

A Hero Will Rise

The Book of Judges

Text

Judges 11:29-40

Topic

Jephthah's daughter and her girlfriends retreat to the hills for two months to mourn her father's foolish vow to offer her life as a sacrifice

Title

"The Hills are Alive with the Sound of Mourning"

Introduction

It's a word that can be offensive, but if Jerry Seinfeld could get away with it on television, then I should be OK using it.

I'm talking about the word 'Nazi' in the season seven episode of Seinfeld titled *The Soup Nazi*.

It's usage revolved around an exaggeration of the excessively strict requirements for ordering soup. Deviate even a little and the Soup Nazi would proclaim, *"No soup for you!"*

One of the recurring issues in the New Testament is the excessively strict requirements that certain so-called religious men put on both Jews and Christians:

- Among the Jews, the strict sect of the Pharisees kept on heaping religious burdens upon the average Jew that they had no real hope of keeping. Jesus said of them, “They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden” (Matthew 23:4 NLT).
- Among the Gentile Christians, the Judaizers insisted salvation required that in addition to faith in Jesus, you must keep the Law of Moses - especially the rite of circumcision.

These men might as well have said, “*No God for you!*”

There seems to be a natural tendency, a bent, towards adding works to the promises of God. Christians do it, too. If you listen carefully to many Bible studies and you’ll realize the emphasis is on what you must do for God.

The same is true of most Christian lifestyle books. The author outlines a program of behaviors that will bring God’s blessings upon you to the extent you are vigilant and obedient in your personal commitment to the program or the principles.

That approach to Christian living can, and often does, have the opposite effect. Instead of experiencing the blessings of God, you lose all joy as you constantly fall short in your commitments to the points of the program.

Or worse yet - you keep the points of the program and begin to think of yourself as more spiritual because of your external efforts.

In our verses, what God has provided and promised Judge Jephthah is overshadowed by something Jephthah thought he needed to do for God, in order to earn what God promised:

- We're told "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah" assuring him of victory over the Ammonite invaders (v29).
- After he had received the Spirit, and knew God's promise of victory, Jephthah vowed to offer a burnt sacrifice IF God would give him victory.

It turned out disastrously for Jephthah; and it will for us, too - every time we add to our faith some work of the flesh.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 God Supplies The Spirit To You By Hearing With Faith, and #2 God Won't Supply The Spirit To You By Works Of The Flesh.

#1 God Supplies The Spirit To You By Hearing With Faith

(v29-33)

I'm plagiarizing the phrase, "hearing with faith." Those are the inspired words of the apostle Paul when he wrote to confront the Christians in the region of Galatia with adding works to their faith. He said,

Gal 3:1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?

Gal 3:2 This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

Gal 3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

Gal 3:5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, *does He do it* by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?

Paul preached the Gospel to the Galatians. They heard it, and received it by faith, and were saved.

The Judaizers came after Paul and taught the Gentile Christians that salvation was by grace through faith PLUS the keeping of the Law of Moses. The Galatians were going for it.

They needed to - and we need to - hear God's promises with faith and take Him at His Word, **not** adding our own works.

Jephthah was the latest hero to be raised-up by God to deliver Israel from her enemies - in this case, an invasion of Ammonites. Jephthah began in the Spirit:

Jdg 11:29 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah...

Having read just that far, you already know the results of this battle. When Israel was walking with God, following God's leader, no force on earth could withstand them. Victory was assured before a single sword was sharpened.

The author says the Spirit "came upon Jephthah." We might say Jephthah was filled with the Spirit; or anointed by the Spirit; or baptized with the Spirit; or clothed with the Spirit.

Pick the one that makes the most sense to you to describe you believing God, then by faith receiving the power to walk with God to accomplish whatever He has set before you.

Jdg 11:29 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.

He “passed through”; he “passed through”; he “advanced.” The writer is describing more than just the physical troop movements. It’s language that suggests the walking in victory of a man dependent upon the Spirit of God.

Your life, and my life, ought to be described as us *passing through, advancing* to our assured, already-won victory over sin, death, and Hell.

Does that mean we never sin? Of course not. As long as we remain in our current unredeemed physical bodies, we have a predisposition to sin.

But we also find the Holy Spirit in residence in these bodies - never less powerful than the moment we were born-again.

It’s why one of our favorite Bible verses is,

Rom 8:11 But [since] the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Doesn’t it make sense that the Person Whose power raised Jesus from the dead can give you victory over any sin?

Jdg 11:30 And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands,
Jdg 11:31 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."

Hold your thoughts on verses thirty and thirty-one for a moment. Let's finish looking at the battle.

Jdg 11:32 So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands.

Jdg 11:33 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.

What was Jephthah's strategy? How large were the respective armies? What weapons were utilized? Did anything miraculous occur on or off the field of battle? I have a zillion questions like those.

They are unanswered for a reason; or, at least, their being unanswered suggests something. It suggests that the emphasis in this story is the power of the Spirit Who came upon Jephthah.

As I pointed out earlier, the battle was won the moment Jephthah was filled; anointed; baptized; clothed with the Spirit. The details would be interesting, but they only detract from the ministry of the Spirit.

With that in mind, let's revisit verses thirty and thirty-one.

Jdg 11:30 And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, "If?" Who said anything about "if" the Lord would do this?

In verse twenty-nine, the Spirit came upon Jephthah. End of story; everything else is mop-up.

Jephthah “made a vow.” Did God ask him to make a vow? Were there any conditions to Jephthah receiving the Spirit?

No; all Jephthah need do was believe God and receive the Spirit as His gift.

The vow was all Jephthah, all flesh, all an attempt to earn God’s gift by adding a Law that need to be obeyed. In the language of the New Testament, having begun in the Spirit, Jephthah was trying to go forward in the flesh, by adding works of righteousness to the grace of God.

Do Christians do this today? Sure we do. Any group who, for example, teaches that water baptism is necessary for salvation is adding a work of the flesh to the grace of God. Salvation is by faith alone, through grace alone - *plus nothing*, not even baptism.

Sure, you should be baptized in obedience to God. But it does not save you. And it does not make you more spiritual.

You are passing through life as a Christian. Would you say you are advancing? If you’re not advancing, if you’re struggling, it might be that you think that God the Holy Spirit is something you must earn by keeping some vows or laws, rather than Him being available to you in His fullness right now.

What we are talking about today is our very human tendency to add the works of the flesh to the promises of God.

If you are struggling with some sin... God the Holy Spirit, Who raised Jesus from the dead, and saved you from sin and death and Hell, lives in you.

I was watching *The Matrix* the other day. Hey, it was free on Amazon.

Anyway, it echoes a familiar theme: The main character finds out over time that he is much more powerful than he ever realized. Once he comes to that knowledge, it's all over for the bad guys.

Same thing with *Star Wars* and the Force. "Use the Force, Luke," and when he does, young Skywalker blows the Death Star to smithereens.

In the next two installments of the original films, Luke grows in his knowledge of the Force until he can successfully face Vader and defeat the Emperor.

Whether we are taught to think this way, or whether we are wired to think this way, Christians live as though we must deserve the fullness of God's Spirit. We're told that "The Holy Spirit only comes upon holy people."

That might be true if the Holy Spirit were a force. The Holy Spirit isn't a force. He is a Person - the third Person of the Tri-une God.

As a Person, He doesn't enter our lives a little at a time, in response to our holy living. No, He comes and takes residence in us, in His fullness.

It is therefore counter-productive, even harmful, to think that we must somehow earn His power.

If you were saved later in life, you likely have a radical testimony of the Holy Spirit's power. One minute you were dead in your trespasses and sins, and the next you were born-again as a new creation in Jesus.

It's likely that you were given immediate victory over many things that had held you captive. Drug addictions... Drunkenness... Sexual immorality... Were all conquered effortlessly by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Over time, Christians who were miraculously changed find themselves entangled in those same sins they were delivered from. The Holy Spirit seems unable to deliver them a second time. They turn to some system of vows, or promise keeping, or accountability to others, but find no lasting victory.

Having begun in the Spirit, we are going forward in the flesh; and it isn't working.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit in His fullness to any believer who asks for Him, and then believes in faith he or she has received Him. He said, "How much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13).

Listen carefully to Jesus' words. He didn't say, "How much more **of** the Holy Spirit will the Father give." He says, "How much more will your Father give the Holy Spirit." In other words, we are to realize that the Holy Spirit is given in His fullness.

Maybe by taking a look at Jephthah we can free ourselves of thinking the Holy Spirit is a force to be earned and instead believe we've received Him to empower us.

#2 God Won't Supply The Spirit To You By Works Of The Flesh

(v31; 33-40)

Let's refresh our memory as to the vow Jephthah made:

Jdg 11:31 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."

What harm could such a simple vow be? After all, burnt offerings were prescribed by the Law. It sounded very spiritual.

Jephthah was victorious, but not on account of his vow. His vow would in fact completely, permanently taint the joy of Israel's victory for generations to come.

When he made the vow, he undoubtedly had in mind the first animal of his livestock that would come forth. He should have been more specific.

BTW - Therein is a problem with all of our extra-biblical vows and promises. We cannot see their disastrous consequences - for us and for others. It's better to simply walk by faith, listening to the Lord, depending on the Spirit to empower His Word, not ours.

Jdg 11:34 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.

This scene is powerful with symbolism. A fruit of the Spirit is “joy.” The apostle Peter speaks of “joy unspeakable and full of glory” (First Peter 1:8). Jephthah’s daughter represented the joy and rejoicing that ought to have resulted from her dad simply taking God at His Word.

But because Jephthah added works to his faith, joy was destroyed, and rejoicing was turned into mourning.

Promoting works of the flesh as being spiritual is the great joy-killer of the Christian life.

Jdg 11:35 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."

Jephthah blamed his daughter. It was her fault, he said, that there could be no joy.

Not true. It was all his fault.

He refused to repent of his vow, instead saying “I have given my word... I cannot go back on it.” In other words, he was too religious to admit he had been wrong... And too proud to renounce what he had done.

Another word for what we are talking about is legalism. Loosely defined, it is thinking that by performing certain works I am more spiritual.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day and their Sabbath regulations are a good example. They thought themselves spiritually superior for keeping their Sabbath laws. It only exposed their spiritual bankruptcy.

Whenever Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath, they were angry, even wanting to murder the Lord, because they said, "No work on the Sabbath!"

Jdg 11:36 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."

The girl's got game. She would submit to her father's rash vow in order to not make the situation any worse than it was.

Legalism hurts others who are trying to be spiritual. It derails their walk with God. Don't be someone who heaps burdens upon others but, rather, help carry them.

Jdg 11:37 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."

Jdg 11:38 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.

Jephthah's daughter is worthy of her own sermon. Once in the hills, I would have kept going. But she was willing to submit for the glory of God.

She gave-up the pleasures of this life - a husband, children, grandchildren - in order to bring glory to God in obedience to her father.

Many of you have had a difficult life. Things did not go well, or as planned. Maybe right now you're in a tough situation; you're not really happy. You feel you are giving-up too much.

I want to be careful in what I say next. I'm not advocating you submit to sin. I'm not saying that, for example, if you are being physically abused, you should take the abuse. Not at all.

But all that aside, the Bible is saying, through Jephthah's daughter, that your obedience to God, to bring Him glory in a difficult life, outweighs your need to be happy.

I know that's a hard saying... But it's true.

Jdg 11:39 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

Jdg 11:40 that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

I know what you're wondering: Does this mean Jephthah offered her as a human sacrifice?

Although that's possible, and some scholars say "Yes," I say, "Of course not."

I'll let one of the commentators who agrees with me speak:

... the writer does not give us details of the young girl's death. He tells us that she told her father to 'do... just as [he] had promised' (v36). She requested that she be allowed to go out to the hills for two months to grieve over the fact that she would never marry (v37), and it became an annual custom for the young women to lament her (v39-40). The last detail appears to be linked with the fact that she never married. The passage emphasizes that Jephthah's only daughter would never marry, which meant that his line would end. If we add to this the fact that Jephthah is listed among the faithful in Hebrews 11:32, it is very difficult to believe that he put her to death.

Be real: I know some of the saints in the Hall of Faith were deeply flawed, and did some crazy stuff; but do you think a guy who practiced human sacrifice could be listed there?

Just looking at the text, we see in verse thirty-nine that Jephthah performed his vow, and immediately it says "she knew no man." Of course, if she was dead, she would have "known no man." But it seems a strong clue that the manner in which the vow was kept was to render her a virgin in life-long service to God.

Her life became a continual burnt offering as she offered herself a living sacrifice.

Besides, whether or not she was sacrificed, or became a living sacrifice, is not the point. Or at least we miss the point by spending so much time debating it.

What's that old saying - "He snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory"? Seems an appropriate commentary in this situation.

Ask yourself: "What am I doing that I believe makes me more spiritual and puts pressure on God to bless me?"

For example: You should have what Christians commonly call 'devotions.' But you should have them to enjoy the presence of God - *not* to perform a work that you think is necessary in order to be more spiritual. On the days that you don't have devotions, you are no less empowered by God the Holy Spirit.

If you are a Christian, you began in the Spirit, when you heard the Gospel and responded by faith. You were forgiven your sins - past, present, and future. You experienced the power of God indwelling you, and you likely walked away from habits and addictions into a newness of life.

Over time, you may have gotten sidetracked by some teacher or teaching, in a church or on the radio or in a book, that suggested certain behaviors you must adopt in order to pressure God into blessing you.

You were told you need to pray like an Old Testament character... Or keep a certain set of promises to God... Or spend 40 days discovering your purpose in life...

You were told you can't be saved unless you have been baptized... Or unless you speak with other tongues... Or unless you 'keep' a set of modern Sabbath regulations...

One author said, “When various man-made standards are elevated to be an essential doctrine of Christ, or held as a pivotal element of salvation, even what is believed with good motives ends up being serious false teaching about holiness and the doctrine of the Gospel.”

Some people think that we need to work for the gift of the Holy Spirit, or earn this gift from God. But Jesus made it plain that all we have to do is ask:

So I say to you, **ask**, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who **asks** receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son **asks** for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he **asks** for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he **asks** for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who **ask** Him! (Luke 11:9-13).

Why go on asking if we’ve received the Holy Spirit? We like to say that He permanently indwells us, and constantly infills us. We ask to remind ourselves of His infilling - because we tend to stray away from the hearing of faith into the works of the flesh.

We ask to remind ourselves that He Who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in us to give life to our mortal bodies.

This morning - “Ask,” and believe you have received Him.