

"LESSONS FROM JEPHTHAH"

(excerpt from *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*)

(Robert B. Chisholm)

Thematic Emphases

Persistent and escalating paganism made the Lord cynical about his people's sincerity and reluctant to deliver them, but once more his great mercy eventually prompted him to respond to their suffering. As we have seen throughout the book, the Lord was able and willing to accomplish his purposes through unlikely instruments (in this case an outcast son of a prostitute). Yet paganism tainted the covenant community and robbed the Lord's great deeds of their impact. Jephthah's vow, born out of deficient faith, turned a victory into a tragedy and Ephraim's petty self-interest and pride turned an occasion for celebration into a civil war. When God's people became contaminated by paganism, even their best leader fell far short of the ideal. Rather than uniting behind the Lord and celebrating his redemptive acts, Israel was once more stained by internal conflict.

Exegetical Idea: *Persistent ingratitude alienated God from his people. God was predisposed to show compassion to his people, but he brought them relief only when they radically repudiated their sin. Even when God intervened, the contaminating effects of paganism were still evident in the community and in Jephthah. Jephthah's deficient faith diluted his victory and Ephraim's pride, coupled with Jephthah's offended honor, led to civil war.*

Theological Principles

One of the book's recurring themes is evident again in this story: Sin brings divine discipline and makes God's people vulnerable to their enemies. Yet God's response to his people's pain is different this time, reminding us that he is not predictable and cannot be manipulated. God is compassionate, but he will sometimes withhold that compassion until his people come to grips with just how serious their sin is. His initial refusal to respond to their cry, even though it was accompanied by a confession of sin, forced Israel to confront the heart of the issue and demonstrate their loyalty in a tangible way by getting rid of their idols. Despite his initial reluctance to respond to Israel's cry, the Lord once again exhibited compassion.

The Lord's kingship, one of the book's ongoing themes, is apparent in this story as well. Jephthah's speech emphasizes that Israel's history is the outworking of the Lord's sovereign decisions and actions. As in the past (cf. 10:11-12), the Lord once again demonstrates his ability to deliver his people from hostile enemies.

Theological Idea: *Theological idea: Persistent ingratitude can alienate God from his people. God is predisposed to show compassion to his people, but sometimes he will bring them relief only when they radically repudiate their sin. Even when God intervenes, the contaminating effects of paganism are sometimes still evident in the community and its leaders. Deficient leaders can dilute God's blessing, and pride can lead to conflict within the covenant community.*

Homiletical Trajectories [Preaching Applications]

(1) This story, like those that precede it, illustrates God's commitment to his people. As usual, he confronts their sin by implementing disciplinary measures. He is willing to show compassion, but we should not assume that relief comes if we simply push the right buttons and say we are sorry for our misdeeds. Persistent sin must be confronted in a genuine, sometimes even radical, manner. This involves recognizing that the Lord alone is the source of salvation. Genuine repentance in turn opens the door to God's compassion, which prompts him to intervene.



(2) Like earlier stories, this account also illustrates how assimilation to the surrounding pagan culture results in the covenant community losing its sense of unity and common purpose. Petty self-interest and pride can tear the community apart.

(3) As the covenant community becomes more like the pagan world around it, the leaders who emerge in the community may display some frightening pagan traits. God can use such flawed leaders to accomplish his purposes, but their deficient faith may turn triumph into tragedy and their deficient wisdom may prove inadequate to promote and sustain unity within the community.

Preaching Idea: *Persistent ingratitude can so alienate us from God that he will bring relief only when we radically repudiate our sin. Even then, the contaminating effects of our pagan culture are sometimes still evident in our community and its leaders. Deficient leaders can dilute God's blessing, and pride can lead to conflict within the community.*

This preaching idea reflects the Jephthah story as a unified whole. If we focus on the first trajectory, a preaching idea might be: *God must sometimes discipline us when we sin, but we should not assume that relief comes if we simply push the right buttons and say we are sorry for our misdeeds. We must confront persistent sin in a radical manner.*

If we focus on the second and third trajectories, a preaching idea might be: *When we embrace the surrounding pagan culture, we can lose our sense of unity and common purpose, allowing petty self-interest and pride to tear the covenant community apart. During such times, we must be especially vigilant, for the leaders who emerge among us may display some frightening pagan traits. God can use such flawed leaders to accomplish his purposes, but their deficient faith may turn triumph into tragedy and their deficient wisdom may prove inadequate to promote and sustain unity within the community.*