

FAILED FAMILIES, FAITH IN GOD

by Steve Zeisler

One of my favorite comic strips is *Calvin and Hobbes*, the ongoing saga of a six-year-old boy, Calvin, and his stuffed tiger Hobbes, who is his companion in life. A couple of weeks ago the comic strip struck me as particularly insightful. The conversation went this way:

Hobbes: "Aren't you supposed to be doing your homework now?"

Calvin: "I quit doing homework. Homework is bad for my self-esteem."

Hobbes: "It is?"

Calvin: "Sure. It sends the message that I don't know enough. All that emphasis on right answers makes me feel bad when I get them wrong. So instead of trying to learn, I'm just concentrating on liking myself the way I am."

Hobbes: "Your self-esteem is enhanced by remaining an ignoramus?"

Calvin: "Please. Let's call it informationally impaired."

Hobbes' question is a good one, isn't it? "Is your self-esteem enhanced by remaining an ignoramus?" Most of us would argue against that when we're talking about children's homework. But perhaps there are areas in our lives where we don't face things, where we don't want God or anyone else bringing to light things that we'd rather remain ignorant of. They threaten our self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a critical need articulated well in this age, and it has been a universal longing of people in every age. Righteousness is the more profound term used in the Scriptures for what we call self-esteem. It's the gift of God; he intends for us to be able to stand before him and before the world and say, "The righteousness of Christ is imputed to me, and therefore I can live life with the absolute security that I am who I ought to be." Our scripture reading this morning from 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 said, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." Going through the struggle to allow the past to be past and put away what once was, to be who we are in Christ, and to be able to say, "I am who I ought to be," is what it means to grow in faith, to become mature in Christ.

I refer you to Judges 10-12 this morning for an examination of this theme as we look at the story of Jephthah. You'll need to "strap your seat belt on" because there's a lot of material here, and we won't be able to read it all. Let's begin with verse 17 of chapter 10 to put ourselves in context:

Then the sons of Ammon were summoned, and they camped in Gilead. And the sons of Israel gathered together, and camped in Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, "Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

As we have seen, there are cycles of sin and God's salvation in Judges. We're at the point in this cycle where the people have recognized their failure, put away their idols, and called to God for help, and he's indicated that he'll do something. And now they ask, "Who is the man who will lead us against the Ammonites?"

Jephthah's Call

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, but he was the son of a harlot.

This is a capsule statement of Jephthah's problem. He was a man of tremendous capability, a valiant warrior, but he was also a man with a past that would dog him---his unfavored entrance into the world as a bastard, as a son of a harlot, rejected (as we'll see in a moment) by his family. He was both capable and outcast. His story ends in the seventh verse of chapter 12, where we read of his being buried in one of the cities of Gilead. Jephthah was a man whose entry into life was tainted, whose death and burial took place in obscurity, someone who would have to struggle with rejection and ultimately call on God to meet his needs. I hope for us to learn from his struggle.

Judges 11:1b-3:

And Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman [a strange woman]." So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him.

Jephthah's father, we're told, is a man named Gilead. Now, an ancient man named Gilead had given his name to the region Jephthah lived in east of the Jordan. Gilead was inhabited by the descendants of Manasseh, Gad, and Reuben.

Some commentators suggest that rather than a particular man named Gilead in this generation taking on the ancient name, it may well have been that no one knew who Jephthah's father was, that Jephthah was just the son of one of the men of Gilead and a Canaanite streetwalker. I'm not persuaded by this, but it's an interesting idea. I think it's more likely that he actually had a father named Gilead. But in any case, as he grew up, his dark beginning came back to haunt him, and his brothers wanted nothing to do with him (for no failure of his own). They threw him out, and he became what amounted to the head of a band of Hell's Angels in a region to the north called Tob. It says that others gathered around him---outcasts and misfits, rejected by their communities. Jephthah led these men. We'll see that everywhere he went he rose to leadership; he was effective, bright, aggressive, and talented, a natural leader.

Verses 4-11:

And it came about after a while that the sons of Ammon fought against Israel. And it happened when the sons of Ammon fought against Israel that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob; and they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our chief that we may fight against the sons of Ammon." Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me from my father's house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "For this reason we have now returned to you, that you may go with us and fight with the sons of Ammon and become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back to fight against the sons of Ammon and the LORD gives them up to me, will I become your head?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD is witness between us; surely we will do as you have said." Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

Who Can Be Trusted?

Jephthah didn't trust them much, for good reason. But they needed a strong military captain to lead them against the Ammonites, and he was all of that. However, he said, "If you bring me back for the military engagement, then will I be cast out again? Or am I to stay on as head of the community afterward?" He wanted to make sure that they were going to treat him seriously and with respect. They agreed and took a vow, calling the Lord as witness.

You can see that Jephthah was trying to undo the pain of the past. It was true in that generation and it is true in every generation that the family system that we grow up in does more to shape us than anything else. His mother was a "strange woman;" that is, she was a Canaanite, and she was a harlot. She was used by who knows how many men and had no place in that society---and he was her son. He had no place in the community either. This rejection damaged and scarred the inner man in addition to causing Jephthah social and economic hardship. The needs, hurts, uncertainties, sorrows, memories, and whisperings from the past were all part of his "baggage."

So when he came back, he wanted to fix it humanly, didn't he? "Let's see if I can take my station at the head of this tribe and finally get your respect. I was rejected by you once; maybe having your approval will make the hurt right." But it wouldn't for him, and it never quite does. We can't fix the hurt that's inflicted on us. People can't make it all better. Even when they agree to do it and follow through on their agreement, it doesn't work.

Even those who come from the best homes, who have the most support, and who are most deeply cared about have some whisperings from the past that make us believe that we're not good enough, make us long for the acceptance of other people, and drive us to succeed. Jephthah was a driven man. He was, as I've mentioned, a capable leader who fought with his band of outlaws in Tob and would fight at the head of Gilead. He was a bright negotiator and a thoughtful man. He hoped that either the approval of the elders of his tribe or the accomplishments of his own hands would somehow make things different.

Personal Prayers

Yet what he needed was the Lord, and I believe he even knew that. Verse 11 is a curious and fascinating sentence in Hebrew. In the prior verse, the elders of Gilead called God as witness in a formal covenant. Later the word in Hebrew translated vow will be used where it says that he made a vow before the Lord. But neither of those terms is used here. In verse 11 it says peculiarly that "Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah." Commentators don't know exactly what that means. I believe Jephthah's "words" were his personal prayer for God's help at the very height of his acceptance by the people of Gilead. When he gained the station that he had been deprived of, he found himself speaking to God, realizing that there was still something that hadn't been achieved and a brokenness of heart that needed attention.

I want to say just one other word in passing before we move on, and that is that the work of the Lord in every age in history may often be best accomplished by redeemed outcasts. Have you ever noticed how many times in scripture it is the rejected one brought back from his rejection who ends up accomplishing the most? Consider Moses, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul. The broken one, the rejected one, the inadequate one out in the wilderness someplace learns that the Canaanite gods don't pay off and that people's approval really isn't enough. These people learn to wrestle with God in their need, and they are the ones who often have the most to offer in the long run. Jephthah fits this picture.

The twelfth chapter opens with a negotiation. Jephthah was not afraid to fight, but he was bright enough to not start with a fight. Verse 12 of chapter 11:

Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying, "What is between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?"

He sent messengers to open negotiations: "Why are we having this fight, anyway?" As he would point out in the negotiations, "We've gotten along with each other for 300 years. We've both lived here all this time." This was the region that is modern-day Jordan and the West Bank. Jephthah lived more than one thousand years BC, and yet the same struggles, the same tensions, the same arguments, the same inability to negotiate were there. Jephthah tried to negotiate are observable today as well.

In these negotiations, Jephthah's arguments were based on the history recorded in the books of Moses. One of the things you end up realizing through these negotiations is that Jephthah knew and loved the Bible, thought about it, and understood the issues; you can't conclude anything else. At one point he quoted verbatim from Numbers 21. Up there in Tob with his band of Hells Angels, he had his Torah in front of him! I don't think the prayers he prayed when he rose to the heights were the first he'd prayed. We ought to

understand this man in his isolation to have been someone who wrestled with and cared about the things of God, even though he was an outcast and his friends were bandits.

Jephthah began his argument by saying, "We tried to avoid war." The Ammonite king said, "When you people came from Egypt, you stole our land. Well, of course that was 300 years ago, but in any case, we want you to give it back to us." Then Jephthah said, "No, we didn't steal it. We avoided war with Ammon (and Moab, and Edom). We actually fought the Amorites, not you. But he finally ended with a statement of challenge, because over and over again his arguments were rebuffed by this head of the sons of Ammon. Verse 27:

"I therefore have not sinned against you, but you are doing me wrong by making war against me."

Jephthah was saying, "We didn't want the war, and we didn't start it. It's not our fault. You're doing wrong by making war against me."

"May the LORD, the Judge, judge today between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon." But the king of the sons of Ammon disregarded the message which Jephthah sent him.

Jephthah was exactly right to lay the responsibility for what should happen at the feet of the living God. "I've done everything I can to avoid this war, and if our only choice is to be overrun by you or not, then all I can do is muster our troops and say, 'The Lord will judge.' He will deliver us. We have the right to live where we're living; God has given us this land. I know that because I know the Bible, and I've even proved it to you in argument," he was saying to the king of the Ammonites. He couldn't have said it more appropriately than he did.

Jephthah's Foolish Vow

Now we come, in verse 29 and following, to the centerpiece, if you will, of Jephthah's story, his dark night of the soul, the critical moment in which his faith gave way, and the awful aftermath that followed. Verses 29-33:

Now the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If Thou wilt indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." So Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. And he struck them with a very great slaughter from Aroer to the entrance of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel.

Now, think carefully about what happened this night before the crucial battle. Jephthah had the Spirit of God descend upon him. It's very clear that he knew, and the writer of this story knew, that the Spirit had come upon him in some dramatic way as he moved forward in front of his army preparing for battle. He knew the scriptures; he had quoted them to the king of the Ammonites, announcing in ringing terms that God would fight for his people: "This land has been given to us by him; he will defend us." And what he ought to have done is rested that night, awakened the next morning, and led his people into battle. But he couldn't. He was afraid, and so he made a deal with God. He cried out of his faithlessness and said, "I can't really trust that the promises of scripture and the presence of the Spirit are enough for me. I need something else." And so he promised to sacrifice what should come out of the doors of his house to greet him on his return, an agreement with God that he would deeply regret.

Now, why would he do that? What is there in his statement to God that gives us a clue, do you think? I'm convinced that it is himself that he could not help but doubt. "If Thou wilt indeed give the sons of Ammon into *my* hand..." I think that he was quite sure that God would somehow give the children of Israel a victory. But what he did was look at himself, and he remembered his past rejection, the isolation, and the feeling that he wasn't good enough. He had all that with him the night before the battle, and he said, "I don't deserve to be a hero. I don't deserve to succeed." And the devil whispered, "That's right, you don't deserve anything. Your mother was a harlot, and your brothers hated you. You have no value. People like you don't amount to anything." So his doubt was, "Will you deliver them into *my* hand?" That's what he could not believe. Even though the Spirit was present in an almost tangible way, even though the promises of God were clear enough to him and he could articulate them to someone else, even though the Lord had provided everything Jephthah needed, it was the tragedy of that background that overwhelmed him that night.

Now as we read on, we'll see if we can figure out what happened. Verses 34-40:

When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came about when he saw her, that he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot take it back." So she said to him, "My father, you have given your word to the LORD; do to me as you have said, since the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon." And she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions." Then he said, "Go." So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity. And it came about at the end of two months that she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

"Alas, My Daughter"

This was a very difficult, painful turn of events. Jephthah came home from the battle, having made the vow. And I think he expected one of his servants, or soldiers, perhaps, to come out of his house. But it was his daughter who was the first one out, dancing with tambourines, and she hugged her father. And his heart sank like a stone.

Now, interpretively there is great difficulty in knowing exactly what took place next. There are two main schools of thought. First, the majority opinion, frankly, is that he executed his daughter. He said that a burnt offering should be made of whatever came out of his house to meet him, and most people throughout history have assumed he killed her and offered her as a burnt offering.

However, I favor the second option. The statement he made in verse 30 in his vow was, "It shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house...shall be the LORD'S...." That is, it should be devoted to the Lord, belong to the Lord. That language is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to speak of giving a child, a gift, or something else into the Lord's service. For example, when Samuel was born under miracle circumstances, his mother took him to the temple and gave up rights to raise him, and he was raised in Eli's home, serving the Lord in the temple. Her son became the Lord's. And if we didn't have the next phrase there would be little argument with this interpretation. The problem is that the next phrase says, "I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

It seems possible to me, and I'm persuaded of this, that this is a statement that was not to be taken literally, but it was intended to convey, "I will take this vow very seriously. I will do to the utmost degree what I have promised." Now, there's no precedent for this interpretation that I know of. The words "burnt offering" are not used to mean what I just said it means here anywhere else in the Old Testament. But there are arguments that support it. One is that human sacrifice was forbidden for the Jews, and with his knowledge of Scripture, Jephthah knew that. Secondly, the entire weight of the passage from here on has to do with the daughter's virginity (meaning childlessness here). She wept that she would never have a child.

Family Tragedy

The point that Jephthah's daughter was his only child is made pointedly: "Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter." I think what Jephthah realized he had to do because of his vow was give his daughter to the Lord's service to the utmost degree. A living daughter should enter the Lord's service, and so she became something like what Catholic nuns are today; perhaps in a cloister or something similar she was given into God's service. She willingly chose it herself, having heard of the vow. The key point in all this is that she would never have children, and she was his only child---so he would never have any more children in his line. He came from a tragic family background, growing up rejected, alone, abandoned by his brothers, a lonely, hurting little boy, having no family of origin that made sense to him. Now he was having taken away from him the family that might have followed him. He was a man who was on either side of his life deprived of wholesome, healthy, valuable, life-enhancing family relationships. It must have been an incredible sorrow to him from where he had come from, hoping to have progeny of his own, to realize that the rashness of his vow and his inability to trust the God had cost him that.

The story goes on (time doesn't permit us to read anymore) to talk about Jephthah as a judge, and there is one last incident where the Ephraimites came against him in battle. The Ephraimites were the "loose cannons" of the judges period. They kept fighting against their brothers, wanting credit for things they hadn't done. They chose to challenge Jephthah near the end of his period of being a judge, and 42,000 Ephraimites lost their lives. The picture you get of Jephthah toward the end of his story is of a man who was alone and about as hard as they come, a man who was exerting necessary leadership but doing it without compassion or sensitivity. He had lost the things that had mattered to him most. If we had told this as a fairy tale, we might have started out with Jephthah's rejection, then told about his ascendancy--coming back into the clan, their acceptance of him, and the victory over the Ammonites. We would have ended it by making him a grandfatherly Mr. Rogers or something. But this is not a fairy tale and in real life Jephthah suffered painful consequences because he refused to believe God the night he ought to have believed him.

It says in verse 7 of chapter 12 that he died in obscurity and was buried no one knows where, in one of the cities of Gilead. Interestingly enough, three minor judges followed him (we won't read their stories, either), and all we know about them is that they had an extraordinary number of children, and they had a grave. It is in direct contrast to the sad ending of Jephthah, who had no children and no epitaph. These minor judges who never did anywhere near as much as he did at least had that much.

What should we learn from all this? First of all, I'm convinced that when the Lord calls on us to face the things from our past that have ruined us, we must take his call seriously. The issues are important, and there are consequences to be reckoned with. Jephthah was saying, "People like me don't get to be heroes." *People* like me. "My hand doesn't get to be the delivering hand. People with my sort of failure and heartbreak, with horribly twisted backgrounds like mine, who have done what I've done, been where I've been---they don't get to turn out okay." But facing all of that, we have the clear promise of scripture that we are new creatures in Christ and the presence of the Spirit of God testifying to us that he loves us. So we must not keep letting what Ron Ritchie calls the old tapes play over and over again in our minds. We can decide to fight the battle in the power of the Spirit rather than trying to avoid a radical quality of faith by hiding behind some other arrangement. The promises of God and the presence of his Spirit in us are really all we need to face whatever foes we have.

Secondly, I think we ought to realize that Jephthah, though he did not have his grave marked by any of his contemporaries, though he had no children to share his life with, does not remain in an unmarked grave in scripture. In the book of Hebrews, written a thousand years after this man's death, the Spirit of the Lord brings Jephthah back. The writer of Hebrews is describing what it means to have faith. He says that among all those who are heroes of the Old Testament, whose example of faith you ought to follow, is Jephthah. Hebrews 11:32: "And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets...." This is Jephthah's epitaph, his memory. The Lord knew that lonely man, knew how hard it was to be Jephthah, and so the night that he failed, even with its aftermath, did not ultimately disqualify him. This is one of the heroes from whom we can learn what it means to trust God, someone whom God has singled out for us. As C.S. Lewis observed, some are given a very hard machine to drive. In the long run he is held out as honorable, even with his failures, his struggles, and his loss.

I think the question that is probably most important for us is, what issues would the Lord have us face? Where are we in his service? What engagement, what battle is ours for tomorrow? What tasks can your hand be put to? Yours, with all the background you have, all the wondering, all the twists, all the pain. Would he deliver anything into your hand or mine? The promise of scripture is that the past is past. We are new creatures in Christ, and his Spirit has taken up residence in us. The old things don't matter anymore. We can be people who live lives of impact and glory to Christ, not because of other people's acceptance, but because the Lord has worked a miracle in us.

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