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15.10.17 - JUDGES 10:6-11:40

JEPHTHAH THE JUDGE: YOU CAN'T BARGAIN WITH THE TRUE JUDGE

You probably know the hugely successful film franchise *Pirates of the Caribbean*.
They've recently released a fifth film called *Dead Men Tell No Tales*.
In the original movie, there's a plot device centred around the word "parlez".
"Parlez" is used a number of times when characters are in a *desperate* situation and their only choice is to ask their enemies to talk, to "parler", so they can make a bargain.
In one scene, the pirates have captured Keira Knightly's character Elizabeth.
To save Elizabeth, Orlando Bloom's character Will threatens to shoot himself.
The pirates need to keep him alive for their own purposes, so they begrudgingly agree to another "parlez".
They make a bargain - they'll release Elizabeth if Will hands himself over.
But being pirates, they find a way of respecting the bargain without really respecting it.
They release Elizabeth, as promised, but only by making her walk the plank!
"We're all men of our word," says Johnny Depp's character Jack Sparrow at one point.
We laugh at the irony.

Now it's entertaining when it's in a movie.
But what about real life?
Have you ever known what it is to be really *desperate*?
You might be *desperate* because you're in a particular time of suffering.
Or maybe there's just something that you *desperately* want.
Or it could be that you feel like a failure in the battle with sin and you feel *desperate* for God's forgiveness.
In each situation, you might be so *desperate* that you find yourself crying out to God for a "parlez".
God, if I promise to serve you more whole-heartedly, will you take away that sickness?
God, if I promise to give you a tenth of my money, will you give me that job?
God, if I promise to never look at that website again will you forgive me?
Now, crying out to God for help when we're desperate is always a good thing!
But doesn't it sometimes get a bit too close to looking like a pirate's bargain?
Does a "parlez" with God really work?
Is there a better way of getting God to help you?

Well, our characters this evening are also in a pretty *desperate* situation.
A "parlez" seems to be their only option.
In fact, this story would make a great blockbuster movie.
It's got violence, great dialogues, a zero who becomes a hero, family backstabbing and a couple of shocking twists.
We might call it: *Pirates of Gilead: the Curse of Jephthah's Daughter!*
Hope that intrigues you!

We're going to go through the story, but we're going to keep pressing pause so we can think about it.
As we go through, we're going to discuss one point that keeps coming up:

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1. YOU CAN'T BARGAIN WITH THE TRUE JUDGE

So far in Judges, we've been going round and round this downward spiral. [Show?]
Israel rebels, God sends enemies to oppress them, they cry for help, he saves them using a "judge", then the judge dies and they rebel again.
Will this cycle get better or worse in our passage?
You can find the first part of our passage in ***Judges 10:6-16***, but I'm going to summarise it.
And let's imagine that we're settling down with our popcorn to watch it as a movie.

The lights go down.
Dramatic music begins.
The movie bursts onto the screen with shocking images.
God's people bowing down to other gods.
Not just one god, but seven different gods.
Their hideous faces flash across the screen.
Baal. Ashtaroth. Dagon. Chemosh. Molech.
And then comes God's judgment.
Enemy troops sweep across the screen.
The Israelites are desperate.
They do the only thing they can.
They ask God for a "parlez".
They openly confess what they have done wrong.
And then, like every other time, God has pity on them and promises to save them, right?
Wrong!
In shock we hear God pronounce these devastating words:
"I will save you no more." (10:13)

God has never refused to save his people before.
Is this it? Has he finally rejected them?
Even more desperate, Israel cry out to God to save them and they even put away their idols.
Ah, ha! Is this some real repentance at last?
Perhaps this will change God's mind.
Well, not exactly.
All we are told is that God *"became impatient over the misery of Israel." (10:16)*
Does this mean he had pity on them or that he was fed up of their repeated empty promises?
It's perhaps deliberately ambiguous.
But we are certainly left wondering:
Have Israel pushed their luck one too many times?
Is their repentance the real deal or is it just more empty words?
Just a pirate's bargain designed to manipulate God into helping them?
But God doesn't give into bribery.
No, you can't bargain with God.

Now the words "18 years later" flash onto the screen and we watch the next scene.

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Read Judges 10:17-11:11

18 years on, the Ammonites are now preparing a decisive strike against an area of Israel called Gilead.
Enter our hero: Jephthah the Gileadite.
We've had some unusual heroes up till now.
But Jephthah is on a whole different level.
Let's imagine what Jephthah's CV would look like…
Job applied for: Judge of Israel.
Skills: Mighty warrior.
Background: Son of a prostitute.
Education: No schooling - driven out by half brothers and made to live as an outcast.
Work experience: Leading a band of criminals.
Oh dear.
This guy is basically the Jack Sparrow of Israel!

But the scriptwriter has crafted his story carefully.
We notice the parallels with the opening scene.
A man rejected by his own people, just like God was rejected by his people.
In their desperation, the people of Israel had resorted to a "parlez" with the God they rejected.
Now the elders of Gilead, in *their* desperation, want a "parlez" with the man *they* rejected.
But just like God, Jephthah's going to need a little persuading.
It turns out Jephthah's pretty good with words.
He guilt trips them: "Hold on, I thought you hated me, why are you now asking for my help?!"
The elders have no choice but to up the bargain a bit.
They offer to make him the leader of all Gilead.
Now we know they're about as sincere as when they told *God* they'd have *him* back.
It's just another empty pirate's bargain, isn't it.
But unlike God, Jephthah is not above a little bribery.
Leadership of all Gilead?
How can he resist?!
Sure, he makes it sound like he'll only accept if God is willing.
But in the next scene of our movie, we immediately find Jephthah acting as if he's the king.

We won't read this bit because it's quite long.
But to summarise, it's basically another "parlez".
With this long speech, the writer emphasises again that Jephthah is a bit of a talker.
He fancies he might be able to talk the king of the Ammonites out of this.
But once again, the first attempt doesn't go down too well.
The king of the Ammonites sends a terse but simple reply:
"Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." (11:13)
But Jephthah reckons he can bargain with the Ammonites.

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You may have been following what's happening in Catalonia recently.
Here we have a modern day argument over territorial claims.
Apart from the violence a couple of weeks ago, so far it's been mostly about talking and bargains.
Ask Catalans why they want independence and they have arguments to hand:
The argument from *history*.
The argument from *economics*.
The argument from *language*.
The argument from *cultural identity*.
Even the argument from *football*!
Well, that's basically what Jephthah tries to do.
He comes up with four clever arguments for Gilead independence.

First, an argument from *history*.
The king of the Ammonites needs to get his facts straight.
At that time Gilead belonged, not to the *Ammonites*, but (slightly confusingly) to the *Amorites*.
Furthermore, Israel had deliberately avoided entering enemy territory.
The Amorites attacked *them*, and Israel defeated them.
So Israel took Gilead fair and square.

Secondly, an argument from *theology*.
It was clearly God that had given them Gilead.
The Ammonites should be happy with what *their* god has given *them*.
(I.e. not very much, since Chemosh is a fake god!)

Thirdly, an argument from *comparison*.
Even the king of Moab, who hated the Israelites, didn't dare attack them.
Why do the Ammonites think they can do any better?

And fourthly, an argument from *silence*.
It's 300 years since Israel took Gilead.
It's a bit late to start filing a complaint!

That's some pretty good bargaining.
But Jephthah's words fail to persuade the king of the Ammonites.

And so we move on to the climactic scene of our movie.

Read Judges 11:29-40

So, having failed with words, Jephthah resorts to warfare and manages to defeat the Ammonites with devastating effect.
Great!
But after all the build up, the final battle seems to be over very quickly.
The scriptwriter wants to focus our attention instead on one more "parlez" that occurs.

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This time it's between Jephthah and God.
Apparently, having God's Spirit on him was not enough to convince Jephthah that God would win the battle.
In desperation, he decides to resort to yet another bargain.
If God gives him victory, he'll sacrifice *"whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me". (11:31)*
The Hebrew is ambiguous here.
Does he mean an animal, we wonder, or is he actually promising a human sacrifice, imagining perhaps one of his servants?
Whichever it is, in a shocking twist to the tale, it turns out to be his daughter, his only child.
We watch in astonishment as this courageous, unnamed girl, persuades her dad to keep his vow.
After giving her two months to mourn that she'll never have children, Jephthah does just that, and sacrifices his own daughter as a burnt offering.
Just imagine how he must have felt as he lit the flame.

Through the tragedy, we find ourselves asking: should he have kept his vow?
What do you think?
Well, the law of Moses does say clearly that vows had to be fulfilled.
It's funny, the pirate of Gilead turns out to be a man of his word after all.
However, he seems to be unaware of the laws which strictly forbid human sacrifice.
Not to mention a law that even allows you to cancel a rash vow.
The man who's so clever with words traps himself with his own words, but only because he didn't know God's Word.
You see, you can't make bargains with God.
Jephthah should have know that.
After all, he himself says in v27: *"The Lord, the Judge decide…" (11:27)*
How can you hope to bargain with the true Judge!
At best, it doesn't work; at worst, it ends in tragedy.

I think as we read this we're supposed to recognise that we have *all* rejected God.
We are *all* in a desperate situation before the Judge.
But how foolish it would be to think we can bargain our way back into his favour!
Our words are empty and superficial as we stand before the Judge that we've rejected.

One day this week, my 18 month old son Nathan was eating his dinner.
He kept trying to throw peas on the floor.
"Not on the floor," I said sternly, "put it in your mouth."
With his eyes fixed on me, Nathan puts the pea in his mouth and holds it there a second.
Then as subtly as he can he lowers his hand and drops the pea in his lap, thinking I haven't seen.
18 months old and he already knows how to obey the letter of the law without obeying the spirit of the law.
But he's unaware of how silly it is to try and manipulate Daddy.

Well, that's how silly we seem to God when we try and make empty bargains with him.
Sure, Daddy, I'll put the pea in my mouth, now stop bugging me!
Sure, God, we'll put away our idols, now please save us!
Sure, God, I'll make an extravagant vow and respect your Word, now please give me victory!
Sure, God, I'll serve you more whole-heartedly, just please take away this sickness!
Sure, God, I'll be more generous with my money, just please give me that job!
Sure, God, I'll stop looking at those websites, I'll read my Bible and pray for an hour every day, I'll go to church more often, I'll stop procrastinating so much, I'll do more evangelism, I'll stop getting angry with my family, etc. etc., just please take away my sin!

Yes, it's absolutely right to cry out to God for help when we're desperate.
But in our desperation let's be careful we don't make hollow promises to God.
We too often just try to use God to get what we want, without any real intention of giving up the control of our lives to him.
But God sees through it all.
You can't bargain with the true Judge.

So what *do* we do?
Well, we have a second point:

2. GIVE UP CONTROL TO THE FAITHFUL JUDGE

You see, what do we learn about God himself?
Well, firstly, he is a *rejected* Judge.
This is very much the problem that runs throughout the book of Judges.
"In those days there was no king," says the writer repeatedly.
Israel have continually rejected *God* as their King.
And in our passage it's even worse.
Israel doesn't even involve him in their choice of a leader, whereas before God had "raised up" the judges.
God doesn't even speak in our passage.
And even Jephthah only pays him lip service a couple of times.
Jephthah could have been the one to lead them back to the Judge they had rejected.
But no, he was a violent, selfish, arrogant, foolish leader,
who sacrificed his only child and forfeited any chance of passing on his rule.
Even if he had been a good judge, he was rejected by Israel just like they rejected God.
What hope is there?

Well, the amazing truth is that the rejected Judge is also a *faithful* Judge.
God may have said that he would not save Israel anymore and then gone completely silent.
But we are still told that *"the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah". (11:29)*
It is still God who gave the Ammonites into Jephthah's hand.
Israel have rejected God one too many times.
And yet, astonishingly, he *still* saves them!

For no other reason than that he is faithful.

And a thousand years later, the faithful God would send another man to be his Judge on earth.
Like Jephthah, and like God, this Judge would also be despised and rejected by men.
But *unlike* Jephthah, this Judge would be a faithful, humble and wise Judge.
This Judge saw through our empty words and superficial bargains.
And yet this Judge and his Father God made the greatest bargain in history,
not by sacrificing another person,
but by sacrificing himself on the cross,
where he took the punishment for our rejection of him.

If we have not yet done so, Jesus calls us to come and receive his free forgiveness,
otherwise one day we will have to stand before him as Judge and take our own punishment.
But to all who have accepted him, he promises to remain faithful,
even though we still reject him and make empty promises over and over again.
Jesus saves us.
For no other reason than that he is a faithful Judge.

Before I was a Christian, I was sometimes afraid of dying and meeting my Judge.
But I wasn't ready to give up control of my life yet.
I told myself that if I ever fell off a cliff or something, I would just shout out "God I love you" before I hit the ground and then I'd be OK.
As if God could be so easily manipulated by such empty, superficial words.
In my early days as a Christian, I found it quite easy to feel like I was right with God without having to give up too much control of my life.
All I had to do was remind myself that I had prayed and read my Bible that morning so I was doing pretty well with God, right?
Then I could go off and live the rest of the day for myself, feeling fine.
As if God would be pleased with me because of a tiny bit of superficial obedience.
In more recent years, I've become much more aware of my sin, and at times have felt quite desperate before my God and Judge.
My instinct is often to try and minimise my sin, or to promise that I'll do better next time, or even to say "look God, I know I'm a sinner but surely you're at least pleased that I'm sorry about it!"
But my words are about as foolish as Jephthah's vow.
As if I can buy God's affection with my shallow words.
Nothing that I can say, nothing that I can promise, is remotely good enough to persuade God.
Even our tears of repentance are polluted by insincerity.
Besides, like Israel, I had my last chance a long time ago.

But as I'm pouring out my vain words, I realise God is saying:
"Shhh, shhh, Adrian, just stop talking for a minute and look up."
And I lift my eyes to see the faithful Judge hanging on a cross.
My words dry up and I find myself silenced once again before him.
As I've been clamouring away, Jesus has quietly got on with saving me.
The great bargain that Jesus made at the cross was more than enough to cover all my sin.

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He has done 100% of the work.
He has had the final word.
I can contribute nothing, not even my own repentance.
He has accepted me, and accepts me still, because he is a faithful and gracious Judge.

I don't know which situation you identity with more.
Maybe you know you're not right with God but you're seeking to gain his favour without having to give up control of your life.
Maybe you're a Christian who easily feels right with God without having to give up too much control to him, because you tell yourself you're doing pretty well as a Christian.
Or maybe you feel desperately guilty before God and find that nothing you can say to God ever seems to satisfy your conscience.
In each case, stop talking.
No more empty bargains.
No more superficial promises.
Bow down before the cross and rest in what Jesus has done.
He has already done enough to cover every sin, even those repeated ones.
Give up control to the faithful Judge.