

Unbelievable Grace!

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

Judges 11:1-28

Introduction

I attended the same Christian school from kindergarten through senior high school. I remember one fellow, named Paul, who was a couple of years ahead of me. He had a withered hand and that had given him, I believe, a complex. He was a very angry young man and was very rebellious. In fact, he was kicked out of high school for selling drugs.

A couple of years later, as I was walking down the sidewalk of the Christian college that I attended, I bumped into Paul. My first thought was, “Is he selling drugs here too?”

However, this was not the case. A couple of years after being kicked out of high school, God reached Paul’s heart and so revolutionized him that he was studying to be a missionary.

I recently called a pastor who supports Paul to find out how he is doing. I discovered that Paul indeed, graduated from Christian college. In fact, he is married with three children and has been serving on the field as a missionary for ten years.

I was fascinated by the thought that this man who was once so stubbornly against God, is now stubbornly serving Him. He has recently been appointed by ABWE (Association of Baptists for World Evangelism) to Mexico City, which, by the way, is called “the graveyard of missionaries”. In fact, the couple that went with him to Mexico City has already quit.

Paul, however, is still in Mexico City. I learned that he has already started a church and they are looking for a building. Through this church, he has led a number of people to Jesus Christ.

We have a natural tendency to write people off because of their past. We are so surprised by God’s grace. Grace is undeserved favor; it is God stooping to bestow His forgiveness and blessing on us. We tend to think that we are more deserving of grace than others. We forget that at the foot of the cross, the ground is level!

It is amazing that God will teach a deep truth such as His grace, by packaging it in the life of a person who has been marked off by society; who has been a loser in everyone else’s eyes, but later, is discovered being used by God in a tremendous way.

This is the kind of person we will look at today. The story of the ninth judge opens in Judges chapter 11. The chapter moves swiftly through the story of the most colorful, impulsive judge to date. By the time I finished studying this chapter, the overwhelming theme had to be two words, “Unbelievable Grace”. We will take a fresh look at this kind of grace today.

Israel had once again, walked into the clutches of false gods. You may remember the cycles of sin that had taken place among the Israelites. Gideon had died; his son Abimelech massacred and murdered his way through a brief reign; two minor judges had risen with insignificant results. The people of Israel were deeper in idolatry than ever before.

God, who is a God of grace, would reveal Himself to the people of Israel by choosing the most unlikely leader they had ever known; a man who was an unmistakably evident recipient of God's grace. The man's name was Jephthah – and what a story his was!

Jephthah's Unpleasant Past – Grace Withheld

Let us look at the introduction of Jephthah in Judges chapter 11. We will begin with verses 1-3.

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. And Gilead was the father of Jephthah. 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." 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.

The first three verses of this chapter were enough to make the religious shudder, the self-righteous faint, and the proud snobbishly angry or at least embarrassed that God had not chosen a leader from among the upstanding, educated, and well-groomed. Jephthah was everything but that. He had a shady, incredibly painful past and a gangster-like lifestyle in the present. Yet, this man will be the ninth judge to lead Israel back to God.

Notice that before Jephthah ever stepped up to the plate in Israel, he had not three, but four strikes against him. Let us take a closer look at these.

1. Strike number one is that Jephthah was an illegitimate son.

Look at Judges 11:1 again.

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

This meant no legal rights or privileges. He was born in a brothel and grew up without the benefit of a caring, nurturing family.

2. Strike number two is that Jephthah's mother was a prostitute.

Frankly, Jephthah's father Gilead was unfaithful to his wife. One evening perhaps, he put twenty shillings down and bought an hour of secret sin. The

only problem was, this young harlot became pregnant. To make matters worse, she would not keep her mouth shut and eventually, exposed this upstanding community man for what he had done.

Gilead bore the consequences of that one afternoon for the rest of his life. His home turned into a battleground of hatred, hostility, and rivalry. Evidently, Gilead had taken the newborn son into his own home, which was the least he could do!

3. Strike number three is that Jephthah was eventually rejected by his adoptive family.

Look again at Judges 11:2.

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."

In other words, when Gilead's legitimate sons became smart enough to think about inheritances, they banished Jephthah because he "obviously" did not belong!

4. Strike number four is that Jephthah became the gang leader of criminals.

Look again at Judges 11:3.

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.

Worthless means, "empty; vain; unprofitable". The shady characters of back alleys and pool halls took to Jephthah.

It is interesting that the only people in Jephthah's life who accepted him were other people who were unwanted. This man who was rejected by everyone who should have accepted him, finds a home among fellow misfits who have also been rejected.

What a life Jephthah had! Born to a woman who wished he had never been born and taken into the home of a father who did not care for him. In fact, his father's absence is obvious – he was evidently embarrassed by the constant reminder of his sin. The boy is left to fend for himself among bitterly angry and selfish brothers with no mention of his father ever stepping in. He was surrounded by family who ultimately rejected him and discarded him like a piece of trash, saying perhaps, "Sorry, we don't want you. You don't belong here, so take a hike!"

The famous Scottish preacher Dr. Alexander Whyte knew something of Jephthah's pain. He had been born out of wedlock, which, in his day, carried a lifelong stigma. He had to contend with the mockery of boys his age, the scorn of girls, and the whispers of townspeople whenever they saw him in town.

When Alexander was born, his mother gave him his father's surname. She raised him in poverty, but with deep spiritual piety. In time, he became apprenticed to a shoemaker and through hard work, he was able to study at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh.

Dr. Whyte's preaching was marked by a keen sensitivity to the evils of his day, as well as a profound identification with those who suffered. In the course of his ministry, he preached on most of the people of the Bible. His popular character studies were put to print and I have the privilege of owning a set myself. I thought it would be interesting to read what he had to say about Jephthah. Listen to what he writes and notice the way Alexander identifies with and almost defends this man:

Jephthah was the most ill-used man in all the Old Testament, and he continues to be the most completely misunderstood, misrepresented, and ill-used man down to this day. . . buffeted about from his birth by his brothers; trampled upon by all men, but most of all by the men of his father's house; called all manner of odious and exasperating names; when a prophet came to dine, he was sent away to the fields to be out of sight.

The iron had entered his soul while yet he lay in his mother's womb; and both his father and his brothers and the elders of Israel helped forward Jephthah's affliction, till the Lord rose up for Jephthah and said, "It is enough"; took the iron out of His servant's soul, and poured oil and wine into the lifelong wound.

Wow! This is a man who understood!

If there is anyone hearing this who identifies – perhaps enduring the pain of rejection; the consequences of similar sin – I want you to know the story is about to change. The grace of God is about to reverse the order. Jephthah will become an encouragement to you that no matter what stains the pages of your past, God's grace can condescend to the

deepest pit and pick you up and set your feet on solid ground!

As far as Israel was concerned, Jephthah was beyond the grace of God!

One other phrase provides additional insight into this. Look at Judges 11:7. The elders come to Jephthah asking for his help, which we will look at more in a moment. Notice, however, what Jephthah said to the elders.

Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me from my father's house? . . ."

So there is someone else involved in this. Imagine what this day must have been like. The elders make a trip to Gilead's house – with their collars starched crisp and white and buttoned tight; their Bibles held tightly under their arms – and they knock on the door.

Perhaps they are invited into the parlor, while Jephthah is outside and can hear the low murmur of voices. He knows he is the topic of a conversation that went something like, "Gilead, that son of a harlot is an embarrassment to the community. And your reputation is at stake. It would be best if you made him leave!"

Jephthah's father evidently listened. So with Gilead weakly apologizing, his brothers hurling insults, and his mother not even around to say goodbye, he leaves his home and heads for Tob.

Tob was a desolate place. The name could be rendered, "without any trees". It was an empty wilderness where all the rejected, unloved lived.

Jephthah becomes a partial illustration of Christ's own story. Jesus was born amid the slurs of an immoral mother. In fact, in His later days, it would be the religious pietists who would say to Him that He did not have a well-bred birth. His mother had conceived out of wedlock and they refuted His claims of deity. He was also rejected by His half brothers. It was not until His resurrection that they would believe Him. He was rejected as well, by His hometown – in fact, the entire nation would send Him to the cross. What an illustration that this man also,

. . . was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . (Isaiah 53:3)

We are not given much in these first few verses of Judges 11, but we are given enough to recognize that Jephthah was an outcast. He was unaccepted; he was

unloved; he was unwanted by everyone except those who were also unwanted. He was a boy who grew up believing that he was worthless trash. So he made his home among others who had been told the same lie.

However, the grace of God comes. It is not given to those who think they deserve it – it is undeserved favor and is given to people like Jephthah.

The unbelievable grace of God does not care about parentage. It is not limited by the social, parental, and environmental factors that men consider determinative.

If Jephthah's life shouts anything, it is the words, "You *do not* have to be a prisoner of your past!"

The Spirit of God gives grace independently of whether or not your parents received it. No matter how desperate; no matter how sinful, God's grace can save and anoint you to serve!"

Gary Inrig, an author whom I have been reading on the book of Judges, received a letter from a missionary friend in Ethiopia. This friend told Gary about two men who planted and pastored churches among the unreached tribes. These were national men who were eking out an existence on their pay of twenty dollars a month by their supporting churches. Gary commented that their applications to become missionaries would never have been accepted by American mission societies.

One of the men is named Arshe. He is twenty-five and has deformed hands – each has six fingers. He has only a sixth grade education and his wife has tuberculosis. Gary Inrig's friend visited Arshe and said he had baptized twenty-four people in one month.

The other man is named Indreas. He has only a fourth grade education and his wife is a former barmaid. He also has four children – one tragically deformed with a hunchback. He preaches in a small church that requires two days of travel from the nearest town. Gary's friend said, "The last time I went to his church, I attended the baptism of eighty-eight new believers."

God is not impressed by the same kind of person that we are impressed with. He works on an entirely different scale!

Jephthah's Swift Promotion – Grace Revealed

The next stage in Jephthah's life reveals the expression of God's grace. Jephthah is sought out by those who had sent him away. Let us discover the reason why. Look back at Judges 10:17-18.

Then the sons of Ammon were summoned and they camped in Gilead. And the sons of Israel gathered together, and camped in Mizpah. 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."

The people are without a strong leader. Frankly, they do not have a fighter with the guts to face the sons of Ammon.

Skip to Judges 11:4-5.

And it came about after a while that the sons of Ammon fought against Israel. When the sons of Ammon fought against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob;

Do you catch the irony in this?! This is great! I will bet there was a lot of stuttering and coughing and staring at the ground! Continue to Judges 11:6-7.

and they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our chief that we might 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?"

This is a valid question! It is totally ignored by the elders. Look at Judges 11:8.

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."

These elders, at this point, will not even tell Jephthah that they really need a strong leader – and he is it. They just tell him that they want to invite him to come with them and, by the way, to become the head of the inhabitants of Gilead.

I would imagine Jephthah getting a little steamed, gritting his teeth, and responding, "Forget you! It's your problem and I frankly hope the sons of Ammon wipe you out. You hated me and kicked me out of Gilead. You and my father and my half brothers are

now in trouble and you want help. I hope you get what you really deserve. You can take a hike! As far as I am concerned, you can die on the battlefield. You hate me and I hate you!”

Instead, the most amazing thing happens in Judges 11:11.

Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them . . .

Note that we do not read of any apology from the elders; they do not say, “Jephthah, we were wrong about you. We were sanctimonious hypocrites. Would you forgive us? We are so sorry.”

No. The elders ignored the issue entirely.

However, Jephthah still decides to return and lead the Gileadites to war. He risks his own life for those who could not care less about his.

This tells us a couple of things about Jephthah. At this moment:

1. Jephthah chose to hurdle his past.

I have no doubt that there was a great struggle in his own soul, but at this moment in time, he decides to forget the things that are behind and press forward. Apology or not, Jephthah will serve God.

2. Jephthah chose to help those who had refused to help him.

I will bet his buddies in Tob thought he was crazy! They probably said, “You’re going to go help your father and half brothers and those stuffy elders?! Let Gilead burn! They have it coming!”

However, Jephthah chose to show grace to those who had withheld grace from him. That is unbelievable too.

What made Jephthah big enough to make this decision and do these things? The last part of Judges 11:11 gives it away!

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.

Do you know what this tells us? That although everyone had abandoned Jephthah, he knew God had not. He had somehow maintained a walk with God that was open and transparent. And on the eve of this incredibly swift promotion from unwanted to wanted; from unaccepted to accepted, Jephthah gets alone with

God and has a conversation. Perhaps he says, “Lord, You’ll never believe what just happened to me! They want me, Lord, they need me. They even invited me to be their chief. Thank you, God. I’ll go and fight for Your cause and for Your name’s sake!”

It is unbelievable grace for God to choose Jephthah and it is unbelievable grace for Jephthah to go!

Another Illustration of Grace

Now we will look at Jephthah’s vow in the last part of Judges 11 in our next discussion. Today, I want to show another illustration of grace that, like Jephthah’s, has much to say to you and me.

Please turn to II Samuel 4:4. This story is about Mephibosheth, the grandson of King Saul and the son of Jonathan.

When Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle, Mephibosheth was five years old. His nurse snatched up this little boy to run from the enemy. In her haste, she accidentally dropped him and caused permanent damage to his legs. He was crippled and had to use crutches for the rest of his life. Look at II Samuel 4:4.

Now Jonathan, Saul’s son, had a son crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the report of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled. And it happened that in her hurry to flee, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.

Nothing is heard about him or from him in fifteen to twenty years – until David ascends the throne. David makes a rather unusual announcement. Turn to II Samuel 9:1.

Then David said, “Is there yet anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?”

The Hebrew word for “kindness” is “hesed,” which could be translated, “grace”.

David’s leadership is a refreshing change from Saul’s bitter, jealous leadership. There is justice and prosperity. He ascends the throne, never having tasted defeat in battle. His kingdom is flourishing – there is a chicken in every pot and two chariots in every driveway.

David in his bountiful attitude, asked if there was anyone left from his old enemy’s household that he could show grace to. He did not ask if there was

anyone qualified among Saul's household – he asked if there was anyone left because he wanted to show grace to them.

Listen to the response of David's servant in II Samuel 9:2-3.

Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and they called him to David; and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" And he said, "I am your servant." The king said, "Is there not yet anyone of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness [grace] of God?" And Ziba said to the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan who is crippled in both feet."

We can almost hear in Ziba's words, "There is a son of Jonathan, but he's crippled in both feet – you don't want him."

Continue to II Samuel 9:4.

So the king said to him, "Where is he?" And Ziba said to the king, "Behold, he is in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel in Lo-debar."

"Lo-debar" means, "a barren place". This cripple is hidden away. Continue to II Samuel 9:5-6.

Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar. Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and prostrated himself. And David said, "Mephibosheth." And he said, "Here is your servant!"

Mephibosheth is terrified. He knew that it was the practice at this time, to wipe out potential heirs. He also knew that Saul had hated David. David then, had every reason to wipe out Saul's family. So Mephibosheth stumbles forward, throws his crutches to the side, falls on his face and says, "I am your servant."

Look at David's response in II Samuel 9:7.

David said to him, "Do not fear, for I will surely show kindness [grace] to you for the sake of your father Jonathan, and will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul; and you shall eat at my table regularly."

This is the first time of four that David says, "You shall eat at my table regularly."

Continue to II Samuel 9:8.

Again he prostrated himself and said, "What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?"

This is a descriptive term for the most despicable thing around – a dead, decaying dog. Mephibosheth says, "I'm just a decaying dog; I'm trash. Why would you want me?"

Look at II Samuel 9:9-11.

Then the king called Saul's servant Ziba and said to him, "All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. You and your sons and your servants shall cultivate the land for him, and you shall bring in the produce so that your master's grandson may have food; nevertheless Mephibosheth your master's grandson shall eat at my table regularly." . . . Then Ziba said to the king, "According to all that my lord the king commands his servant so your servant will do." So Mephibosheth ate at David's table as one of the king's sons.

Skip to II Samuel 9:13.

So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate at the king's table regularly. Now he was lame in both feet.

Can you imagine this scene in the dining room of the king, with all the servants attending? There is David seated in royal splendor. Then comes Solomon, the brilliant heir apparent, walking across the courtyard to find his seat. Lovely, queen-like Tamar comes and finds her seat. Here comes rugged, handsome Absalom – he grabs a chair and sits. Perhaps visiting that evening is Joab, the muscular, bronze general of the forces. Then, there is the "clump, clump, clump" sound of crutches as Mephibosheth makes his way across the dining room and shuffles into a chair to eat with the king.

Mephibosheth had nothing; he had done nothing; he deserved nothing – that is the whole point of grace.

He received grace from the king's hand because he was the son of the king's friend. In the same way, you and I receive grace from God because we are the friend of His Son, Jesus Christ.

I think of John Newton, who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace". You are probably familiar with this man's unusual story. I read this past week that he

said there would be three wonders about heaven that would amaze him when he got there. He said:

1. the first will be the number of people who are there that I did not expect to see;
2. the second will be the number of people who are not there that I expected to see;
3. the third and greatest wonder of all will be to find myself there!

Ladies and gentlemen, this is unbelievable grace. John Newton would pen the words that we sing:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Why? Because of God's unbelievable grace.

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