

Vows • Judges 11:29-40

INTRO • Read Eccl. 5:1-5

1. Ever say something you later regretted?
  - a. Usually it's days later.
  - b. But sometimes it's the moment you speak; and you wish you could reach out and grab the words and stuff them back in your mouth.
  - c. Then there are those times; **WHILE you're speaking** there's a part of you saying, "You're gonna regret this!"
2. We're looking at our speech today; specifically, we're looking at our vows, oaths, promises.
3. Because there's a great story in Judges that illustrates the **caution** we ought to exercise when it comes to them.

Set Scene

1. The cycle's turned yet again and Israel is once more in a time of discipline for having turned to idols.
2. Their eastern neighbors the Ammonites have been harassing them for 18 yrs.
  - a. It took Isrl that long to genuinely repent of their rebellion against God.
    - 1) At first they only asked for God's help out of the **consequences** of their sin.
    - 2) It wasn't till they asked for help in **quitting** sin itself that God stepped in.
  - b. **Finally**, when the Ammonites amass a huge force for yet another invasion,
  - c. The people of Israel rally to resist them.
  - d. The problem is: There's no one to lead them but a guy named Jeph they'd **banished** yrs before.
3. So they go and ask him to take command.
4. If he does and Isrl prevails, they promise to make him king.
5. Jeph agrees but tries some diplomacy before battle.
  - a. It fails. The Ammonites are determined to fight.
  - b. After all, they've had their way for the last 18 yrs and figure it's going to be an easy win.
6. Turns out, not so much.

<sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jeph, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced *toward* the people of Ammon.

1. Note the 1<sup>st</sup> words; "The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah."
2. That's all he needed to ensure victory God's presence & power.
3. But Jeph does something totally necessary . . .

<sup>30</sup> And Jeph made a vow to the Lord, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, <sup>31</sup> then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

1. Jeph was supremely conscious of God's presence.
2. But he was also fully aware of the massive task before him. Whooping the Ammonites was no easy task.
3. So he does the all too human thing; **he strikes a bargain with God**.
  - a. "If you give me victory, I'll be **so devoted** to you, I'll sacrifice the 1<sup>st</sup> thing out my door when I get home."
  - b. So typical! Specially of people who aren't all that conscious of God when things are going well.
  - c. He rarely crosses their minds; **UNTIL** they're pressed—facing a huge challenge.
  - d. There was a movie years ago about a guy **mistakenly** diagnosed with a terminal illness
    - 1) The doctor told him his last days would agony, so he decided to end it before that happened.
    - 2) He swam out into the ocean intending to drown himself.
    - 3) Way offshore, at the end of his strength, he remembered something his daughter had said. It sparked a desire to survive.
    - 4) So he turned around and started back to shore – but he was exhausted.
    - 5) Realizing he wasn't going to make it, he turned to God as a last resort and prayed.
    - 6) "Help me Lord. I promise not to try and kill myself anymore.  
Save me and I swear I'll be a better father. I'll be a better man. I'll be a better **everything**.  
All I ask is **Make me a better swimmer**.

Oh God; let me live and I promise to obey every 1 of the 10 Commandments.

I shall not kill. I shall not commit adultery. I shall not . . .

I'll learn the 10 Commandments and then I'll obey every 1 of them.

Just get me back to the beach.

[Now he's made it a little way in but still has a long way to go.]

I'll be honest in business.

I want to see another sunrise, another sunset.

It was a mistake God. I never really wanted to kill myself.

I wanted to get Your attention. Help me make it.

I'll give you 50% of everything I make. 50% God!

I want to point out nobody gives 50%. I'm talkin' gross, God.

[Now the shore's in sight.]

I think I'm gonna' make it. You won't regret this Lord.

I'll obey every commandment. I'll see my parents more often.

No more cheating in business, as soon as I get rid of those 9 acres in the desert.

[Now he's where the waves break. The beach is 50 yards away.]

And I'm going to start donating 10% right away. I know I said 50%, but 10% to start.

If You don't want You 10%, then don't take it.

[Then as he crawls onto the sand ]

I know it was You who saved me. But it was also You who made me sick.

4. Jeph's facing a huge challenge and needs God's help.

a. God gives it, but Jeph thinks what'll seal the deal is a sacrifice.

<sup>32</sup> So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands. <sup>33</sup> And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith—20 cities—and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

1. This was a rousing victory took the Ammonites generations to recover from.

<sup>34</sup> When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she *was his* only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

1. As Jeph rides home he's **stoked** because not only is he victorious, the shame of his earlier banishment has been erased. He's now ruler of all Israel E of the Jordan River.

2. What a homecoming this is, right up to the moment when his daughter runs out the door to greet him.

3. Then his joy turns instantly to wrenching grief.

4. You see, when he'd made his vow, he assumed 1 of the many animals he owned would come out the door.

a. A chicken, sheep, or goat. They're always going in and out the door.

b. But not this time. This time it's his only daughter.

1) She's all dressed up with lil bells in her hands, and she's dancing a victory dance for him.

2) Later we learn she's somewhere btwn 9 & 12, when girls are all about flowing dresses & dancing, & twirling & singing for their daddies.

c. And she is his DELIGHT; the light of his life.

d. Because of the rejection his family had shown him as a child, he's determined to make sure his daughter never knows that pain.

5. When she exits the house and begins to dance a welcome to him, **his heart explodes!**

<sup>35</sup> And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot go back on it." <sup>36</sup> So she said to him, "My father, *if* you have given your word to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon."

1. Instead of sweeping her up into his arms and giving her a big hug, he hangs his head in torment.

2. The great victory over Ammon and all it means is eclipsed by a loss so great it leaves him devastated.

3. He's made a vow to God; he can't break it.

4. He can't because integrity matters to Jeph. He keeps his promises, even when they cost him.

5. **She knows** what kind of man he is & tries to cheer him by submitting to whatever his vow is.

a. Note that moms and dads; Jeph's integrity is not been lost on his daughter.

b. He's raised her well, with the virtue **all** ought to teach their children.

<sup>37</sup> Then she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for 2 months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I." <sup>38</sup> So he said, "Go." And he sent her away *for* 2 months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains.

1. She spent 2 months saying goodbye to her friends and, "*Bewailing her virginity.*"

2. Keep that phrase in mind because it's important in understanding what's going on.

<sup>39</sup> And it was so at the end of 2 months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel <sup>40</sup> that the daughters of Israel went 4 days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

1. How are we to understand this?

a. Did Jeph offer his daughter as a sacrifice; a **burnt offering** as originally vowed back in v31?

b. Some take it that way. But close examination reveals something different.

2. After church 1 Sunday, a young boy asked his mother, "Mom, what's a virgin?"

a. She thought, "Oh no. The time has come."

b. She calmly explained the facts of life in great detail.

c. When she finished, he looked puzzled & said, "So what's a King James version?"

3. We can sort out what Jeph offered God by that word '**virginity.**'

4. Hebrew scholars say the **best** translation of the last phrase of v31 is,

I will consecrate it to the Lord, or I will offer it for a burnt-offering.

5. In other words, Jeph said, "Whatever's 1<sup>st</sup> out my door, whether sacrifice or offering, I'll give it."

6. With great confidence we can say ***Jeph knew that God considered human sacrifice an abomination.***

a. In vs14-28, when Jeph tried diplomacy with the king of the Ammonites, he rehearsed Israel's whole history. So we know he was well-versed in God's Word.

b. Both Lev 18 & Deut 12 strictly forbade human sacrifice. [Lev. 18:21 & Deu. 12:31]

c. God would **never** hold him to a vow that called for a blasphemous abomination.

c. Heb 11:32 puts Jeph in the Hall of Faith; not possible if he'd murdered his daughter in a misguided act of devotion.

6. So, **how** was she consecrated to God?

7. Exo 38 & 1 Sam 2 speak of women who served God at the tabernacle.

a. Usually, these were **widows** w/o children to support them.

b. Jeph's daughter was different.

1) She's a young woman just entering the age when she & her friends are looking forward to marriage.

2) Get married, have kids, make a home.

c. That's why v37 says she wanted time to "*bewail [her] virginity.*"

d. The future she dreamed of is gone. She'll spend her life single, serving God at the tabernacle.

8. What made this offering so costly to Jeph was that this is the end of his family line.

a. His daughter will never marry.

b. She'll never have kids; so he'll never have grandchildren.

c. That may not seem like a big deal to modern Americans.

d. It was EVERYTHING to Jeph & his daughter.

1) **Family was everything!** Children were a man's chief delight & desire.

2) What you did in life, you did **chiefly** for the benefit of your descendants.

3) Here's Jephthah; flush with victory.

a) His ignominious past erased; replaced by the promise of greatness.

b) He's just set his descendants up as people of position & influence.

c) But it's all lost the moment his daughter walks out the door to greet him.

4) That fast, Jeph's gone from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows.

9. V39 seals it –

And it was so at the end of 2 months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man.

a. That makes it clear. The vow was fulfilled ***in her remaining a virgin.***

b. If she'd been sacrificed it would read, "She died."

### Be Cautious of Vows

1. Let's wrap this up by seeing how all this relates to us Jeph's oath was **unnecessary**.
  - a. The Spirit came on him **before** he made his vow, not after.
  - b. Success was assured because God was with him, not because of his vow.
2. God's choice of Jeph was a matter of His grace; not Jeph's merit.
  - a. Jeph picked Jeph to lead **because** he was an outcast. He **wasn't** qualified.
  - b. That way, when Isrl won, everyone would know their victory was due to God's help, not Jeph's skill.
3. Jeph's vow was an attempt to lay some little claim to success.
  - a. "God gave me victory because He wants what I promised."
  - b. "So this victory is partly due to my devotion!"
4. Christian, hear me: Pride is insidious!
  - a. If it can't robe us in arrogance, it sneaks around to cloak us in false humility.
  - b. Something deep in the brokenness we inherited from Adam is a **reluctance** to accept God's grace.
  - c. We have a hard time admitting how **totally** dependent on Him we are.
  - d. We want to claim **at least some little sliver of worthiness**,  
then make THAT the REAL REASON God saved us.
5. A major cult admits this in their twisted theology.
  - a. They define God's grace as a stop-gap.
  - b. It's what God ADDS **after** we've done all we can, so that we make it to heaven.
6. No! God's grace first woos, then wins, & carries us all the way home.  
Eph 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.
  - a. They'll be no boasting in Heaven, save in what God has done.
7. But here's the thing; and we see it in Jeph.
  - a. When **touched** by God's **grace**, we often respond by trying to **GIVE** something of our own.
  - b. The problem is, we sometimes offer **more** than we're **later** willing to part with.
  - c. Overwhelmed by grace, it's easy to promise great devotion.
  - d. But later, when it's time to ante-up, the cost looms large and we regret the vow.
  - e. **Regret** ought never stain our gift.
8. That's a lesson Solomon knew well and why he penned Eccl. 5:1-5.

<sup>1</sup> Walk [carefully] when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. <sup>2</sup> Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. ... <sup>4</sup> When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For *He has* no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed— <sup>5</sup> Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.

1. Let's follow Jeph's example of integrity & faithfulness.
  - a. If you say you will do a thing, **DO IT!**
  - b. Especially the small things, the daily things.
  - c. If you say you'll be somewhere at a certain time – be there!
  - d. If you say you'll do something, do it – no matter how trivial.
  - e. We **learn** faithfulness, not by facing some huge trial, but by being faithful in the little things.
  - f. By being faithful in the little commitments of life, we build up the **moral inertia** to face the bigger challenges.
  - g. But if we neglect the little things, we train ourselves to unfaithfulness.
2. As a young boy, Johnny loved the stories he heard in S/S – of the heroes of the Bible who did great things.
  - a. He wanted to be a hero when he grew up.
  - b. And God **wanted** to use Johnny, so He gave him **parents** who told him to keep his room clean. He said he would, but he didn't.
  - d. Johnny went to school, and God gave him teachers who assigned **homework** so he could learn faithfulness, but he didn't do his homework.
  - e. God blessed Johnny with a **job**, and in the interview Johnny promised to be on time and do a good

job, but he didn't.

f. God gave Johnny a *wife*. In the wedding he vowed to be faithful & provide her. But he wasn't & didn't.

g. Now at 85, Johnny sits alone in a nursing home, looking back over his life wondering why God never used him.

14. Don't be Johnny – be Jephthah.