

## Vows – Judges 11:29-40

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Reading – Psalm 15

<sup>1</sup> LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?

<sup>2</sup> He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart;

<sup>3</sup> He *who* does not backbite with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;

<sup>4</sup> In whose eyes a vile person is despised, But he honors those who fear the LORD; He *who* swears to his own hurt and does not change;

<sup>5</sup> He *who* does not put out his money at usury, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these *things* shall never be moved.

#### B. The Departure of Virtue

1. Peter Jackson's film version of JRR Tolkien's epic *The Lord of the Rings* did very well at the box office.
2. Thousands who never read the books saw the movie & entered the world of Middle Earth where the Battle between good & evil was joined in vivid detail.
3. One of the things in Tolkien's story that appeals to so many is the simple virtue portrayed in the heroes of the story.
  - a. We see loyalty, courage, & self-sacrifice from the beginning to the bittersweet end.
  - b. And these virtues are all put to the test in the face of tremendous evil.
4. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* at a time when virtue was under attack.
5. As a professor at Oxford in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he gathered with friends like CS Lewis and talked about the direction the Modern World was taking.
  - a. They could see how the *skepticism* & secular humanism were turning society into a heartless machine.

- b. People were being turned into little more than tools to build the perfect world.
  - c. Being involved in education, they could see how humanism was infiltrating the schools, tearing away the spiritual-life & values students.
6. So both Lewis & Tolkien wrote modern myths that were aimed at **preserving** the values & virtues civilization is built on.
    - a. Lewis wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia & The Space Trilogy*.
    - b. Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit & The Lord of the Rings*.
  7. The movies did a good job of bringing across Tolkien's intent of **revaluating virtue**.
  8. And as we sit & watch the heroes press on in their quest to deliver Middle Earth from the hideous grip of darkness, something is stirred inside us.
  9. There's an **ache** in our hearts as we watch them press on in the face of impossible odds.
  10. Though they're bone weary & covered with sweat & the grime of many miles & trials, we see **a beauty** that brings us to tears.
    - a. It's not the beauty of outward appearance,
    - b. But **the beauty of virtue**, of a character that does the right thing, the **good** thing, even when it's difficult & there's nothing personal to be gained.
    - c. If Sam's picking up the exhausted Frodo to carry him the last few feet to Mt. Doom so they can complete their quest doesn't move you deeply, I don't know what to say.
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11. Tolkien's & Lewis' works notwithstanding, the departure of virtue from modern society has continued on unabated.
  12. Despite the popularity of Jackson's movie trilogy, it seems virtue has nearly disappeared.
  13. What the modern world seems to value today is **rudeness & crudeness**
  14. All you have to do is take a look at what's popular on TV & in music.
  15. Society has become coarse & instead of virtue being something beautiful & sought after, it's mocked & made fun of.

### **C. A Celebration of Virtue**

1. Psalm 15 is a **celebration of virtue**.
2. It's a bold declaration of the kind of person God delights in.

3. And v. 4 reveals a virtue that ought to mark every believer.
4. We find it in the last half of the verse – where David says - **He who swears to his own hurt and does not change.**
5. That word “swears” refers to the making of an oath, the pledging of a vow.
6. God delights in those who *keep their word*, even when doing so costs them more than they anticipated.
7. There’s a wonderful story from the life of one of the Judges that illustrates this for us. It’s found in Judges 11 . . .

## II. TEXT

### A. V. 29

**29 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, 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. Yet again, Israel had turned to the worship of idols & God disciplined them by allowing the Ammonites to harass them.
2. After 18 years of harsh oppression, the people of Israel finally cried out to God & asked for deliverance, not just from oppression, but from the waywardness of their hearts that saw them turn so quickly from God when things were going well.
3. God’s answer was Jephthah, a man who’d been rejected by his family & had gone off to live in the wilds.
4. Jephthah was a natural leader, & it wasn’t long before he’d gathered round him a group of followers with whom he raided foreign caravans & villages.
5. The leaders of Israel sent messengers to Jephthah in his hideout in the eastern hills, asking if he’d lead them against the Ammonites.
6. Jephthah consented, and as he went out to battle, we read here in v. 29 that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, meaning God’s favor & power gave him what he needed to defeat the Ammonites.
7. Now – that’s all Jephthah needed to ensure the outcome of the Battle – God’s presence & power.
8. But Jephthah does something in response to the Spirit’s anointing that wasn’t really necessary . . .

### B. Vs. 30-31

**30 And Jephthah 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. As Jephthah made his way to the battlefield, v. 29 tells us the Spirit of the Lord came upon him.
2. He sensed this anointing, & responded by making a vow.
  - a. It was prompted by the awareness of God’s call upon his life.
  - b. In gratitude, as He faces the coming battle, he says,
  - c. “If you’ll give me victory, I’ll offer You the first thing that comes out of the door of my house when I return home.”
  - d. This vow isn’t so much a *bargain* as it is an expression of *devotion* to the Lord.
  - e. As he’s now marching to battle, he realizes it *would have been* a good idea to make an offering *earlier*.
  - f. But it’s too late now, so he says, “Lord, I promise, I’ll bring my offering as soon as I get home safe.”

### **C. Vs. 32-34**

**32 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—twenty cities—and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.**

1. Jephthah led the men of Israel to a rousing victory, handing the Ammonites a defeat that would last for generations.

**34 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.**

2. As Jephthah returns to his home he comes not *only* as a victorious leader.
3. The rejection he’d known from his brothers is now *erased* in the warm acceptance of his entire tribe.
4. He’s a happy guy as he approaches his house because a new day

has dawned for him.

5. But his joy turns quickly to wrenching grief.
6. Because as he moves toward his door, he's keeping an eye out for what will be the first to greet him.
7. He's mindful of his vow & wondering what offering he'll be making.
  - a. Jephthah was probably thinking that he'd see one of the many animals he owned lounging in the yard.
  - b. But as he draws close, he sees his only child come out the door.
  - c. She's all dressed up with little bells in her hands, and she's dancing a victory dance for him.
  - d. Because of what we later learn about her, we can safely assume she was somewhere between 9 & 13, when little girls are all about flowing dresses & dancing, & twirling & singing for their daddies.
8. So as she greets him with this tender expression of honor his heart explodes!

#### **D. Vs. 35-36**

**<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. Jephthah ought to have swept her up into his arms and given her a big hug.
2. But he can't - he's ruined. The great victory over Ammon is now eclipsed by a loss so great it leaves Jephthah devastated.
3. He tells her he's made a vow to God, and he can't break it.
4. He can't break it because he's a man of his word; he's one who keeps his promises, even when those promises cost him dearly.
5. ***She knows*** what kind of a man he is & tries to cheer him by actively surrendering to whatever that vow is.
6. It's clear that Jephthah's integrity has not been lost on his daughter.

7. He's done a good job of raising her with the virtues *all* parents ought to teach their children.
8. This shows how *close* father & daughter were.

### **E. Vs. 37-40**

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

1. She asked for a little time to visit her friends before the vow was carried out.
2. Then she spent 2 months, "*Bewailing her virginity.*"
3. Keep that phrase in mind because it's important in understanding this passage.

**39 And it was so at the end of two 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 40 that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.**

4. How are we to understand this?
  - a. Did Jephthah offer his daughter as a burnt offering?
  - b. There are some who understand it that way.
  - c. But a close examination of the *whole* story reveals something different.
5. After church one Sunday, a young boy asked his mother, "Mom, what's a virgin?"
  - a. She thought, "Oh no. The time has come."
  - b. So sat down with him & calmly explained the facts of life in great detail.
  - c. When she finished, he looked puzzled & said, "So what's a King James version?"
6. We can sort out what Jephthah offered to God by that word 'virginity.'

### **F. What Was Offered?**

1. The key for understanding what happened to Jephthah's daughter

is found in vs. 31, 37, & 39.

2. According to most Hebrew scholars, the best translation of the last phrase of v. 31 is,

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

3. In other words, Jephthah said, “Whatever’s the first thing to come out of the door to greet me, if it be a thing fit for a burnt-offering, it shall be made one; if fit for the service of God, it shall be *consecrated* to Him.”
4. In vs. 14-28, Jephthah had demonstrated that he was well-versed in the Word of God.
  - a. Before going up against the Ammonites in battle, he’d tried negotiation.
  - b. He sent a long message to the Ammonite king rehearsing the whole history between Israel and Ammon.
  - c. In his commitment to keep his vow to the Lord he demonstrates his awareness of the Law of Moses which reminds the people to fulfill what they have promised to God.
5. So Jephthah would have known the prohibition *against* human sacrifice.
  - a. It was strictly forbidden in Lev. 18:21 & Deu. 12:31.
  - b. He would have known God would *never* hold him to keep a vow that called for such an abomination as killing his daughter.
  - c. In Hebrews 11:32, Jephthah is listed in the Hall of Faith with just a select few others.
  - d. Such a glowing commendation would hardly go to a guy who killed his daughter in a misguided act of devotion.
6. When Jephthah made his vow in v. 31, he meant that if an animal *fit for offering* was the first thing he saw, he’d offer it up as a burnt offering.
  - a. The burnt offering was a symbol of one’s total consecration to God.
  - b. The whole thing was burnt, picturing complete devotion.
  - c. But only *clean* animals were allowed to be offered.
  - d. If someone wanted to devote an *unclean* animal, then its *value* was assessed in silver & *that* was given to the tabernacle.
  - e. WE read that persons could be consecrated to the Lord as well, but they wouldn’t be sacrificed; they would either give silver to

- redeem their value, or they would offer themselves in service to the Lord at the tabernacle or temple.
7. In Exodus 38:8 & 1 Samuel 2:22 we read about women who gathered at the tabernacle to serve the Lord.
    - a. Typically, these were older widows who'd already married and had their families.
    - b. Their children were grown & had their own families, and their husbands had passed on.
    - c. So these women would gather to serve in whatever way they could at the tabernacle.
  8. The difference with Jephthah's daughter is that she wasn't a widow, she was a young woman who was just entering that time of life when the rest of her friends were looking forward to marriage.
  9. This is why in v. 37 she says she wants some time to "*bewail [her] virginity.*"
    - a. If she knew she was going to be offered as a burnt offering, would she be lamenting the fact she hadn't had sex? Not hardly!
    - b. No, she wanted to take a couple months to say goodbye to her friends before she shipped off to go serve at the tabernacle which was miles from her home.
    - c. And though she wasn't going to die *physically*, she *was* dying to all her hopes & dreams of having a family.
    - d. What made the offering so costly was that as Jephthah's only child, continuing the family & name lay with her.
    - e. *This* is what crushed him so badly.
      - 1) Not only was he sending his daughter off to live far away where he would rarely if ever see her,
      - 2) By committing her to the service of the Lord, it meant *the end of his family line.*
      - 3) I don't think there's any way for us to grasp just how *brutal* this was for the both of them.
      - 4) *Family was everything!* Children were a man's chief delight & desire.
      - 5) What you did in life, you did *chiefly* for the benefit of your descendants.
      - 6) And here is Jephthah – His victory over the Ammonites has erased his past as the outcast son of a harlot who'd turned



into a brigand & highway robber.

- 7) He's just set his descendants up as people of position & influence in Israel.
- 8) But all of that is lost in the moment his daughter walks out the door to greet him.
- 9) That fast, he's gone from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows.
10. V. 39 seals it –  
**And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man.**
  - a. You see, it's made clear for us – the vow was fulfilled *in her remaining a virgin*.
  - b. If she'd been offered as a burnt offering it would read, “And he carried out his vow. And she died.”
  - c. There is only one place offerings could be made – at the tabernacle.
  - d. The priests *never* would have gone along with Jephthah's plan to burn his daughter!
  - e. No, he simply took her to the tabernacle & devoted her to the service of God.
11. The story ends with the comment that for a time the young women of Israel would annually visit Jephthah's daughter at the tabernacle.

### III. CONCLUSION

#### A. Be Cautious About Vowing

1. The lesson for us is two-fold.
2. **First**, be *cautious* about making vows.
  - a. It's clear from vs. 29 & 30 that Jephthah's oath of an offering was *unnecessary*.
  - b. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him *before* he made the vow, not after, not as a result of his vow.
  - c. The victory was already assured because God had anointed him.
  - d. But Jephthah, sensing the move of the Spirit, did not keep check on his flesh, which jumped in & tried to have its say.
3. Here's the thing: When *touched* by God's *grace*, the natural

reaction of the believer is to respond in like manner – & want to **GIVE** something.

- a. The problem is, what we offer is often *more* than we're *later* willing to part with.
  - b. Overwhelmed with the goodness of God, it's easy to promise great devotion because in that moment, it's the most *reasonable* thing in the world.
  - c. But later, when it comes time to fulfill the promise, the cost looms large and we can regret our earlier promise.
  - d. *Regret* ought never stain our service or offering to the Lord.
4. Remember when Jesus visited Zacchaeus in Jericho?
- a. Jesus opened the door of hope & forgiveness to the despised, little tax-collector.
  - b. Zacchaeus was so excited he vowed to repay *everyone* he'd ripped off, with interest!
  - c. But after Jesus left, I wonder how *excited* Zacchaeus was about going to all those he'd collected too much from to pay his vow.

5. In Eccl. 5:1-6 we read –

**<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>3</sup> For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words. <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. <sup>6</sup> Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?**

6. Solomon knew what it meant to be visited by God & touched dramatically by His grace.
- a. So he urged *caution* when responding to the Lord.
  - b. He said, “Don't be too quick to speak about *how devoted* you are.”

- c. “Don’t be hasty to promise God what *form* your devotion will take.”
  - d. “Be quiet and simply enjoy God’s goodness.”
7. Then he warns, if you *do* make a vow to God, *keep it!*

### **B. Keep Your Vows**

1. And that brings us to the **Second** lesson – *Fulfill your promises.*
2. Remember the words of Psalm 15 – The person who maintains fellowship with God is the one who *keeps his word*, even when it costs more than he anticipated.
3. Over & over in the Psalms, we find this emphasis on the faithful heart that performs what is promised to God.
4. Faithfulness is a virtue that’s in shockingly short supply these days.
  - a. Employees feel little need to be faithful in their work.
  - b. Children have little concern with being faithful to their parents.
  - c. And faithfulness in marriage has hit an all-time low with rampant affairs & divorce.
  - d. Our courts are overflowing with cases of people suing each other for breach of contract.
5. Now, all this ought not surprise us. Modern man has turned his back on God.
  - a. If there is no god, then *anything goes.*
  - b. There’s no one looking over our shoulder; no Judge before Whom we must finally stand & give account.
6. Each one does what is right in his own eyes – So when a commitment or promise requires more than we’re willing to spend, we break our promise. And why not? Who’s going to hold us accountable?
7. As the people of God, we are called to be **LIKE HIM**, & God *always* keeps His promises!
  - a. He keeps them even when they’re costly – as in when they cost Him his Son.
  - b. God’s promise is sure; what He has said He *will* perform.
  - c. In fact, God is *so* faithful, His promises *can’t* fail.
8. Being His people means being called to be *like* Him.
  - a. So even though the virtue of faithfulness isn’t valued by society at large, it *has to be* among us.
  - b. If we are *the people of God’s Word*, then we must be a people

- of *our* word.
- c. Are you faithful? Do you keep your promises?
  - d. Or do you bail when it costs more than you originally thought?
9. Some time ago a young woman signed a contract to teach in a Christian school.
- a. Students enrolled and the curriculum was set.
  - b. But in August, just a couple weeks before school began, she received a better offer from another school.
  - c. So she ***broke*** the original contract, leaving the first school without a teacher for that grade as it was now too late to find someone.
  - d. If she'd been ***faithful***, if she'd lived by the principle of integrity given in Psalm 15:4 & demonstrated by Jephthah, she would have fulfilled her promise and stayed at the first school.
  - e. When challenged by that very truth, she replied that she had prayed about it & "***felt a peace***" about her decision.
10. I don't know how many times I've heard people ***justify*** unbiblical behavior by saying they have a peace about it.
- a. They wave that phrase like a magic wand over their choices as if it's supposed to make everything alright.
  - b. I've heard all kinds of outright sin ***excused*** by the line - "I have a peace about it."
11. When ***your*** peace contradicts the Word of God – we'll I leave it to you to figure out which is the right one to go with.
12. Let's follow Jephthah'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 will 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've neglected the little things, all we do is train ourselves toward unfaithfulness.
13. Johnny longed to be used by God. He wanted so badly to do something really big for the Lord.
- a. He loved the stories in the Bible about the heroes of the Faith.

- b. He loved hearing biographies about men & women who'd stood for God against impossible odds; he wanted to grow up to be one of them.
  - c. God *wanted* to use Johnny, so He gave him *parents* who told him to keep his room clean so he could learn faithfulness, and Johnny said he would, but he didn't.
  - d. Then Johnny went to school, and God gave him teachers who gave him *homework* so he could learn faithfulness, but he didn't do his homework.
  - e. As a young man God blessed Johnny with a *job* so he could learn faithfulness, and Johnny promised during the interview he'd be on time and do a good job, but he didn't.
  - f. Then God gave Johnny a *wife*, and at the wedding he took a vow to be faithful to her, to provide for & take care of her. But he didn't.
  - g. And 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 a Johnny – be a Jephthah.