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Judges 10 - 12

The Tragedy of a Paganized Faith

I remember a class I took in college where the professor was teaching us about the concept of “catharsis,” and he explained it with this illustration: one day, he went to a movie theater, and saw a movie that was pretty sad and depressing; he ended up bawling his eyes out in the theater. But then, he walked outside, leaving the dark theater for the bright, sunny afternoon; he went home and hugged his healthy and happy wife and kids; and immediately, he felt a huge emotional relief; in fact, he felt even better and happier than *before* he went and saw the sad movie that made him cry his eyes out. It was *cathartic* for him; it brought emotional relief, gratitude even joy. I’ve had similar experiences myself; while I don’t particularly enjoy sad and depressing movies and stories that make me cry, there is, indeed, something beautiful that happens when you look up from your tragic book to be reminded of just how blessed and happy your life truly is. Looking from the dark to the light, from the tragic to the beautiful, from the sad to the happy, can actually leave us with a deeper sense of joy and gratitude in the long-run, even though it means we have to experience strong, negative emotions first. While not pleasant at first, the sense of relief, joy, and gratitude that comes later *is* very pleasant and satisfying.

And I think that’s a pretty good illustration of how we’re supposed to experience the book of Judges. It gives us a bleak picture of the sinful and idolatrous conditions of the human heart, and the disaster it brings; it shows us our need for grace; but it does so to make us all the more grateful for the grace we receive in Christ. The book forces us to come to terms with just how sinful humanity is, and just how terrible, tragic, and depressing the painful effects of sin can be. And it only gets worse as the book goes on. There’s really nothing redemptive or positive about the story of Jephthah. This story shows us just how *pagan* Israel, and its judges, have become. In this passage, we see a tragic picture of how Jephthah, and Israel as a whole, no longer know God or His Word as they should; their faith in God has become thoroughly pagan, corrupting the way they approach God, bringing disastrous results. It’s a tragic, depressing story. In fact, all of the applications for us from this passage are negative; all we see are examples of what *not* to; this is why, as we’ll see, each of my sermon points today is a negative prohibition, saying, “Don’t do this,” “Don’t be like that.”

So we may ask, then: why is it *good* for us to look at such negative story and hear so many negative prohibitions and warnings? It's because when we look at the story of Jephthah, we realize just how dangerous it is to misunderstand God and approach Him in unbiblical, pagan ways; it shows us just how tragic and dangerous sin and idolatry are. It shows us our need for the glorious grace of Christ. Therefore, this story should ultimately lift our eyes to the glorious grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, making us appreciate His goodness, love, and grace all the more deeply. And the first way this text helps us to be genuinely grateful for God's grace is to show us our need for it and to warn us against presuming upon it. So point number one:

I. Don't Presume upon the Lord's Grace (10:1-16)

Our section begins in chapter 10, bringing us from the tragedy of Abimelech to the tragedy of Jephthah: "after Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola," and then Jair, two minor judges that we're only given quick snapshots of, reminding us that the Lord is still at work in Israel, still delivering and saving His people. And yet, things are not well in Israel: in verse 6, we see our pattern repeat yet again, beginning a new judge cycle. Like we've seen with each cycle before, it always begins with Israel sinning before the Lord; but this time, we're given the longest and most detailed depiction of Israel's widespread sin and idolatry that we've seen yet. We see this in v.6: "The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashteroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of MOab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him." We're used to seeing the refrain, "The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." And over the course of Judges, we've seen Israel slide further and further into idolatry, worshiping the Canaanite idols, the Baals and Asheroth. But now, we're told that Israel's idolatry has gotten even worse; they're worshiping all the different gods and local deities of all the different tribes and nations around them. Remember our first sermon on Judges: Israel was told to come in and whip out all the pagan peoples of the promised land of Canaan, so that they would remain faithful to God and wouldn't follow after all the pagan gods. But Israel disobeyed, didn't drive out the pagan peoples, and now, Israel has become just as pagan! They are becoming indistinguishable from the pagan peoples around them, worshiping all the pagan gods; and as we'll see, they have begun to treat Yawheh like just another one of these local, pagan deities.

So, once again, we see God's anger and judgment. In vv.7-9, we're told that God "sold them" into the hands of the Philistines (on the west side of Israel) and the Ammonites, coming from the East. Next week, the story of Samson will deal with the Philistine threat; chapters 10-12 deal with the Ammonites, in the East. So God's judgment is clearly shown through the increasing oppression of Israel by their enemies. But not only that; when Israel cries out to the Lord for help, God responds with a sharp rebuke. We see this in vv.10-14: "And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, 'We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals.' And the LORD said to the people of Israel, 'Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken me and served out gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.'"

In other words, God is saying to them, "Listen, everytime you've called out to me for help, and I helped you, you then went right back into sin and idolatry, right back to all the false gods of your enemies! Don't come crying to me everytime everytime you're in trouble, only to turn right back around to your pagan gods after the trouble is gone! Go and ask them for help!" And of course, the irony is rich there because *those gods are no gods at all!* The Israelites were fair-weather fans of a football team who only root for them until they lose, and then they abandon ship for the next super bowl champions. When everything is going well, they want to worship all the pagan gods so they can be just like the sinful peoples around them; but then, when they're in trouble, they come crawling back to God, presuming that He will help them again, like always. But God says He'll have none of that. He will not be just another god on their shelf of idols: "oh, we'll worship Baal at harvest time, Asherah for fertility, and Yahweh we need deliverance from our enemies." The Israelites presumed upon the grace of God, assuming they could just treat him like all their other pagan deities. And God gives them a clear answer: "No, you cannot. It doesn't work that way."

We presume on the grace of God whenever we just take God's grace for granted, act like He owes it to us, and use it to justify a life of sin and worldliness. You cannot worship God on Sunday, but worship the idols of money, sex, pleasure, and popularity Monday through Saturday. We can't tell ourselves, "Oh, just go ahead and give into this temptation, just this once; go ahead

give into that sinful impulse that you want so badly to do; after all, you can just repent and ask God to forgive you later, and He will, right?” When we start to think this way, we are presuming upon the grace of God. God will not just be another idol on your shelf; God will not let you take His grace for granted. If you go on presuming upon His grace, then you just might find yourself with no grace at all. If we just treat the gospel like a “Get-Out-Of-Hell-Free” card, clocking in our church attendance and a few prayers for forgiveness here and there, so that we feel better about ourselves as we go on living lives of sin and worldliness, then it may very well be the case that you’re not truly repenting and putting your faith in CHrist for salvation *at all*. The grace of God is gloriously free! *But it is not cheap*. Don’t take it for granted.

And yet, gloriously, the alternative to presuming upon the grace of God is to truly grasp just how abundant and wonderful His grace really is! Perhaps you have been taking God’s grace for granted; the answer is: confess your sin, repent, and turn to God, resting on His glorious grace in Christ Jesus! As counter-intuitive as it may seem, the solution to presuming on God’s grace is to truly, humbly repent, know your need for grace, and ask God for more of it, believing that God truly abounds in grace and mercy! And that’s exactly what we see here; even after God says he will not help Israel, they confess their sins, “they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel” (10:15-16). Remarkably, God is still going to help Israel. And yet, it’s not going to be the same as it was with earlier judges; it’s going to be a partial deliverance. God’s rebuke here explains why, at the end of Jephthah’s cycle, Israel doesn’t have years of peace and safety. It also explains why God is increasingly silent as we go forward in Judges. Sure enough, though God is “impatient” over their suffering, we see Israel grow impatient in waiting on God, as they take matters into their own hands. This leads us to point number two...

II. Don’t Trust in Human Solutions for Deliverance (10:17 - 11:11)

In all the other cycles of judges so far, we’ve seen God “raise up” or “call” each judge. But that’s not what we see happen here. Instead, we see the Israelites call Jephthah to be their next deliverer. In vv.17-18, Israel is asking around for who will deliver them from the Ammonites, offering to make the warrior their leader to rule over them. Then, in chapter 11, we’re introduced to the man they choose: Jephthah, a “mighty warrior.” But there’s a problem with Jephthah; he’s not exactly a stand up citizen, as we seen in 11:1-11. Jephthah was born to a prostitute, and his brothers have him run out of town. Jephthah, no longer a man of Gilead, ends

up living in the wilderness, and, we're told in v.3, "worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him." Basically, Jephthah is presented as this barbarian warlord, a bandit captain who's not allowed in town. And yet, when Israel grows desperate, they turn to *this guy* to come save them and be their leader! Jephthah's first response is, "Seriously? Why would I come and help you guys after what you did to me?" But, after political negotiations, they convince Jephthah to come and make him their leader. But it's very clear that he isn't coming out of the goodness of his heart; he's coming because they offer him political power and leadership. And it's also clear that Gilead isn't trusting the Lord to save them here; they are trusting in the wisdom and power of man.

Our default setting as sinful humanity is to trust in ourselves, good works, and man-made religion instead of trusting in God. Think back to Galatians, where Paul talked about how both Jews and Gentiles were, before becoming Christians, slaves to the "elementary principles of this world." Our default setting, as sinners, is to think that we can do enough religious works, or be good enough people, or come up with other man-made solutions in order to save ourselves - not just physically, but *spiritually*, to justify ourselves before God! But we can never be good enough; we can never do enough good or religious works to save ourselves from our sin. Salvation does not come from human solutions - salvation only comes from God by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, the God-Man, who lived, died, and was raised again, so that if we truly repent and believe in Him, we will be saved! So let us not trust in ourselves or mankind or anything else but Christ alone!

And this means that we must rightly know and understand God in order to rightly trust Him. Which brings us to point number 3...

III. Don't Misunderstand Who God Is or What He Says (11:12 - 12:15)

Even though Israel raises up Jephthah, God, in His abundant mercy, uses Jephthah to save Gilead from the Ammonites. In chapter 11:12-28, Jephthah sends a message to the Ammonite king, trying to negotiate for peace. He makes a long historical argument, drawing from the history of Israel that we see in the book of Numbers, explaining how their land never belonged to the Ammonites. He basically says, "Look, you guys have no right to claim this land; it was never yours, and we've had it for about 300 years." But then he makes a theological argument, in vv.23: "So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them?" He's saying, "Yahweh gave us this land; who are

you to take it from us?” And that’s absolutely the right case to make! But then, his theological argument continues in v.24, and becomes a bit messier, as he adds: “Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess?” Now, it’s possible that Jephthah is just using a rhetorical argument here, trying to establish a common understanding between them. BUt it’s also very possible (and I think very likely) that what Jephthah says here reveals that he is operating on pagan assumptions. You see, the common religious view of that day and age was that each nation and tribe had their own gods that they worshiped, so that when two peoples’ waged war, whichever had the stronger god would win. And so it seems that Jephthah is saying, “Look, our God Yahweh gave us these lands, and your god Chemosh gave you your lands; who are we to argue about that?” In other words, it seems like Jephthah is just equating Yahweh, the one true God, with Chemosh and all the other pagan idols, treating God like just another local deity.

Whether or not that’s what’s going on in v.24, it’s certainly what’s going on a bit later, in 11:29-40. Jephthah’s negotiations don’t work, and they go to war. And “the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah,” (v.29), making it clear that Jephthah’s decisive victory here is from the Lord. But the victory and deliverance here is not main focus of the story, but is quickly overshadowed by a tragic vow that Jephthah makes, in vv.30-31: “And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, ‘If you will give me the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.’” Then Jephthah wins the battle, for the LORD gave the enemies into his hand (v.34). But then, when Jephthah returns home, in vv.34-40, the story turns tragic. When he gets home, his daughter comes out of the house to greet him, singing and dancing and playing the tambourine, celebrating his victory and welcoming him home. And then the reality of Jephthah’s foolish vow dawns on us: he vowed to sacrifice “*whatever*” first came out of his house to greet him. In fact, the Hebrew could actually be translated as “*whoever*.” Jephthah cries in despair, but he doesn’t repent of his vow as wrong, or accept the responsibility for his foolish vow; instead, he blames his daughter, as if it’s her fault! He accuses her, in v.35, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow.” The daughter humbly accepts her fate, and asks for two months to mourn her virginity - since her life will tragically end in her youth, and she will leave no family or legacy

behind, and Jephthah's line will die off with her, since she's his only child. And after the two months are up, v.39 says, her father "did with her according to his vow that he had made."

Now there's several questions we need to answer about this text. First off, did Jephthah really kill and sacrifice his daughter here? Unfortunately, the text makes it very clear: yes, he did. This story is so painfully sad that there have been many who've taught and preached this text, trying to say that he didn't really kill her, but just sent her away to a monastery; but that is not at all what the text says! The vow in v.31 is to offer up whatever, or whoever, comes out to greet him first "for a burnt offering." And v.39 says he did with his daughter just as he vowed to do. The next question is: was this a good thing that Jephthah does here? Absolutely not! This is outright, heinous evil, and abomination before the Lord, as the Law of Moses made clear. Child sacrifice was what marked the evil, pagan gods and religions of the Canaanites and all the nations around Israel, but Israel was expressly forbidden to practice it. But, we may ask, what about the vow that Jephthah made? Didn't he have to keep the vow? The Law does certainly take vows very seriously; if you break a vow to the Lord, it would bring a curse upon you. But that would have been far better than his daughter paying the price! Furthermore, God never demands that someone sins just because they took a vow to sin! God is good and righteous. I've heard people teach this story before where they basically say that Jephthah's hands were tied, and he had no choice but to do what he vowed to do. But that's not true at all! In fact, Lev. 5 made provisions for sacrifices to be made when a vow couldn't be kept because it would include sin. If Jephthah knew the Law of Moses, he would've known that! But that's just the problem: he didn't know God's Word. He didn't know God. He actually thought that God demanded that he sacrifice his daughter to him! That's not *at all* what God is like! God doesn't demand such a thing - he abhors it as an abominable evil! That's part of why he told Israel to wipe out the pagan peoples of Canaan in the first place, because they practiced child sacrifice! But the problem is, Jephthah has a *pagan view* of Yahweh; he thinks God is just like the pagan gods of the land. The problem is not that he made a hasty vow; it's that he made a *pagan vow*. The problem is that Jephthah didn't know God! He didn't know God or His Word, but had a pagan view of God - and it had *devastating consequences*.

We see further evidence of this at the end of our section, in chapter 12, where we see the unity of Israel is deteriorating. A civil war breaks out between Ephraim and Gilead, two neighboring regions of Israel, over foolish and sinful reasons: Ephraim's pride is hurt because

Jephthah didn't ask them to help, though Jephthah claims he did. They go to war, and Jephthah leads Gilead to victory, wiping out tens of thousands of the tribe of Ephraim. But the fighting doesn't end there: when the Ephraimites try to sneak across the river, back to their side, the Gileadites stop and kill them. Even when they lie, the Gileadites are able to spot them by their different accents. This whole scene shows us just how fractured and divided ISrael has become. These are two neighboring tribes that have drifted apart so much that they have different accents and are willing to go to war for foolish reasons. What we see is yet another picture of how paganized Israel has become; they are supposed to be unified as the people of GOd, ruled by His Word! But instead, they're a fractured people, worshipping different gods in the different tribes, becoming just like the different pagan nations around them. They're divided because they are no longer united around their common faith in the one true God, as His people. In-fighting breaks out because they don't know God.

Unfortunately, there have been many examples throughout history where people have mixed Christianity with other religions and pagan ways. And this is very much a problem and temptation for us to be on guard against today. For one thing, explicit paganism is on the rise in America. New age practices are becoming increasingly popular; I've heard stories from many of you, about people you know claiming to be Christians, but going to seances and tarot card readers, or about healing crystals and new age meditation being encouraged at schools and workplaces. Just the other day, I was sharing the gospel with a lady who claimed to be Catholic, but thought astrology was just as spiritually true and helpful as the Bible, and believed that her deceased loved ones visited her in the forms of animals. Just in case anyone is wondering: *stay away from those kinds of beliefs and practices!* Don't mess with New Age spiritualism or try to mix it with your Christianity; it's paganism! And there are many other, subtle ways we can be tempted this way. We know that idols aren't just statues made with hands, but that we can make idols out of anything - like money, ambition, popularity, sex, personal autonomy and freedom, etc. Our secular age has just as many idols and pagan practices as the age of Jephthah. In fact, child sacrifice is very much apart of our pagan culture, where women get abortions in the name of the god of personal autonomy and sexual freedom. And just like we can be tempted towards the idols of our culture, so we can also be tempted to start to view God and Christianity in pagan ways.

This is why it is *so important and crucial* for us to *know what the Bible says about God*; why we need to rigorously read, study, and understand the Bible, that we might truly and rightly know God, His Word, and the gospel of Christ Jesus. The stakes could not be higher - this is a deadly serious matter. Many people scoff at the idea of studying theology; they might say, "What's the big deal if we don't know all the right theology or don't study and understand the Bible that well? Isn't Christianity about the heart, not the head?" The tragic story of Jephthah warns us about how wrong that kind of thinking is. True Christianity - truly knowing God - is a matter of *both the head and the heart*. We cannot rightly know and trust God in our hearts without rightly knowing *about God* with our heads. We must have a right, accurate knowledge of God, His truth, salvation, and what it means to live as His people and worship Him - and we can only have such knowledge through *the Bible*, God's Word. In order to have our hearts rightly fixed on the Lord in faith, we must devote our heads to having a right understanding of God and His gospel through the Bible. If we don't, the results will be disastrous; just as it proved deadly for Jephthah's daughter, so it will be spiritually deadly for us if we do not rightly know God and His Word. It will lead to us living lives and having beliefs that give the *appearance* of Christianity, but are actually mixing biblical beliefs and practices with thoroughly *unChristian, unbiblical, and ungodly practices*.

So, practically, this means you should carve out time for your own personal study of God and His Word.. Read the Bible. Pray to God that He would help you to rightly understand and apply it. Read good books that help you understand it. If you want to know some good books to read, I would be more than happy to recommend you or lend you some. Come to church. Make it a priority for you and your family to sit under the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Come to Sunday School (our Core Discipleship Class). This semester, we're teaching on a right understanding of God; make it a priority to come and learn more about God. Come to Sunday night services, where we study and apply God's word together. If you're not a member of a church, join a healthy, biblical church; it's in the church where we hold one another accountable to a biblical statement of faith and church covenant, committing to God and one another that we will not drift into false beliefs and practices, but will be committed to rightly know God, His Word, and the gospel of Christ.

And so, it is quite fitting for us to end by lifting our eyes from this tragic, sobering story of a paganized faith and be reminded that our faith is in the glorious, gracious gospel of Jesus

Christ, which most fully shows us who our great God is! The gospel declares that God will not be manipulated or bribed, that we cannot presume upon His grace - and yet, He abounds in grace and mercy to all who turn to Him! The gospel declares that, even though we are sinners who cannot be good enough or do anything to save ourselves, God graciously offers salvation to us, freely! Not by our works, but purely because of what He has done for us in Christ Jesus! The gospel declares that God does not want human sacrifice, but instead, he sent His own Son, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who laid down his life as a sacrifice for us! That Jesus lived and died on the cross for our sins, in our place, to satisfy the wrath of God we deserve, and He rose from the grave! The gospel declares the good news that if we confess our sins and turn away from every false, unbiblical, pagan faith, and put our faith in Christ alone, then God will forgive and save us, even raising us from the grave to eternal life! The gospel declares that if you're trusting in Christ this morning, you are completely forgiven, loved, and even righteous before God, purely by His grace!

Perhaps, today, you don't know God. Perhaps you've never truly repented and put your faith in the gospel of Christ alone for salvation. I plead with you: turn to Christ today! Repent and believe, and then make your faith public through baptism, and join a church that will teach you to know God through His Word. If you have any questions about that, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.