because of his battle skills, Jephthah is called to lead the Israelites against the Ammonites. Jephthah calls upon God in the face of battle and makes a rash manipulative vow. The vow itself, regardless of its content, reveals more misunderstanding about the ways of God with man. People who really know the Lord understand that He is not a God to be manipulated by people making "deals" with Him.

The worst thing of all, of course, is that this man actually believed that God would be pleased by a sacrifice of a human being! Some commentators have tried to evade the natural force of this passage by saying that Jephthah must have been expecting an animal of some sort to rush from the house to greet him, but the clear language of the passage simply will not play that explanation out. Jephthah was not expecting to have to sacrifice his daughter. Jephthah certainly was not familiar at all with the law of Moses. This willingness to support a human sacrifice is yet another example of how bad things really were in Israel. For anyone (let alone the acknowledged leader of the country) to even think that this view could be appropriate is almost beyond my comprehension.

Jephthah then was not a righteous man and God did not endorse, inspire or condone his vow. But that leaves us with a big question. If he was not a good man, why did God choose to use Him? -- why would the Holy Spirit come upon such a person?

The answer of course is that we have absolutely no idea why God chose to use him, unless it was to further humble the Israelites who had long before driven him out of their society. God does have a habit of using the despised things as I Corinthians 1 has reminded us. That is probably the reason the birth of the Savior was first announced to shepherds -- just about the lowest people on the ladder of social respectability in the Israel of that day -- and why Rahab was the only person saved (with her family) out of Jericho and why the resurrection of Christ -- the most important event in human history -- was first announced to women among whom was a converted prostitute with no decent reputation or social clout. We can never really know why God chose to use Jephthah -- any more than we will know why He chose Deborah, a woman, or Gideon -- He just did! What is much more important for us today is to note that He did choose to use Jephthah and in so doing shows us that God can use unrighteous as well as righteous instruments to accomplish his work. Listen -- have you ever wondered about the people who have been genuinely converted to Christ under the ministry of well known pastors and evangelists who later were found out to be terrible frauds -- living lies and trampling on the grace of God? Could the people affected by the ministry of a corrupt preacher really be saved? Why would God honor their work and use them for good even when their lives were inconsistent and at times rotten to the core. What we need to understand is that God is sovereign and there are times when He chooses to honor His word and His truth despite the fact that the instrument is an unworthy one. That is not the "norm" and it is certainly no justification for you and I as His servants to develop an attitude of nonchalance about our personal holiness, but it is true that God is so great that He can use a Cyrus or a Nebuchadnezzar to accomplish his purpose just as easily as a Daniel or a John the Baptist.

If and when you discover that some Christian leader, through whom you have seen the Holy Spirit accomplish some mighty work of grace, turns out to be a fraud, don't let that throw you spiritually -- don't turn away from God on that account.

I never cease to be amazed at the degree to which the Bible has shaped our culture and even our language without us really being aware of it. Some time try this very interesting little exercise. Carry a little notebook with you for a few days and every time you read or hear a reference to or an expression that comes from the Bible, just jot it down. I guarantee that you will be astonished at the degree to which Biblical truth has shaped our culture -- even though in many cases we no longer realize the origins of the concepts or expressions. It is certainly true that it would be impossible to pretend to be a cultured or educated person without becoming very familiar with the Book that you and I so treasure. The reason, of course, that I have raised this issue is because of the simple but profoundly effective test described in chapter 12 for identifying anyone from the tribe of Ephraim who tried to cross the fords of the Jordan. Each traveler was required to say, "Shibboleth" (a word meaning an ear of corn). Since the Ephraimites could not make the "sh" sound, if the traveler said "Sibboleth" he was taken and executed.

Even though our culture is right now running as hard as it can in the opposite direction, it is good for us to realize that the Bible -- much more than any other book or any other set of ideas has shaped our culture and our language. Understanding that fact may help to provide us with a hundred opportunities to explain to our family, friends, co-workers, "where that idea came from" and in that find an opportunity to share Christ.

As you continue on through Project 4:4, may you know God more, may He transform your life, and may you let Him use you to help transform the lives of others.

Once Again this is Alex Ehly, encouraging you to continue running the race with diligence and perseverance. God Bless!