

Mr Talkative

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Angela, for reading. It would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at page 254, that story of Jephthah.

We're in a series at the moment as a church family and judges. And as always, you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if that would help you just see where we're going with this history, this story from the Bible.

So this is kind of family time. This is God's people, church family, listening to God. We want to hear God and encounter him in his word. So let's pray as we do that.

Let's ask for God's help. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you are a speaking God who has made your character known to us, that as we go through the challenges of life and as we as a society hit the challenges of our world, you have spoken and made yourself known.

And so we pray that you will help us to hear your voice in the Scriptures and respond rightly to what you're saying to us today. In Jesus' name, amen. I don't know what kind of picture you would have of becoming a Christian, what it would be like to become a Christian or what it's like for you.

[1 : 10] Kathy and I watched the film *The Martian* last week. You might have seen it. Matt Damon accidentally left behind on Mars, growing his own potatoes. And the crew of the spaceship that left him behind, the *Hermes*, they want to get him back.

So they want to do this fly past Earth, go around, head back, pick up Matt Damon, who's stuck on Mars. And they can't get... The problem is they don't have enough supplies on their spaceship, right?

Enter the Chinese. The Chinese have got a rocket that they can fire up. And as the *Hermes* heads back towards Mars, this rocket will fly up and they'll kind of bolt it on and it will give them the supplies they need.

It made the movie very popular in China. Interesting, isn't it? Ridley Scott knows what he's doing. So anyway, the Chinese have that rocket and they do that and they manage to get this. So I won't tell you what happens, but that's partway through the film.

And I just wonder if sometimes we have a similar view of what it's like to sort of turn to God and become a Christian. That it's a bit like the *Hermes*, that becoming a Christian doesn't really change your direction of travel.

[2 : 17] You're kind of going along in a certain way, but you just need a bit of help. You need a bit of a boost. So you get God and you plug him in and he boosts you to carry on.

It's sometimes how we even advertise or present the Christian faith to other people. You seem to be doing great in life. You're going along fine, but maybe there's something missing.

So let me tell you about Jesus and you can bolt him on and you can just carry on as you are, but you'll be a bit more fulfilled because you'll have Jesus with you. So what our Bible story this morning shows us is that the rescue that God is offering us from sin is a much more needed thing than we realize.

It's much more significant and it fundamentally changes the direction of your life. That's what we see. So we're in this series in Judges. This is Old Testament. It's before Jesus came.

And at that time, God had rescued a group of people and he brought them out of slavery in Egypt, where they were, and under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, they'd gone into this new land, the promised land.

[3 : 24] And for a period of time, they were led by these judges, these leaders. And by the time we get to chapter 10 in Judges, things are getting worse and worse. So our first point this morning is, this is a nation on a downward spiral.

We get introduced to Jephthah at the beginning of chapter 11. And even just his background shows us that Israel is in massive moral decline. In verse 1, we're told his father was Gilead.

So he is the clan leader, the tribe leader. He's a very significant person. Jephthah, as his oldest son, will be the next clan leader. But he was born from Gilead, paying for sex.

It's like suddenly finding out that Prince William has another child from a prostitute. So he'll be the next king. And Gilead's wife's sons drive him away because they don't want him to be in charge of them.

So he doesn't deserve that. They treat him badly. And that is Israel, God's chosen people. They're meant to live such good lives that the world will see and realize their God is the true God.

[4 : 37] But instead, they've become that kind of nation where that kind of thing goes on among the leadership. But what's really important to understand this story and apply it today is that if you notice when we have the reading, the first half of the story was kind of about Israel and God.

And the second half of the story was about Jephthah and how they relate to him. But the way they treat Jephthah is the same. It's an analogy of how they're treating God.

So if you think about it, Jephthah has the right to be their leader and they drive him away. And Israel has just treated God like that. He should be their leader and they've driven him away.

That's clear from the beginning of chapter 11. If you have a look at verse 6, again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Well, we've seen that before in Judges, them doing evil. But then it says they served and this time it lists seven gods.

Well, seven kinds of gods. That's much worse than anything we've had before in Israel's history.

The Baals and the Ashtoreths, the first ones, were the gods worshipped by the people in the Promised Land when Israel arrived.

[5 : 47] But it's as though now they've gone, oh, these aren't really enough for us. Let's find some more exotic gods. And they go for the nations around them and they say, well, who are you worshipping? We want to worship your gods and serve them.

It's getting worse. And this is the truth about sin. Your sin always tends to get worse. Sin isn't just the bad things we do. Sin is loving the wrong things.

Basically, instead of loving God and loving other people, which is what we're meant to do, our love turns in on itself and we love ourselves too much. It's a self-centeredness. And left to ourselves, our sin spirals downwards.

So if you've got a real problem with internet pornography, people never really start with the violent, sadistic stuff. No, it starts with just looking for exciting sex scenes in movies or leering over the latest music videos.

And then we move on to the kind of glossy images of soft pornography. And then we get less sensitive to that and we need something more hardcore to give us pleasure. And then, and then, and then, it just gets worse.

[6 : 55] Or I had an example this week from a minister in Liverpool. It's quite direct, so I'm going to quote him rather than summarize. He was talking about how sometimes for a Christian, hospitality can move to the periphery of life.

And he said this, it starts with being busy doing up your new house and then wanting to be a bit careful about the carpets and then not being able to have people around when the baby's asleep and then being too busy to come to small group and then feeling we just live a bit too far away from the church building and then having to get ready for work on a Sunday afternoon and then getting here before 11 on a Sunday seems too difficult and then you've got to rush off for lunch with your family every week and then by the time you've done all that, you've reduced your care for God's people to 87 minutes a week, 35 of which you spend half listening to a sermon.

But you see his point, our sin gets worse. It spirals downwards. It's like a cancer growing on our souls. I know it's not nice to think about it like that, but if we don't accept that that's what our sin is like, then we just read a story like this in Judges and we think, this is just really sordid.

What's it got to do with me? Instead of realizing, this is God showing us that our sin is really serious and that he's got an amazing solution for it if we realize that.

So where did Israel end up in their sin? Well, they end up in slavery. If you just have a look with me at the end of verse 6. And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, he became angry with them.

[8 : 26] He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites who that year shattered and crushed them. The punishment fits the crime.

God's people reject him to worship idols, worshiped by the people around them. Ironically, he gives them exactly what they asked for. They want to be the slaves of the gods of the nations, so he hands them over to be the slaves of those nations.

Just as it's always true that idolatry, worshipping other things and not God, it leads to enslavement. The idols of that time were very obvious.

They had shrines and altars. You'd have seen around. They had these cult prostitutes. But today, our hearts are just the same. An idol is anything that you love and serve and trust because you think it will give you what you really need in life.

It might be money or sex or popularity or power. Those are the things people build their lives on today. We take good things and we turn them into God things.

[9 : 36] Like colorful statues on a Hindu's mantelpiece, we fill our hearts up with the things we think will give us ultimate fulfillment. Personal development, success, family, leisure experiences, good things, we turn them into God things.

And when we do that, our idols enslave us. Because when the idol lets us down, what we think is, I must serve that idol more.

I need more of it. So if you think that your marriage will ultimately satisfy you, that will be what will give you heaven, then you're left unfulfilled and what you think is, I need another relationship.

I need a different spouse. If you make success in your career into your idol and sacrifice other things for your career, then if you actually achieve success and you're not satisfied, you end up thinking, I need a new challenge at work.

I've got to do even better. So we get enslaved because we don't think our problem is that we've gone to an idol and worshipped it. No, we think, I've not worshipped my idol enough.

[10 : 48] I need to give it more. So let's see what happens next to the Israelites in their suffering. Our second point, a prayer without a sorry. Now just to explain what happens here, it's possible to hear someone and it sounds as though they mean one thing and actually they're talking, they mean something completely different by what they say.

I don't know if you've got any examples of that. I was talking to Keith from our church family earlier this week and we were just together one evening and he said to me as he went home, he said, I'm going to watch Rogue One again tonight, the Star Wars movie and I said, it's a great film, isn't it? And he said, yeah, it is great but it's quite brutal though, quite a brutal film and I said, I didn't think it was brutal. I said, what do you mean? And then I said, oh, do you mean the end and what happens at the end? And he said, well, yeah, yeah.

And then he recounted what happens at the end and as he did, I realized, I haven't seen the film. I was thinking of a totally different film. So Keith is hearing words from me in a conversation about a film.

I mean something totally different by them and now it's bought the film for me. But if you just have a look at verse 10, that's what happens here. The Israelites cry out to the Lord in verse 10 of chapter 10.

[12 : 03] They say, we have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals. It sounds sincere but God sees exactly what's going on. The people are not actually sorry for their sin.

They're only sorry because of the consequences of their sin. That brutal language of verse 9, they were shattered. They were crushed.

So the marauding barbarians from other nations have come into their land. They've stolen the food. They've slaughtered the men. They've taken the women to be their slaves. And this goes on for 18 years.

When it says in verse 10, they were in great distress at the end of verse 9, it's very, very bad what's happening. And the Israelites are really sorry about that.

But this is bombshell to religion. It's a religion that prays to God when you really need Him. But in truth, you still don't really want to let Him be God.

[13 : 05] So God gives them a history lesson in verse 11. He says, whenever you've cried out to me in the past, I've saved you. So why have you ignored me? Verse 13. You have forsaken me and served other gods.

So I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble. So by praying like they are to God, it's like they're treating Him like another idol.

If we can just push the right buttons with God and bargain with Him, we'll get what we need and then we'll carry on. And God says to them, it's very chilling, isn't it? He says, I will no longer save you.

Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Perhaps a bit like today, if we use a confession prayer at church like a magical incantation.

We've wandered and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We've sinned in thought and word and deed through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault. We're truly sorry.

[14:11] As though we think we can fool God. And God is not easily fooled. I don't know if you saw this week in the news about this, at Robert Gordon University, they're having an art exhibition.

And a couple of students saw there was a spare table in the exhibition. So they just put a one pound pineapple on the table. And they wanted to see if people would think it was art.

And they went back four days later and it had been put in a cabinet case because the curator had not just thought it was art but thought it needed protecting more from the general public.

People can be easily fooled, right? But God is not easily fooled. And there's a way to, there's a way to pray that's actually still just idolatry.

Just, it's turning back to God because what we want from Him are the things we worship instead of Him. Instead of turning back to Him because we want Him. And there comes a point when God says, if you're living for idols, let your God save you.

[15:19] In a mess with your credit card again, let those shoes that you bought save you. In turmoil because you've really upset a friend because she realized you were criticizing her behind her back, let popularity come to your aid.

In trouble at work because you lied to give yourself more credit for something and then to cover up your mistake. Why not let ambition save you?

Those things that you've replaced God with, let's just see how they look after you now. It's quite scary that, isn't it? Because we all know those gods don't save us.

Now, of course, often God doesn't hand us over like that. We turn to Him, He's incredibly merciful, and He looks after us far more than we deserve. But we can't fool Him.

Even when we're tricking ourselves, He knows what's really going on in our hearts. And He exposes that in our next point, it's our third point, a crime boss who sees the problem.

[16:29] Remember, when we look at how the Israelites treat Jephthah, we're seeing a picture of how they're treating God. That's what's happening. So if we just go on into chapter 11, the elders of Gilead, they go to Jephthah, and they find him in verse 5, in the place where they'd sent him, in verse 5.

But by now, he's a mobster, verse 3. So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him. He is Michael Corleone. He's Jabba the Hutt. And they try and entice him back to protect them. Just look with me at verse 6. They say, come, be our commander so we can fight the Ammonites.

But they don't really want Jephthah to be in charge. He's just their last resort. It's just the same as they're treating God. They're bargaining with him.

You can be commander of our army if you come back. But if you just look back at verse 18 of chapter 10, they'd already agreed, whoever leads us will be head over all who live in Gilead.

[17:33] They're hoping to avoid that with Jephthah that he'll actually be in charge. They're bargaining. Just like we bargain with God in a desperate situation.

Please help me out of this, God. And I'll go to church every week for the next 10 years. So verse 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? 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 head over all of us who live in Gilead.

He pushes back and they have to admit he'll be in charge. So Jephthah, he might be stacked like Jack Reacher or Dwayne Johnson, you know, the rock, but he's no meathead, right?

He gets what's going on. He says, really? He even asks them again, verse 9, suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me, will I really be your head?

[18:41] The elders of Gilead replied, the Lord is our witness. We will certainly do as you say. And at that point, Jephthah goes with them and the people make him head and commander over them.

It's a direct parallel of what's happening with God's people Israel and the way they're treating God. They want his rescue, but they don't want him to be God. Jephthah makes the mask again. He does that because they have to learn that rescue comes with rule. If they want him to save them, they have to let him lead them. Now, Jephthah is a bit of a scoundrel, right? But the thing is, the principle is the same when it comes to God. Israel has turned to God. They've asked him to rescue them, but rescue comes with rule. And second time round, the people truly and deeply repent.

That's in chapter 10, verse 15. The Israelites said to the Lord, we have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.

[19 : 46] Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord. So this time, it's deeper, genuine repentance. We know that because of two things.

First of all, they're saying, we want you to be our God even if it means we're going to keep suffering. They don't want God for what they can get from him. They just realize it's wrong to have turned from him and they want him for himself.

And secondly, they get rid of the foreign gods in the land that they've been serving. They're going to stop worshipping them. They're genuinely sorry. Not just for the trouble it's got them into, but because it's turned them from God.

It's the same for us today that we need to ask ourselves, are we willing to say to God, I want to know you, not just because of what I can get from you, but because of who you really are.

He wants us cut to the heart, deeply convicted that our love for other things has grown too strong and that's wrong. It's wrong to have done that and so that we are genuinely resolved in our hearts to say yes to him and his presence and his good rule over our lives from now on.

[20 : 58] So how does God respond to a prayer like that? Well, that's our fourth point. We've seen a nation on a downward spiral, a prayer without a sorry, a crime boss who sees the problem. Fourthly and finally, let's look at a God with a compassionate heart.

So Jephthah and God, in some ways, they're like each other in the stories, but at this point, they become very different. Jephthah wants power and recognition, so he goes back to Gilead once he knows that he'll get that.

But in chapter 10, the Lord responds differently. If you look again at verse 16 of chapter 10, then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the Lord and he could bear Israel's misery no longer.

That's why God saves us. It's not ultimately about whether or not we've managed to impress him with how deeply sorry we are.

It's not that our repentance is like a bargaining chip that twists his arm. No, it's that he's compassionate. Compassionate so that for those 18 years, he's been looking on at his people in grief as he has seen them suffer the consequences of their sin.

[22 : 08] And his character doesn't change, so he is compassionate today. And we need to hear that as we look at the events of the last week. That we can be assured that we have a God who grieves when his people are in distress, when we're troubled, when we're afraid.

He's a God who longs for us to turn back to him so that he can rescue us. And if you're here and you're not a Christian, let me ask you, is that how you really view God today?

Often the God that we think we are rejecting in the Christian faith is not the real God. Yes, he does demand that we stop worshipping other things and that we worship him instead.

But it's not for his good as though he's lacking anything and desperately needs us to serve him. No, it's for our good because we were made to know him and live for him.

And even when our own wrongdoing gets us, our own foolishness gets us into terrible trouble, and even when we can only blame ourselves, the God who made us is still deeply moved with compassion for us.

[23 : 26] So because I'm a church minister, I do often get asked by people, if God is really good, how could he have let these things happen to me? And there's lots that we don't know in those situations about why God has allowed certain things to happen.

But we know that the answer can't be it's because God doesn't care. It can't be that. Judges chapter 10 verse 16 is a very precious verse about the character of God and it shines like a diamond in the middle of a horrible story about human sin.

He could bear Israel's sin, sorry, He could bear Israel's misery no longer. He steps in to act to rescue them.

Just like in Isaiah 63, we read, in all their distress, He too was distressed. It shines a light into the heart of heaven and reveals a God grieving every moment for 18 years that the mess His people were in, a mess of their own making, and then rising up out of immense love to rescue them.

So whatever you thought about God before, let me ask, would you be willing to turn to a God like that this morning? And if we're Christians here, could we be moved to a deeper repentance, a deeper conviction of how awful it is for God that we turn the good things He gives us into God things and replace Him with them?

[24 : 54] knowing that this is God's character, the God of compassion who is waiting to save us.

We know that's what He's like because now we've seen that just as He raised up Jephthah in those times, He has raised up one far greater than Jephthah in the Lord Jesus.

Just think, Jephthah was a man despised and rejected by His own people who spent years in the wilderness, but who then rescued His people and led them into freedom. And now, God has sent us Jesus of Nazareth.

Just like Jephthah, He's despised and rejected. John says about Him, He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. He too spent time in the wilderness.

But unlike Jephthah, He was perfectly righteous so that when He died a criminal's death, He could bear our sin to offer us His righteousness, forgiveness, and a fresh start with God.

It's His heroic compassion that changes our hearts and draws us into deep repentance, turning back to Him. Amen.

[26 : 09] Amen.