

Vows (Alternate Sermon) — Judges 11:29-40

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Rejection*

1. There are few pains more intense than the pain of rejection
2. Probably all of us have known that pain at one time or another
3. Some of us may be stinging with the pain of rejection this morning

B. *John Whyte*

1. The great Scottish preacher, Alexander Whyte was well acquainted with this pain
2. He had been born out of wedlock in a time when such a thing was considered scandalous
 - a. when to be called a “bastard” was one of the worst labels you could give a person
3. As he grew up, his background haunted him
 - a. had no friends
 - b. other kids taunted him
 - boys mocked
 - girls scorned
4. He was made to bear the pain of a sin that was not his own
5. Alexander’s father had offered to marry his mother, but she refused
6. She raised him in poverty, but in deep reverence for God
7. In time, he became apprentice to a shoemaker
8. Through hard work he was finally able to attend the University in Edinburgh, Scotland
 - a. entered seminary
 - b. graduated and became a very successful preacher
 - c. a well known personality of the day
9. Dr. Whyte never forgot his illegitimacy
 - a. his preaching and teaching was marked by a keen sensitivity to the evil of his day, as well as a profound identification with those who suffered
 - b. his messages on the people of the bible stand out as some of the greatest speeches ever given in the English language
 - c. they have been compiled into two-volumes that are still read by pastors and bible teachers
10. One of the best of these character sketches was on the life of Jephthah - the Judge of Israel
 - a. Whyte felt a strong kinship to Jephthah
 - b. for like Whyte, Jephthah was conceived and born out of wedlock
 - c. he too knew the rejection of his own people

- d. but like Dr. Whyte, Jephthah was raised up by the Lord to do a mighty work

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1-3

{1} Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah.

{2} Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman."

{3} Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.

1. Jephthah's story begins on a mixed note
 - a. he was a mighty man of valor
 - .. a man of great courage
 - .. a man of integrity and devotion
 - b. but he was the son of a harlot
2. As he grew up in the home of his father, his half-brothers made fun of him
3. As they all got older, the brothers banded together and exiled him from their home
4. He was forced into the region of Tob, where other exiles and outcasts joined him as he raided the many caravans that made their way through that region between Mesopotamia and Egypt
5. It wasn't long until quite a nice little army surrounded Jephthah
 - a. his fame and reputation spread far and wide
 - b. travelers through the region passed only with his permission
 - c. his valor became known and respected
6. Then, because of the rebellion of Israel against God, He turned them over to the Ammonites who pressed them hard
7. After some time of oppression, the elders of Israel came to Jephthah and asked him to lead them in battle against the Ammonites
8. Jephthah sought the Lord on it, and agreed to lead them
9. It is clear from most of ch. 11 that Jephthah was a man of God
 - a. he is described as a mighty man of valor
 - b. he tried diplomacy with the king of Ammon before entering into combat
 - c. his knowledge of scripture and the history of Israel was excellent
 - d. when the rest of Israel had turned away from Yahweh, Jephthah continued to live by and trust in His name
10. It's important that we understand this as we consider the end of the

story of Jephthah's life

B. Vs. 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. Jephthah tried diplomacy with the king of Ammon, but it didn't work
2. He tried to reason with the Ammonites to show them their invasion of Israel was unjust and doomed to failure
3. But they would not listened
4. The time for diplomacy has come and gone
5. The time for battle had arrived
6. Now, on the eve of battle, the Spirit came upon Jephthah and empowered him to lead the people of Israel against their enemies
7. We learn a vital lesson here —
8. Natural ability is not enough to accomplish the work of God—Only the Holy Spirit is sufficient to accomplish it.
9. Jephthah was a might man of valor
 - a. he has already proven himself a natural leader
 - b. he has already demonstrated his military prowess
 - c. he has already shown his natural wisdom in a really brilliant argument of diplomacy
 - d. but none of Jephthah's natural abilities were enough to do the work of God
10. Oh, this is a lesson we must learn and take to heart
 - a. the work of God is never done by natural means
 - b. it is always and only done by the supernatural empowering He gives
11. We are too prone to think that because someone has a great natural gift, they would make a marvelous and powerful testimony for God
 - a. might be a voice
 - b. might be painting or sculpture
 - c. might be something like — leadership
12. Interesting that God often takes people with tremendous natural gifts and uses them in ways were those talents are of no use
13. History is filled with people who were gifted with beautiful singing voices and who thought they would serve the Lord in theaters and cathedrals - singing of His glory to kings and rulers — but they ended up on the mission field among a primitive people
14. Natural talent often just gets in the way of what God wants to do
 - a. consider Moses
 - b. a natural leader, educated in the wisdom of Egypt
 - c. tried to deliver the children of Israel by his own hand;
 - d. ended up murdering an Egyptian,

- e. had to flee into the wilderness and spend 40 years coming to and end of himself and his own abilities before God could use him
 - f. it wasn't till after he had learned that lesson that God could use him
15. God does not use our "natural" talents for our own good
 - a. if He did, then we would get a big head at all the things we were doing for God
 - b. the church and heaven would be one big boasting party
 16. Rather, God empowers us by His Holy Spirit to accomplish His work
 17. In fact, have you noticed how His work is done by the most unlikely candidates?
 18. Something marvelous will happen and people will sit back and say - "Wow, that must be God!"
 19. I see natural talent like the outside of a cup; it is but the container
 - a. the question is - what's on the inside
 - b. self, or Jesus
 - c. if we are full of self, then the natural talent will be used for our own glory
 - d. if we are full of Jesus, then the talent is used and empowered by Him to bring glory to Himself
 20. Jephthah was a man with great natural talent as a leader; but now, the Holy Spirit comes on him to empower him to the task of delivering Israel
 21. Jephthah yielded himself and his talents to God, and God took them up and sent them forth filled with Himself

C. Vs. 30-40

{30} And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands,

{31} "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. Now, many of you know the end of this story
2. So let's go ahead and read to the end of the ch.

{32} So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands.

{33} 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.

{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.

{35} 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."

{36} 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."

{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.

{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.

3. Okay, let's face it — this is deeply troubling!
4. Many people, reading this passage for the first time, have come to the conclusion that Jephthah offered his daughter as a human sacrifice
5. Don't worry — he didn't do any such thing; and a careful reading of the text shows that
6. Let's clear up this issue first
7. Jephthah made a vow to the Lord
 - a. if he was victorious, he would offer as a sacrifice the first thing out the door
 - b. because people kept their livestock in the first floor of their homes, there is little doubt that Jephthah was thinking of offering an animal to the Lord
 - c. he went in to battle, defeated Ammon, and returned home
 - d. as he approaches his house, he comes flushed with the thrill of victory
 - e. he is excited to see what animal will come out, he wants to offer it up to the Lord as a statement of his thanks
 - f. but the first thing to cross the threshold is not a cow or goat - it is his own daughter, his only child, of all things!!!
8. Jephthah rush of excitement turns to a cold, hard pit in the middle of his stomach
9. As his only child, his daughter would be the one who would have to carry on her father's family and name in Israel

- a. Moses had given the command that if a man had no sons, his daughter could receive her father's land and keep it in his name, even if she married into another family
 - b. but now that Jephthah has made this vow to the Lord, because she is his only child, his name and family will die out in Israel
10. In v. 31, Jephthah vowed to offer up a burnt offering to the Lord
- a. burnt offering was an offering of total consecration and devotion to the Lord
 - b. but when he saw that his daughter came forth, he knew he couldn't offer her as a literal burnt offering
 - c. it is clear from earlier in ch. 11 that Jephthah was well acquainted with the Law of Moses
 - d. human sacrifice was strongly prohibited - in fact, it is called an abomination to God
 - e. so Jephthah knew he wouldn't be sacrificing his daughter in this way
 - f. but he would offer her as a spiritual burnt offering,
 - .. that is, a spiritual sacrifice of total devotion to God
 - .. she would be given to the service of the Lord
 - .. by going to the place of the tabernacle in Shiloh and serving there for the rest of her life
11. That this is the way we are to understand this is clear from his daughter's words in v. 37
- a. she went to bewail her virginity
 - b. seems clear
 - .. if life, would have bewailed that
 - .. she is mourning her loss to every Jewish woman's desire to have children and carry on the family name
12. Also, look at v. 40 . . .
- a. the KJV says that the girls of Israel "lament" the daughter of Jephthah 4 days a year
 - b. "lament" a poor translation
 - c. better understood as commemorate with joy
 - d. the young women of Israel celebrated the sacrifice Jephthah's daughter as she gave up her own life to serve the Lord
13. There is another reason why we should see her sacrifice as spiritual and not literal as well . . .
- a. no one could offer sacrifices in Israel except the priest at the tabernacle
 - b. no priest of God would have taken part in such a sacrifice as this

D. *The Greater Lesson*

- 1. But the greater lesson for us to glean from these verses is this . . .
- 2. Why did Jephthah make this vow?
 - a. the Spirit of the Lord had already come upon him to lead the people

in battle—that should have been enough to secure his heart in the victory of Israel

- b. why then did he make this vow?
3. Though Jephthah was indeed a man of God, he made a common mistake
4. He tried to secure the favor and blessing of God by promising God something
 - a. he said, “*If* indeed you will deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then I will sacrifice to You.”
 - b. he tried to strike up a bargain with God
 - c. he tried to impress God with a vow, with a promise of religion, an offer of sacrifice, as though God gets something out of a burning animal carcass
5. And Jephthah’s rash attempt to curry God’s favor led to sorrow and grief - as it always does!!!
6. Friends, the great lesson the Spirit would teach us is that we must stop trying to give God reasons for blessing us
7. That is the sure way to shut off the blessings of God
 - a. you see, God’s blessings come by His grace
 - b. and grace is *unearned* favor
 - c. so if blessing is by grace, then to try and *earn* blessing is fruitless
8. Picture it like this . . .
 - a. one day sitting at the office, I think of my wife and how much I love her
 - b. I decide to stop and get a dozen long-stemmed red roses
 - c. walk in the door, hand them to her
 - d. but before she takes them she says, “I want those roses so much I will cook you your favorite meal tomorrow night.”
 - e. now, I hesitate to give her the roses
 - .. I intended them to be an expression of my love for her
 - .. apart from her earning them
 - .. they are a *gift* of love, not wages for doing something to please me
 - .. by responding the way she has, she has turned the expression of my love into something less, something common, something unlovely
 - f. I wanted her to simply reach up, take the roses, smell them, put them in a vase and enjoy them
 - g. I don’t want her to do anything FOR them, they are FOR her
 - h. she has subtly twisted the focus from my love for her to her desire for roses
9. God wants to bless us because He loves us
 - a. and whatever the blessing is, it is but an expression of that love
 - b. when we make vows and promises in order to get something from

- God we take advantage of his love
- c. we demean His grace and gifts
 - d. we seek to *obligate* God instead of letting Him simply love us
10. You see, the reason God has chosen the way of grace in blessing us is because *He* is the one who gets the glory
 - a. because it is grace, apart from what we do
 - b. it makes us love and appreciate Him more
 - c. it makes us want Him more
 - d. it draws us to Him
 11. If we can earn blessing
 - a. then it begins with *us*
 - b. *we* get the glory
 - c. God is ignored except as a cosmic bellhop who jumps up to bless us whenever we ring the bell of devotion
 - d. our relationship with God becomes one of duty and drudgery
 - e. it pushes us away from Him
 12. Tell me friend, what is your relationship with God based on
 - a. grace?
 - b. or your devotion?

E. *The Danger*

1. Some one might say, “Are you saying we shouldn’t be devoted to the Lord, that we shouldn’t serve Him because that would cut off blessing?”
2. No, I’m not saying that at all
3. We are called to service and devotion - but as a response to God, not in an attempt to curry His favor
4. Back to the story of giving roses to my wife
 - a. a right response on her part is to take the flowers
 - b. and to wrap her arms around me and give me a kiss and say thank you
 - c. she will likely make me my favorite meal the next night, not because she has to, not because she wants the roses, but because she already has them and appreciates my love
 - d. so as she makes the meal, she cooks,
 - e. not out of dry duty and boring drudgery
 - f. but out of love filled joy

III. CONCLUSIONS

A. *Let Us Learn*

1. Let’s learn the lesson this passage teaches us
2. To not make vows to God in order to gain His favor and blessing
3. Let us learn to simply let go and embrace God’s love
 - a. shift our focus from here [point in]

- b. to there [point up]
- 4. As you look at history, discover the men and women who have had the greatest impact on the church, sparked revivals and renewals—those who have understood grace

B. *To Lost . . .*