

Cross Your Heart and Hope to Die

Cycles of Sin . . . Stories of Grace – Part V

Judges 11:29-40

Introduction

Has it ever occurred to you that what you believe determines how you behave? Solomon said something like this in Proverbs 23:7a, when he wrote,

. . . as he thinks within himself, so he is . . .

What you believe about God affects everything about you. The decisions you make, your attitude in life are ultimately, related to your personal view of God.

Let me illustrate this with the example of a person who worries about everything. I will use this person as an illustration because none of us fit that category! A person who worries about everything is, in reality, a person who has a small God.

The apostle Paul links the two when he writes,
Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication . . . let your requests [worries] be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

In other words, “Stop worrying – give your worries to God.”

You might say, “He’s got to be big enough to handle my worries – I have a lot of them.”

Exactly.

Let me take this a step further and say,
Truth eventually determines experience.

I will illustrate this, as well.

A man who falls from the tenth story may shout as he passes each window on the way down, “It’s okay – I’m doing fine.”

He may mean it, but eventually, the truth will catch up with the experience. In fact, it will fashion his experience!

The evils of our society – the things we read about and hear of in the news – are happening because society has abandoned truth.

You, like me and millions of others, have probably sat mesmerized in shock at the newscasts of the rioting and violence around the country. People are killing and stealing and destroying property.

I saw, this week, a newspaper picture of three women, in their mid-thirties, running down the sidewalk loaded down with so many items of stolen clothing that it took all three of them to carry it. It was even more shocking that all three were laughing.

I read of one lady who was interviewed while sitting in her car outside a store. Her entire family was inside the store stealing. A reporter asked her what she was doing and she told him her family was inside the store taking what they wanted. The reporter asked her how she could do that, and quoted her answer of, “It’s not stealing – there’s nobody in the store – so it’s free.”

We could give this lady a book about her experience – condemning theft and pointing out why it is wrong to steal and telling the penalty for thievery. The problem, however, is not this woman’s view of

theft. The root problem is that she does not know that God is in the store. If she understood that – that truth would affect her experience.

Now let us bring this a little closer to us. This same root problem exists in the church today. Our generation has become so focused on experience or “how to behave,” that we have abandoned our beliefs or “what to believe”; that is, the truth of who God is.

The Christian community is chock full of books and seminars that relate to the Christian’s experience – how to have this and how to be that and how to overcome this – how to experience Christianity. In the process, we have abandoned the truth; we have abandoned what we are to believe about God. And:

What we believe about God will determine how we behave before God.

We have forgotten who God is. We need a renewed desire to discover the person and character of God.

Many of the troubles in our Christian lives are happening because we do not understand God. We are people running around looking for the best kind of Kleenex to help our nose because we have a cold. We have forgotten that it takes an internal work to fix the cold.

We need to spend less time exploring our experience and more time exploring *God!*

The Bible is intended by God, not just to make us smarter, but to introduce us to Himself – how He acts, how He thinks, how He responds, what He does, what He is like, what He expects. When we come to know Him, it shapes the way we live. When we discover the truth about God, we are able to experience life to its fullest.

Frequently, God teaches truth through the personal story of a biblical character. He often teaches the way to do something right, by showing someone who did it wrong.

I invite your attention to the tragic story of a man who did not know God well enough; a man who had great zeal for God, but not enough understanding of God. As a result, he made wrong decisions that affected his life, the life of his family, and the nation of Israel. Let us read Judges 11:29-40.

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.

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, “If You will 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.

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.

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 no son or daughter.

When he saw her, 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.”

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.

At the end of two months 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.

Jephthah's Vow – What Did He Mean?!

Before I dive into Jephthah's vow and what it reveals, I will answer the question, "Did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter on an altar to God?"

I have read every commentary on Judges that I have, along with the footnotes quoting additional authors. Let me say, up front, that I do not believe Jephthah sacrificed his daughter to God.

I know some disagree, and all are entitled to their opinion, but let me give the reasons that he did not.

1. First, God would have judged Jephthah for violating the law.

I did not say that God would not have blessed him because God blesses us, even when we sin. He will bless Samson, as we will discover, who lived an immoral life as a judge.

I said that God would have judged Jephthah for violating the law. The law of God clearly condemned human sacrifice! That is what the pagan Canaanites did.

You might say, "Well, maybe Jephthah didn't know the law."

Indeed, Jephthah grew up in the kind of home that did not teach the law. He was kicked out and became a gang leader in the land of Tob. However, during the two month delay when he was waiting for his daughter to return, we can be assured that the priests would have informed him!

2. Secondly, the tragedy in this passage seems to be Jephthah's loss of future children, not the loss of his daughter's life.

Notice Judges 11:34 again.

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 no son or daughter.

The point of this is that she was his only hope of having grandchildren and great grandchildren. In other words, when Jephthah died, the influence of his

family name would die! In that day, the clan was all important.

This seems to be the emphasis of Judges 11:37, as well.

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 . . ."

3. Thirdly, the normal expression for human sacrifice is avoided in the passage when the time arrives to perform the sacrifice.

Note Judges 11:39 again that summarizes exactly what Jephthah did. It does *not* say, "At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she burned as a sacrifice on the altar . . ."

No! It says,

At the end of two months 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 . . .

One commentator writes,

Jephthah could have vowed that in case of victory, he would dedicate to God for tabernacle service one member of his household. The fact that it turned out to be his daughter, rather than a servant, was tragic for him. Indeed, she was his only child; he could never expect to see grandchildren; and he would seldom, if ever, see her again.

Another commentator adds,

Nothing indicates that Jephthah literally sacrificed his daughter on an altar. The origin of the Hebrew word "olah," or "burnt offering," meant literally, "to ascend". It signified the smoke that ascended from the altar. In time it became the word used to describe a burnt sacrifice. There is nothing in the narrative to prevent us from concluding that Jephthah's daughter went across the Jordan Valley and ascended the other side to Shiloh, where she spent her life serving the Lord in the temple.

4. Fourthly, the daughters of Israel went yearly to visit with Jephthah's daughter.

One verse that is often overlooked is Judges 11:40. Look again at that verse.

that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah ...

The word “commemorate” can be translated, “to talk with; to praise”.

The verse says that the daughters “went yearly”. Where did they go? The only logical explanation seems to be that they went to Shiloh and spent time with Jephthah’s daughter. They probably talked with her and praised her for her dedication to a life of unselfish service – all for the sake of helping her father keep his foolish vow.

Jephthah’s Vow – What Did He Misunderstand?!

Why did Jephthah make this foolish vow that would so impact people? I believe it was because he had a lack of knowledge concerning the God of Israel.

Let me give two wrong assumptions that led Jephthah to make this vow. I will apply these to us because quite often, we do not know God very well.

1. False assumption number one is that God cannot be trusted under fire.

Notice again Judges 11:30.

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, “If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand,”

This false assumption produces rebellion.

In reality, if we do not trust God, we will abandon Him under fire!

Let me pause, at this point, to say that our view of God is largely shaped by those who have been in authority over us. Fathers play a critical role in this. The way a father lives and walks and talks and responds will largely shape his child’s view of the way God walks and talks and responds.

I will also say that none of us have an excuse for not having a biblical vantage point of God. We are all told to go to God’s word and that by doing so, independently of background, we can know God. Fathers, however, can throw some obstacles in the way that some have to get around in their pursuit of God.

I will use my father as an illustration, knowing he would never want to be the example. I know he was

not the perfect father, but some things happened that created an impression of God in my young mind that has been very valuable. The way my father responded under fire was one of these things. I could trust my father’s character – consistently.

I can remember as a teenager being with him on his mission field, which was the streets of downtown Norfolk, passing out invitations to fellows to come to the servicemen’s center. I remember my father talking to a man, who from appearances was either a drug dealer or a pimp, about the Lord. Suddenly, the man slapped my father in the face as hard as he could. I was thinking, “It’s two to one!” My father kind of stood there and looked at him, and then said, “Sir, do you feel better now?”

When the pressure was on, my father responded in keeping with his character – I could trust him. I have never had in my mind, an image of God reacting in anger.

However, what about Jephthah’s father? Do you remember this upstanding man in the community from our study of him in our last discussion?

His name was Gilead – he bore the name of the tribe. He had failed morally and had conceived Jephthah out of wedlock with a harlot. He had enough character to bring Jephthah into his home and to raise him, but he never stood up for the boy. So the brothers would hurl insults and make life impossible for Jephthah. Then, one day, the elders, the other spiritual authority, came to visit and said, “Gilead, that boy is an embarrassment. Send him away.”

Gilead responded under the fire of that kind of pressure and did what was wrong. Jephthah’s father could not be trusted, his mother had abandoned him, and the elders hated him. Jephthah left.

Now Jephthah is going to have a hard time understanding that God will not betray him when he is under pressure. Under fire, is God going to stick with him? He made the false assumption that God would not, so he makes a plea, “Oh God, don’t abandon me!” – and he makes his foolish vow as a result.

2. False assumption number two is that God can be bribed and coerced into keeping His word.

Judges chapter 10 made it very clear that God would deliver the sons of Ammon to a repentant Israel. Furthermore, in Judges 11:29a, we are told,

Now the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah . . .

This confirmed God's leadership and power. It was clear that this was God's design.

However, because Jephthah did not know he could trust God, he tries to bribe Him. Notice again Judges 11:30b-31.

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If You will 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."

Jephthah's vow was a shallow attempt to obligate God to keep His word. In other words, "God, I know You like offerings, so if You keep Your word, I'll give You a special one."

This false assumption produces manipulation.

God then, can become someone who responds to the human who gives Him the most impressive benefit package. If this is true, then God is for sale! His word can be bought by the highest bidder.

The Bible teaches, however, that God is sovereign. This means He is not for sale! It also means He can be trusted beyond doubt – He will keep His word. He cannot be encouraged to do what is right because it is His character to do what is right. He cannot be coerced to do what is wrong either.

You have probably seen and heard little kids on the playground and one has promised to do something that another is not really convinced he will do.

"You promise?!"

"Yea, I promise."

"You really, really promise – cross your heart and hope to die; stick a needle in your eye?"

When a kid says that, it is a serious contract! That kid does not trust the other, so he is trying to get some type of promise out of the other kid.

How many of us try to get God to cross His heart and hope to die? How many of us can simply take Him at His word because we know Him well enough to know that He can be trusted?

How do we act toward Him with the way we give money or with the way we have devotions or with the way we represent Him? Are we doing these things to impress Him into giving us what we want?

We must rediscover the person of God!

We need to be reintroduced to the character of God. We live in a Christian society that is so focused on the experience that we are abandoning the truth – and the truth is what sets us free.

Oh to have the curiosity of a little kid! When they are young, they come out with questions about God like, "Who is God? What's He like? Where does He live? What's it like in heaven? . . ."

Do we know the answer to these questions? No, not really. However, we quit asking the questions. Why? Because we do not really recognize the fact that what happens there impacts the way we live here.

A few days ago, one of my six year old sons and I were alone. This boy had been particularly close to his grandfather, Papa, who was now in heaven. He asked, "Dad, will there be paper in heaven?"

I knew this was a loaded question and answered, "Well, I'd like to think there will be paper in heaven. Why do you ask, son?"

"Because Papa was such a good drawer and when I get to heaven, I want him to draw me some pictures."

Do we color in heaven? Would it make any difference? You had better believe it – because truth determines experience! What you believe determines how you behave!

Last week must have been my week for questions because my other six year old son asked at the dinner table, "Dad, is God married?"

I responded with theological certainty, "No, son, God isn't married."

"Why not, Dad?"

"Eat your supper before it gets cold."

No, I did not answer that way! I tried, in a futile attempt, to answer that question.

Does this make a difference? What I know and the way I know it shapes my attitude today. If God is big enough and majestic enough, then whatever comes along my path, He is big enough to handle and I can trust Him.

I want to close with the words of an eight year old boy who writes tremendous theology. He has come to understand something of who God is and what God does. He writes things that adults should rediscover as well.

One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes these to put in place of the ones that die so there will be enough people to take care of the things here on earth. He doesn't make grownups. Just babies. I think that's because they are smaller and easier to make. And that way He doesn't have to take up His valuable time teaching them to talk and walk - He can just leave that up to the mothers and fathers. You shouldn't always think of what God can do for you. I figure God put me here and He can take me back anytime He wants. I think it works out pretty good.

God sees everything and hears everything and is everywhere. Which keeps Him pretty busy. If you don't believe in God, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you - like to camp - but God can. It's good to know He's around when you're scared of the dark or when you can't swim very good and you get thrown in the deep water by the big kids.

. . . that's what I believe about God.

What is your God like? Is He the God of the Bible - sovereign, trustworthy, powerful, loving, and wise? Do you realize that what you understand about Him affects the way you live for Him?

Are you struggling with discouragement? Are you trying to avoid the penalty of some temptation? Are you going through the deep waters of a trial? Rather than tackle the discouragement or the temptation or the trial; rather than focusing on the experience, go to the Bible and begin reading passages that will reintroduce you to God. Read passages that deal with His sovereignty, His character, His power, His wisdom, His love.

The bigger your God - the smaller your trial; the more majestic your God - the greater your security; the deeper your joy. We need to re-acquaint ourselves like never before with who God is; with the truth of God! That truth, as it relates to our experience, will set us free.

The truth, Christ said, will set us free!

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