

The High Price of Salvation

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: as we've been getting deeper into the book of Judges in this series of evening devotions, by now you may have noticed a growing tension that's building between the Lord and his people Israel. Early on when the Israelites wandered from the Lord and he sent enemies against them to drive them back to himself, as soon as they'd cry out for his help, the Lord was swift to save them. It happened several times that way. It was like the Lord couldn't wait to set them free of their afflictions and restore them to himself again. But then last time, when the same cycle of unfaithfulness started again, the Lord hesitated a bit to rescue his people from the severe hardship he brought on them by the Midianites. That time, before he delivered his people by the hand of Gideon, he sent a prophet to remind them why this oppression had come. The prophet told them, "You betrayed the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt, from that house of bondage; the same Lord who has since saved you from your enemies numerous times. Despite all he's done for you, *yet again* you have turned your back on him and you've gone off to worship the false gods of your heathen neighbors."

It was a rebuke they needed to hear. You see, they were beginning to take the Lord's deliverance for granted. They were acting as if it didn't matter what they did most of the time – they could worship whatever gods they pleased and engage in all kinds of immoral behavior – as long as they turned back to the Lord when things got really bad. Then everything would turn out all right. They could count on it. And it was like they were using the Lord's unfailing dedication to them as a license to sin. It was becoming a calculated thing. "We can do this. Because the Lord is so slow to anger, we can get in several good years of sin and idolatry before he does anything about it. And then when he does, we can even put up with a few years of hardship while we continue to enjoy the pleasures of sin. Only when it becomes absolutely unbearable will we ask the Lord to save us. And because he's merciful and forgiving, he will. He does it every time. And then after a bit, after a few good years, we can do it all over again. We enjoy sinning so much it's worth it in the end."

God's people needed to hear that that sort of attitude was unacceptable. That's why the prophet was sent to call them to repentance – to *genuine* repentance. And that's why too the Lord's deliverance was delayed. His people needed to have the heat applied for a longer period in order to help them understand that the Lord's forgiveness was not their inalienable right. They needed to understand that sin has real consequences – that with sin, there is always a price to be paid. No matter how attractive or tempting it may be, sin is never "worth it". The price always exceeds the pleasure.

Unfortunately, as we heard this evening, it was a lesson the Israelites failed to learn. Shortly after Gideon's death, they again turned from the Lord. And this time it seems that they jumped headlong into the enticing worship of the various Canaanite gods and goddesses with greater zeal than they ever had before. And in response, the Lord put a squeeze on them from two different sides. Ammonites from the east and Philistines from the southwest, they soon made life very difficult for the Israelites – though it took 18 years of this oppression for the situation to become so bad that the Israelites felt they had no recourse but to return to the Lord and cry out to him for rescue.

And this time around the Lord surprised them by saying, "No. I've had it with you. I am not going to save you. I've been there and done that more times than I care to remember. You

want to worship other gods? Fine. Have at it. And now that you've got trouble, ask them for help. Let's see if the gods you have chosen can save you."

And my how quickly the Israelites get serious about their repentance then. First we hear that they throw themselves on the Lord's mercy. They readily admit their guilt and say they're willing to accept whatever punishment he deems fit, "But please, whatever else you do, save us from our enemies now!" And we read, "Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them". Hear that? They had been keeping their idols right where they'd been worshipping them – or maybe they'd put them in their closets or covered them with a blanket or something to get them out of sight – *while* they went to the Lord for help. But it shows that they were already planning to return to their false gods just as soon as the Lord lifted the oppression of the enemy. They were like a kid apologizing for stealing cookies while his hand is still in the cookie jar he's holding behind his back, or an unfaithful husband telling his wife how sorry he is while he's on the phone reserving a motel room for another rendezvous with his girlfriend. Small wonder the Lord refused to help them when their repentance was so utterly insincere. But when they did get serious about it and actually came clean, he was more than willing to save.

And this time he does it through a man named Jephthah. He was from that portion of Israel on the east side of the Jordan River where the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh settled. We call it the Golan Heights today. And because it was off by itself and surrounded by hostile nations, it was the part of Israel that usually came under enemy occupation first whenever there was trouble. So it's small wonder that a man like Jephthah became a warrior: there were always plenty of enemies around for him to fight.

But we also learn that among his own, he wasn't a very popular or well-liked guy. No, he was the illegitimate son of a man named Gilead by a prostitute. Gilead, who seems to have been a pretty important person, had a legitimate family as well; and when Jephthah grew up his half brothers ganged up on him and threw him out. They weren't about to let him have a share of their inheritance. So, friendless, family-less, and dispossessed of anything that might have been coming his way, he set out on his own. And through his courage, his wits, and the strength of his arm he made a name for himself as a pretty tough guy. Before long he had gathered to himself a band of loyal mercenaries who with him conducted raids on Israel's Syrian enemies and helped keep them at bay. And thus he became known as smart and effective military commander.

Well, then came the Ammonite invasion of Israel because of the people's unfaithfulness. We've already seen how slow and initially insincere they were about repenting; but it finally happened. And then the men of northeastern tribes gathered together for battle. The trouble was they had no one to lead them. No one had that kind of experience, or if they had some, they didn't feel competent to lead the whole army. So they tried incentives to get someone to step forward: "Whoever leads us in battle will become the chief leader of the land afterward." Still there were no takers. No one had the courage or the confidence – or more importantly, the trust in the Lord – to want the job of leading the army.

And so, out of desperation and presumably rather reluctantly, they turned to Jephthah. "Come, lead us against our enemies" they said "and then you can rule over us." It was an enticing offer; but Jephthah seriously questioned their honesty. "Yes, but didn't you hate me and drive me away?" he asked. "Yes", they said, "but we want you back now." "And if I come lead you in battle and we win, will you really appoint me as your leader and let me rule over you?" "Yes", they replied, "the Lord is our witness."

Now, that should have set off some warning bells. Here they are taking an oath in the name of the Lord to let him rule over them; but it's precisely their unfaithfulness to the Lord and

the promises they made to him that got them into this trouble in the first place. I mean, if they don't bother to keep the promises they make to the Lord, what are the odds that they're going to keep the promises they make in the Lord's name?

But the thing to see here is that Jephthah and his relationship with the men of Gilead is a living picture of the Lord and his relationship with Israel. The truth is that neither of them is wanted. They're both hated and driven away – until they're needed. And when that time comes, the people make all kinds of promises. "Sure, you get the enemy off our backs, and then we'll be loyal to you. You can rule over us. We'll be faithful and devoted to you." The men of Gilead are saying exactly the same thing to Jephthah as the people of Israel are saying to the Lord. And like the Lord, in the end, Jephthah agrees to help.

And seeing Jephthah as an illustration of the Lord will help us to understand the rest of what happens – because what follows is one of the most difficult sections of the entire Bible. First the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jephthah. This tells us that over and above his natural strength and military prowess he's given *supernatural* strength and abilities. The Lord is with him and is working through him mightily to bring about this deliverance for his people. But unfortunately, that's not enough for Jephthah. Even knowing that the Lord is with him and that therefore he will surely win the day, yet, nevertheless, he adds his foolish oath to the situation. He couldn't leave well enough alone – he has to make his own contribution (which is always a mistake).

And so Jephthah makes the vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph, I will sacrifice as a burnt offering to the Lord." Now, it's helpful to understand that on the surface, the oath is not as foolish as it sounds. Israelite houses were often connected to their barns, so when Jephthah says this, he anticipates that the first thing out of the door will be a sheep or a goat; perhaps even a donkey. The last thing he expects it to be is a person – and certainly not his daughter, his beloved and only child.

But we heard what happened. The Lord gave the victory. And when Jephthah returned home it was his daughter who ran out first to greet him. No doubt she'd heard of her father's great triumph and was eager to give him a hero's welcome. She bursts out of the door with her tambourine, dancing and singing, hailing her now famous father. She is beside herself with delight. And Jephthah goes from being the happiest man in the world to the most wretched in an instant. But what we really ought to take note of is how serious both of them are about the oath, as foolish as it was. The father realizes that he cannot go back on an oath he made to the Lord. And his daughter understands this too and she willingly accepts her fate. Now surely, the thought of backing out must have crossed their minds. And how easy it would have been to rationalize it: "The Lord would understand. It was a stupid oath in the first place; and who could have guessed the way things would turn out? We'll just go ahead and sacrifice a nice goat instead." But no; though they must have thought about it, it's never spoken of. A promise made to the Lord must be kept. For them, it's that simple. And in this way they are the exact opposite of the rest of the Israelites for whom breaking sacred oaths to the Lord has become something of a national pastime. Not for Jephthah and his daughter; and so, after taking a few months to mourn her fate with her friends, she returns home and pays the ultimate price in order that her father may keep his vow to the Lord. And thus the salvation of Israel that came at such a low and easy cost for the nation comes at the highest price of all for its leader and his only child.

And this is where we find Christ in this story. The foolish vow that Jephthah makes not knowing what it would cost him is the same vow the Lord makes. The difference is the Lord makes his oath knowing exactly what the cost will be. The salvation of God's people can only be purchased by the sacrificial death of his one and only Son. It's a promise they make

together before the foundation of the world. They make this promise already seeing the cross and all the suffering it entails. It's a promise they make to you and to me. And I don't know ... maybe it's easy for us to think, "Well, together they are the Lord God; they can handle it. It's no big deal for them." If so, this account of Jephthah and his daughter should bring it down to earth for us. The father's shock and absolute misery knowing what he must do is something we can relate to. We can to a certain extent feel what he does. And the daughter's selfless sacrifice and her willingness to give herself in order to preserve a sacred vow—well, maybe we can't relate to it; but we can certainly be inspired by it. Together their agony over what they must do is meant to help us understand what the Lord has done to save us.

I said before that sin is never worth it. The price of sin always exceeds whatever fleeting pleasure may be gained by it. The thing is we don't end up paying that price. Oh, we may suffer some consequences now and then; but by and large we get away with it. The price nevertheless must be paid if we are to be saved from the eternal suffering that every sin against God or against our neighbor deserves. That price is paid by our God: the Father who sacrifices his Son and the Son who willingly submits to torture, to crucifixion, and to death – for us and for our salvation. We know this. We are confident of it. And the danger here is that we, like the Israelites, may take it for granted. It happens when we think, "Well, since the Lord is picking up the tab and he'll forgive whatever wrong I may do, then it really doesn't matter how much I sin. It doesn't cost *me* very much, so I might as well enjoy myself and run up the bill." This is precisely what the Israelites were doing. And it's easy for us to shake our heads at them and think, "Boy, were they a bunch of unfaithful ingrates." My friends, *we are* the Israelites.

And so it is fitting in this season in which we reflect upon our Lord's passion and death that we consider the high price of our salvation; that we turn our faces toward Christ's suffering: every stroke of the lash, every blow of fist and rod, the insults, mocking, spitting, curses; the seemingly endless hours in which each breath was gained by pulling against nails driven through the flesh of his hands and feet – that we see and know the infinite price he paid to redeem us, and genuinely repent. That we see sin for what it is and what it does, and hate it and truly seek to turn from it. That having died with Christ to sin, having been forgiven and washed clean and given his Spirit to lead and guide us, we may seek to live by the Spirit and walk in God's ways, making it a priority to keep our sacred vows to the Lord even as he kept his to us. May this be the goal of our Lenten journey, for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!