

Right in Their Own Eyes:

An Exposition of Judges

Lesson Eleven: Open Mouth, Insert foot! Pt 2 [Judges 11:29-40]

Opening Illustration: Have you ever just put your foot in your mouth? This is a rhetorical question. We all have. There are few things more embarrassing or more painful than saying REALLY stupid things! Some examples:

Psalm 15:4b “...He swears to his own hurt and does not change.”

I. Introduction/Review

A. What is the general character of the Judges?

1. Contrary to what we may have been taught, their character is generally bad.
2. There are some good exceptions (Deborah, Tola and Jair, etc.), but the ones that get extended “airtime” are, most often in the book of Judges, seriously flawed individuals.
3. Jephthah is a seriously flawed individual. Surprised? You shouldn't be.

B. Sometimes the Bible is hard to believe.

1. Sometimes it is hard to believe because we are stubborn in our unbelief.
2. Sometimes it is hard to believe because we limited in our understanding.
3. Sometimes it is hard to believe because we have already determined what the Bible should say.
4. Sometimes it is hard to believe because look to “experts” instead of the text.

II. Exposition: Let's just take a look at the text (Judges 11:29-40)

A. What does God do? v. 29

1. The Spirit of the Lord empowers Jephthah.
2. Jephthah, as a result, passes somewhat easily through the territory.
3. Jephthah, then, is confident and powerful. How will he handle that?

B. What does Jephthah do?

1. He makes an impulsive, foolish vow.
 - a. If You will indeed give me victory in this battle,
 - b. Whatever comes out of my door to greet me, I will sacrifice to you.
 - i. Notice, he says, “whatever”. I wonder what he had in mind?
 - ii. Notice, also, that he promises to perform an “Olah [עֹלָה],” which means, “burnt offering.”
2. He achieves military success (seemingly) as a result of this vow.
3. He experiences great heartache because of this vow.
 - a. Why does he experience heartache?
 - b. What does he do about it?

C. Why did Jephthah do it?

1. Because he wanted to win the war and take his place as leader of the people of Gilead.
2. Because he was incredibly foolish and lacked common foresight.

III. The Problem—Does Jephthah go through with it?

A. There are only 2 possibilities

1. Possibility #1—Yes, he did.
2. Possibility #2—No, he didn't
 - a. Instead, he gave his daughter to the temple/tabernacle as a perpetual virgin.

B. What are the arguments for possibility #2?

1. Human sacrifice is clearly commanded against in the Bible.
2. Jephthah's daughter asks to mourn her virginity, not her life.
3. God would not have given Jephthah victory if He knew that Jephthah's daughter would be sacrificed.
 - a. This is an argument based on a very general assumption of the character of God.

4. Why on Earth is Jephthah listed in Hebrews 11 if he committed human sacrifice?
 - a. It is assumed that someone who did something so horrible could never be listed in the great “Hall of faith” chapter.

C. What are the arguments against possibility #2 and for possibility #1?

1. Human sacrifice is clearly commanded against, but as we have seen, the Judges are not necessarily godly people. Is it really out of the realm of possibility that Jephthah, in his foolishness, did something wrong?
2. Jephthah’s daughter could have been mourning her virginity because she understood that not only was she going to die, but the entire family line was coming to an end.
3. The text itself presents absolutely no evidence for possibility 2. It is not an explanation of the text, it is explaining AWAY the text. [obviously, this is huge.]
4. Jephthah promised to sacrifice who/whatever came out of the house as a “burnt offering [עֹלָה].” Verse 39 says that he did what he vowed. If something changed, we would expect that in the text.
5. If Jephthah didn’t want to give his daughter up as a perpetual virgin, all he had to do was to pay a fine.
 - a. Leviticus 27:1-8 provides a way to get out guilt for vowing away another’s life.¹
6. The question of why Jephthah is listed in Hebrews 11 is a real head-scratcher no matter how you interpret this passage.
 - a. He is still foolish and impulsive, even if he didn’t sacrifice his daughter.
 - b. Notice some of the others listed in Hebrews 11:32. Samson is not exactly a godly example!
 - c. The point here is that real difficulty in this situation is NOT whether or not Jephthah sacrificed his daughter. Instead the real difficulty is how on Earth did Jephthah make the list in Hebrews 11? Since this is a study of Judges, I will leave that for another time.

IV. Some pastoral thoughts in light of this Predicament

A. Never follow an interpretation that has to explain away the text of Scripture.

1. The Bible was written to be understood.
2. The Bible was written with the authority of God.
 - a. 2 Timothy 3:16-17
3. Be very careful not to deal lightly with the text.

B. Never decide ahead of time what God can and cannot do and then argue that against the text.

1. This is sadly common
 - a. One example: Hell. How many times have you heard someone say, “My God would never send people to Hell!” If that is the case, then the “God” in question is not the God of the Bible.
2. We have already seen things in the book of Judges that are (admittedly) head scratchers.
 - a. Example: God sending an evil spirit.

C. Never trust any expert’s opinion if it violates the text.

1. God gave His word to you.
2. God gave preachers/teachers to the church for you.

Quote: For my part, I do not believe in the infallibility of experts, and I think that the tyranny of experts is the worst and most dangerous tyranny that ever was devised. J. Gresham Machen, “Things Unseen,” page 273²

V. Conclusions—What are we supposed to learn from this?

A. Be careful about off-hand comments and promises. God takes what we say seriously.

1. See **Matthew 12:36-37**

B. We don’t always understand everything.

1. Maybe Jephthah’s presence in the “hall of faith” is something that requires us to have faith?

¹ This point is made in Darrell Block, “Judges, Ruth.” New American Commentary (NAC), page 377

² Yes, I understand the irony of quoting an expert to say that we should not trust experts. ☺