

July 30, 2023

“Far As the Curse Is Found”
Judges 11:1-12:7

FCF: A shallow view of the Fall’s effects

PROPOSITION: (magnet) We are deeply broken.
(anchor) And need the Lord’s repair.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

“So, doctor, how bad is it?” A line repeated in the exam room. It’s one worth asking of humanity. “How bad is it?” Isaac Watts’ hymn, “Joy to the World,” was written in 1719. It was not meant as a Christmas carol but a paraphrase of Psalm 98. The third stanza reads (**READ**):

No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found, far as, far as the curse is found.

How far is the curse found? From what we can see from the book of Judges, it’s pretty far.

We’re continuing on in our series in Judges. In terms of historical context, it’s the time between Moses (the settlement in the land) and David (the time of the monarchy). A rough time.

SCRIPTURE READING: **Judges 11:1-12:7**

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

I know I’ve mentioned C. S. Lewis quite a bit recently. That comes from an immersion in Narnia in our Inklings Beyond group. Let me read you this from *Mere Christianity* (**READ**):

There are two ways in which the human machine goes wrong. One is when human individuals drift apart from one another, or else collide with one another and do one another damage, by cheating or bullying. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual – when the different parts of him (his different faculties and desires and so on) either drift apart or interfere with one another. You can get the idea plain if you think of us as a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another’s way; and, secondly, if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order.

As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions.

Lewis goes on from there to talk about the need to be on the same map or sheet of music.

But I want to focus on the ships. They are less seaworthy because of the collisions and broken steering mechanism. That is, what’s happening on the outside is tied to what’s happening on the inside. Put another way, things are amiss between us because things are amiss within us.

That’s what we see in Judges and Jephthah. It’s a major point of this passage. We are clearly meant to see that we are deeply broken. We are deeply broken and need the Lord’s repair.

How do we see this brokenness? In at least these three ways. First, in the snare of materialism. Second, in the horror of syncretism. And then, third, in the madness of tribalism.

I. THE SNARE OF MATERIALISM

First, the snare of materialism. We see this in the opening verses (**READ Judges 11:1-3**).

A) The Dissolution of a Family

What is unfolding here is the senseless, sad, and tragic dissolution of a family.

1. A dysfunctional family

Jephthah is a mighty warrior. He is likely the firstborn son of the family. But he is illegitimate, being the child of a prostitute. Clearly, the man came from a rather dysfunctional family.

2. Driven into exile

And he is driven into exile. His only community some “worthless fellows” in the land of Tob. This was a gang of scoundrels, a band of misfits, mercenaries. These years hardened Jephthah.

B) The Deceitfulness of Riches

So we see the dissolution of this family. But why? What’s the driving force here?

1. Not from shame

It’s not from shame. It’s not because they are all humiliated or embarrassed having him around.

2. But from greed

No, it’s from greed. His half-brothers are concerned about the inheritance. So they work to cut him out of his share so they could have a bit more. It’s all very common, all so contemporary.

Part of our brokenness is the snare of materialism and its destructive power.

Illustration:

Remember Midas, the man who could turn anything he touched to gold? In one telling, he reached out to comfort his daughter but turned her to gold. Now he hated this pseudo gift.

Application:

What about us? How might we fall prey here? Money, wealth, and material possessions can mean different things to each of us. Think with me. For some of us, we need it for the sake of more security and control in our lives. For others of us, we need it for the sake of more ease and comfort. Then for others of us, we need it for the sake of the approval and status we seek. Do you see? It can mean different things for us. We need to be aware of such vulnerabilities.

For we are deeply broken. Deeply broken. And we need the Lord’s repair.

II. THE HORROR OF SYNCRETISM

Which brings us to the second point, the horror of syncretism. We see this in the vow Jephthah makes in vv.29-40. This is the focus. In fact, all the business with the Ammonites in vv.4-28 is really just the context for this. That part doesn’t make it into the children’s Bibles.

A) A Terrible Series of Events

What unfolds is a terrible series of events. It’s hard for us to get our minds around.

1. The making of his vow

Jephthah makes this vow. He’s zealous to win this battle. So he does all he can to prepare. He makes a promise (READ Judges 11:30-31). “God, if you do this, I’ll do that.” The narrator is not approving, just reporting. The words aren’t precise. It could be “whatever” or “whoever” comes out. But this coming out “to meet” implies intelligence, rationality, intent - a person.

2. The killing of his daughter

This is human sacrifice. Jephthah, in keeping his vow, kills his daughter. Now some want to try and soften this. But a natural reading of the text implies not consecration to religious service but a burning as an offering. Literally, v.39 reads, “he did to her his vow which he vowed.” That’s what 11 of the 13 commentators I read said. This is part of the spiraling down of this time.

B) A Twisted Matrix of Beliefs

But how this be? This terrible series of events is connected to a twisted matrix of beliefs.

1. Pagan influences

Consider the pagan influences Jephthah experienced in the years living in the land of Tob. Yes, we can read his fine recitation of Israel’s history in vv.4-28. But he’d adopted parts of Moabite religion, the worship of Molech, along with the worship of the LORD - the practice of child sacrifice along with the ethic of the preciousness of life. The bulkheads were hardly sealed.

2. Common unbelief

But it’s not just the pagan influences in Jephthah’s life. It’s the unbelief common to us all. It’s a struggle to believe in the LORD’s goodness. That’s why Jephthah makes this vow. He’s trying to impress the deity, to get him to act, to buy him off. There’s no idea here of unmerited favor.

Part of the brokenness we face is the horror of syncretism, this blending of faiths.

Application:

What of us? How might we be vulnerable to this? How might we be mixing our worship of the LORD with the gods of this age? I’ve already mentioned money. What of sex and power? What of freedom, of independence, and the right of self-governance and self-determination?

Pushing further, how might we fall prey to false ideas of God and how we serve Him? Trace your disappointments. Follow them back to your expectations. There you may well find a sense of entitlement, a sense of deserving, something you earned. But that’s not how He works.

Oh, how deeply broken we are. And how desperately we are in need of the Lord’s repair.

III. THE MADNESS OF TRIBALISM

Which brings us to the madness of tribalism seen in a civil war (**READ Judges 12:1-4a**).

A) A Shocking Degree of Disunity

What we see unfolding here is a shocking degree of disunity among God’s people.

1. An affront by the men of Ephraim

It starts with this affront by the men of Ephraim. They cross over the Jordan and berate Jephthah for leaving them out of the war with the Ammonites. They even throw out some slurs and taunts.

2. The response of Jephthah

Jephthah responds by setting the record straight, much as he tried to do with the Ammonites. But he doesn’t wait to see how the argument lands. He attacks, beats them back, and concocts this “password by pronunciation” to deal with the stragglers. This isn’t too hard to envision when you just think of the different sounds and various regional dialects with the English language.

B) A Stunning Display of Pride

But why? What's driving this madness? A stunning display of pride on both sides.

1. The men of Ephraim

The men of Ephraim seem to specialize in vanity and arrogance. We saw this earlier with Gideon. It's in the air and water. Such pride soaked through and flowed from their culture.

2. Jephthah

But we see it with Jephthah too. He's had enough. And so he deals with his fellow Israelites from another tribe far more harshly than the soldiers of Ammon. And 42,000 died. 42,000.

Again, this is part of the brokenness - the madness of tribalism.

Illustration:

Here's a headline. "Indonesia Soccer Match Brawl Leaves at Least 125 Dead". That was just a few months ago. There have been similar stories from Mexico, Canada, and France. All are cases in which fans of different teams in the same country let loose upon one another, all out of a wrong-headed view, a twisted priority, as to their ultimate sense of identity and belonging.

Application:

What of us? How might we fall prey to this impulse? In the past, dismissiveness of other denominations was common. We created caricatures of one another to push aside any idea we might have things to learn from one another. But now, it's gone from dismissiveness to disdain - even of those in our own tribes. You see it in blogs and web sites - stoking fires of suspicion, choking out the possibility of charitable judgments. But that's what happens when our identity is in anything but Jesus, when down deep we see ourselves as anything other than His followers.

Oh, how deeply broken we are. And how desperately we need the Lord's repair.

CONCLUSION:

So is there any hope? And, if so, how is it seen here? There are hints, clues and traces. The curse will be broken by the One Jephthah prepares us for - the Judge, the one true Savior and Deliverer, Jesus. Note the similarities between them. Both were despised and rejected by their people. Little reason seen as to what use they would be. "But God chose what was weak..."

Yet for all the similarities, the differences and contrasts are all the greater. Jesus has no foolishness, only faithfulness. He acts not out of vain impulsiveness but deliberate intention. He has vowed not to sacrifice another to secure our deliverance and salvation but only Himself. And while reviled, He entrusted Himself to His Father to do justly. Jesus alone is mighty to save.

By these similarities and even more by the differences and contrasts, these historical events surrounding Jephthah were pointing the way to Jesus - some 1100 years before His arrival on the scene. The good, the bad, and the ugly. He alone is mighty to save. That's good to know.

For we are deeply broken. Each and all of us. And we need the Lord's repair.

PROPOSITION: (magnet) We are deeply broken.
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