

Jephthah & Co. : Leadership & Folly

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[0 : 00] Well, here we go. What does it look like for a nation to be ruled by fools? I'm sure for most of you as I ask this question, your thoughts go to this guy.

It seems that the whole world is instinctively nervous about someone like Donald Trump ruling one of the largest and most powerful nations in the world. People worry because he's so impulsive and he doesn't even attempt to cover up his shortcomings.

Or even acknowledge them as shortcomings. And we're especially worried because this guy's his opposite number. And the combination of these two men is frankly a concern.

We probably feel then we don't really need to be taught what it looks like for a nation to be ruled by fools. But we actually do. We need to be shown what folly looks like because very often we don't understand what it is actually that folly consists in.

We can easily misjudge what makes a ruler foolish. And this is why the book of Judges is in the Bible. The book of Judges offers us ample illustration of what it looks like for a nation to be ruled by fools.

[1 : 16] What's interesting is that the rulers that we meet all the way through the book of Judges, they're like the curate's egg. They're a mix of good and bad.

They demonstrate both wisdom and folly. I think you can only get a handle on what the book of Judges is trying to teach us when you can see how this is actually part of a much bigger story of wise and foolish leadership.

And the narrative, of course, finds its great climax in Solomon. King Solomon is supremely the wise yet foolish ruler. Which is why the book of Proverbs holds the key to understanding Judges.

The book of Proverbs warns us that a ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor. And we see a bit of that tonight. Proverbs also urges us to see how wisdom is the essence of leadership.

One of the most beautiful passages in Proverbs, I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence. I possess knowledge and discretion. Counsel and sound judgment are mine.

[2 : 24] I have understanding and power. By me, kings reign. And rulers make laws that are just. By me, princes govern. And all nobles who rule on earth.

So Proverbs is very important to understanding the book of Judges. And there are actually very specific Proverbs that put the wisdom and the folly of each of the Judges in a nutshell.

And we'll see how that works out for Jephthah. But before we get to him, let's remind ourselves of what we're up to in the story. We've had a couple of weeks off the madcap story of Judges.

After the disaster of Abimelech, which was a Gideon's son, we have this string of leaders recounted in short succession. And we're told that the Israelites keep turning away from God to worship the local gods, the local idols.

And the Jephthah story begins on the back of this situation. And we find the Eastern Israelites under invasion from the Ammonites. And what's worse, they're leaderless.

- [3 : 25] And so we pick up the story at this point. And the first thing we're shown is the folly of Israel's elite. The elite of Gilead are in a crisis, but they don't ask God for help.
- They need a leader, but there's absolutely no consultation of God whatsoever. Instead, they dangle the carrot of power in front of the masses. In chapter 10, verse 18, chapter 10, verse 18, they say, whoever will launch the attack against the Ammonites will be the head of all of those living in Gilead.
- Now, appealing to the base instincts of power is a surefire way of making sure you don't get a wise leader, isn't it? If you dangle the carrot, you'll get a donkey. And interestingly, there is no donkey foolish enough to take up this offer.
- Instead, they have to go hunting and find the infamous outlaw Jephthah. And so they go and they find Jephthah and repeat the offer to him, and he accepts. But now in their folly, they have a profoundly ill-qualified ruler.
- And the narrator makes this clear by including the detail that Jephthah is the son of a prostitute. Now, what marks Jephthah out as an ill-qualified leader is actually not his pedigree, though.
- [4 : 46] What really marks him out is his folly. And the story goes on to show us this in two select incidents. I'm sure there are many more in his life they could have chosen, but they choose two.
- Jephthah's infamous oath and Jephthah's infamous treatment of his challenges. And it's crucial to recognize, though, that in both of these, we see ways that Jephthah also exercises wisdom.
- And the reason this is so important is that we are supposed to see that it isn't just evil men who are fools. We need to see this if we had let God's Word get some traction on our lives now, this evening, to hear what God is saying in this book.
- It isn't just evil men that act foolishly. People who show some degree of wisdom can still act very foolishly. Even people endowed with the Spirit of God.
- And Jephthah is both of these. And this should make us quiver in our boots. It should make us quiver in our boots because I take it that we, too, are people who show some degree of wisdom in our lives because God has given us of His Holy Spirit if we've put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- [6 : 03] So Jephthah actually looks a lot like us, even though we might not have thought that at first. And if we were to avoid his folly, we need to understand exactly where he went wrong.
- And so to do that, we need to look quite closely at these two incidents, his oath and his treatment of his challenges. Now, the situation of Jephthah's disastrous oath was his admittedly challenging responsibility to take the fight to the Ammonites.
- And it's here that we see some remarkable qualities in the man. I don't know if you noticed that, but we're told that he's some kind of pirate, but we actually see him acting more like a prophet.
- He gives this long speech that started at verse 15 in chapter 11. Jephthah indicts the king of Ammon of his sin. The king of Ammon is accusing Israel of stealing land from him, but Israel has stolen nothing.
- Israel was given that land by God, and it was God who took that land, actually, from the king of the Ammonites. It wasn't the Ammonites at all, and he gave it to Israel. And Jephthah also emphasizes that he is not the great ruler.
- [7 : 18] It is simply God's representative. God, not Jephthah, is the judge of Israel. He's actually the only person in the whole book that says that. God is the judge of Israel, in verse 27.

So like a true prophet, Jephthah publicly entrusts the whole situation to God's ability to defend his own honor. So these are the words of a man upon whom the Spirit of God rests.

And we're told that explicitly in verse 29. God has opened Jephthah's mouth, and that's actually what his name means. In Hebrew, Jephthah means God opened.

So there's puns running all the way through about Jephthah in his big mouth. But God opened. And so we see that. When Jephthah opens his mouth, he speaks wisdom.

But also when Jephthah opens his mouth, he speaks like a fool. Now Jephthah musters the men of Manasseh for war, and on the eve of battle, he makes a vow. In verses 30 and 31, Jephthah says to God, 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 from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.

[8 : 44] It's here that the book of Proverbs really helps us to understand what's going on. Many of you will know it. Proverbs 20 verse 25 warns us, It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.

Now Jephthah is the very definition of a rash vow, isn't it? What we've got to see though is that the rashness of the promise isn't necessarily determined by how quickly it's made. It's possible to make a very well calculated promise in haste.

The rashness of a promise really though is determined by its folly. Now most English Bibles actually smooth over this by using the word whatever.

In English, whatever implies a thing, doesn't it? A thing could be a person, but it isn't necessarily a person. It's here that I think the RSV, did anyone grow up with the RSV?

I remember struggling with that as a nine-year-old trying to read the RSV. But the RSV actually gets it right. Verse 31 in the RSV version, it says, The reason I think that it's really clear to see that the RSV gets it right is that animals don't go out the front door to meet returning conquerors, do they?

[10 : 12] Jephthah is not thinking that his pet dog's going to come bounding up to him and to lick him when he comes home in triumph. In all likelihood, he's thinking of a male servant or a male slave. And that's where actually the gender in Hebrew helps us too.

There's masculine and feminine gender. And Jephthah's vow, we just see, is supremely foolish at this point. Jephthah is promising God a human sacrifice.

What makes this so bad is that he's treating God like Chemosh, the very pagan deity that he's opposing in God's name.

Now remember how this battle was framed as a fight between Chemosh and God. In his wonderful prophetic speech, in verse 24, Jephthah says to the king of Ammon, Will you not take what your God Chemosh gives you?

Likewise, whatever the Lord, our God has given us, we will possess. Now, Chemosh was worshipped with human sacrifices. In 2 Kings chapter 3, we're told how our battle was going very poorly for the king of Moab.

[11 : 21] So he offers up his son as a sacrifice on the city wall. And here we have Jephthah promising to do exactly the same. And it is this total ignorance of God that makes Jephthah so profoundly ill-qualified to lead his people.

And Jephthah and his daughter pay a very high price for this folly. But Jephthah's folly holds more wide-ranging consequences for the nation.

And I think you can get so shocked by what's happened so far with his daughter being sacrificed that you can miss this, that we've got to see it. His folly holds far worse consequences for the nation.

And that's what we're given the two stories, the two little examples. And so we come to the second one. The second example of Jephthah's folly shows us not just how Jephthah himself suffered for his folly, but how he made the nation suffer.

Now like all rulers, all leaders, maybe some leaders here in business will know this well, you encounter challenges, challenges to your authority. And we're told how the unruly Ephraimites, they come after him.

[12 : 32] In chapter 12, verse 1, the Ephraimites come up to Jephthah and they say, why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We're going to burn down your house over your head.

Now Jephthah opens his mouth in folly once more. Jephthah doesn't see that a dispute with God, God's enemies, sorry, a dispute with God's enemies might require a different response to dispute among God's children.

And Jephthah sadly adopts the exact same approach that he did with God's enemies, with the king of the Ammonites. And tragically, this leads to the same outcome, to a war on his fellow Israelites.

Now what we've got to remember, this stands in stark contrast to what Gideon did a few chapters before. Gideon handles the same problem with the same people in chapter 8.

There we see how the Ephraim apps, they come up to Gideon and they accuse him of the same things and he responds with gentle speech. Here again, the book of Proverbs helps us get a handle on what God's trying to teach us here.

[13 : 40] Proverbs 15 verse 1 reminds us, and perhaps many of us know this because we need to be told this many times in the course of a week that a gentle answer turns away wrath.

Jephthah, however, has no gentle words for the Ephraimites. Instead, his anger and his answer stirs up more and more wrath and it precipitates something close to genocide. We're told in verse 6 that Jephthah is responsible for the death of 42,000 Ephraimites.

And here, we're supposed to see something of a sobering comparison with the previous judge of Biblick, if you can cast your minds back to previous weeks. Things are going from bad to worse in Israel.

Abimelech killed thousands of fellow Israelites. Jephthah, however, kills tens of thousands. And the point is simply that Jephthah lacks the wisdom of Gideon and his folly vastly outweighs that of Abimelech.

So things are going from bad to worse and just to keep this thought in your mind as we go into the sermon series further over the next weeks and the closing chapters, we see a repeat of these same stories but in a more dissonant key.

[14 : 59] We see the shameful treatment of another girl and the genocide of another tribe. It's good to keep that in view as we keep going. So the story of Jephthah is an object lesson in what it looks like for a nation to be ruled by fools.

But what are we to make of all this? I heard that Neil was being a bit cheeky this morning saying probably how I'd apply the passage. How does it connect with our lives? At a very basic level, actually agree with Neil, I think he's right.

Don't try this at home. Don't sacrifice your daughter. Jephthah is clearly not an example to follow, is he? But I doubt anybody here really will find themselves tempted, you know, to make that promise to offer a human sacrifice through the week when things are getting tough.

It's the bizarreness of these stories that can make it really hard to miss the point that they're making. But if we do take that effort to scratch the surface a bit, it's actually not too hard to see how it gets traction on our lives.

The Bible shows us these two sides to Jephthah's folly, the personal and the public. Did you notice how Jephthah's rash vow cost him dearly, but it didn't hold any consequences for the nation?

[16 : 19] And how his rash treatment of the Ephraimites held devastating consequences for the nation, but it actually didn't affect Jephthah. We're shown both his personal and public consequences of his folly.

And if we follow this through, it actually becomes pretty clear how these consequences also hold implications for us. Let's just think about the personal side of things first. Ignorance of God is what lay at the root of Jephthah's rash vow.

Jephthah acted foolishly because he was ignorant of how God should be worshipped. This dynamic of ignorance leading to folly, I'd like to suggest is every bit as real for us as it was for Jephthah.

Like Jephthah, we too need to know how God is to be worshipped. Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your spiritual act of worship. So in the same way that Jephthah acted in folly because he didn't know the answer to this question, what does it mean to actually offer your body as a living sacrifice?

[17 : 39] What does it mean to worship God? What does it mean? Because Jephthah couldn't actually answer that question, he acted in folly. And we too will act in folly if we do not know the answer to this question.

Our lives will be a blasphemous act of worship if, like Jephthah, we are ignorant of what pleases God. So how are we to know what pleases God?

The answer is incredibly simple. God has told us. He's told us in the Bible all we need to do is to listen to him. In this regard, a really troubling aspect of contemporary evangelicalism is the increasing retreat of Scripture in church services, especially the Old Testament.

In many, if not most, contemporary evangelical churches, the only Scripture that's read is the ten or so verses that forms the basis of a sermon. And this is a fairly recent development.

It's only happened in the last 20 or so years. In the church I grew up, there was always an Old Testament reading and a New Testament reading. And the service usually began with a psalm.

[18 : 53] I'm getting grey hair, but I'm actually not that old. It's only in the last 20 years that things have changed. But in evangelical churches today, that would be a rarity. An Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading, and a psalm.

That would be a rarity. And this is a troubling development because the Bible is to be the mirror that shows us whether our worship is pleasing to God.

And if the Bible takes a back seat in our church services, how will we know whether our worship is in fact pleasing to God? There's a very real temptation though to be lured into thinking, oh, it could never happen to us.

We could never possibly be led into Jephthah's folly. But think about it. Jephthah was no liturgical innovator. Sacrifice was the right way to worship God.

And Jephthah thought he was offering the most preeminently valuable sacrifice he could think of. The life of a person is infinitely more valuable than that of an animal, isn't it? The Bible even says that.

[19 : 53] Why else would the Chemosh worshippers offer up their children? See, Jephthah was offering up worship par excellence. And however alien it might seem, there is a logic to what Jephthah did.

He was only sorry that it was his daughter that came out the front door, not one of his servants. And in his cultural context, that vow made perfect sense.

And we too can be convinced that we are offering up the most valuable worship there could be. And with our cultural frame of reference, it will all make perfect sense. But this is precisely why we have to be on our guard.

There is always logic to folly. It always makes sense. It's the only reason we ever do foolish things. We only ever act foolishly because it seemed like a good idea at the time.

And there is always this logic to folly. And the only thing that is capable of unhinging that logic is the Word of God. Jephthah's worship made sense, but it was not guided by the Word of God.

[20 : 58] Jephthah had plainly never heard Deuteronomy chapter 18, verse 10. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire.

Had he heard this, it would have cut across the logic of his worship like the knife that passed across his daughter's throat. But what verses of Scripture might there be that cut across the logic of our worship?

Which passages of Scripture would shine a light on what in our worship is unpleasing to God or profoundly unwise? And I like to suggest in the same way that Jephthah couldn't know what he didn't know, we too cannot know what we don't know.

We will not be able to recognize where there's a mismatch between our worship and what is pleasing to God unless we cultivate a deep familiarity with what God sets out in his word.

Now if we want to avoid this kind of mismatch between what we think is pleasing to God and what is in fact pleasing to God, we need to make it our business to familiarize ourselves with every nook and cranny of the word of God.

[22 : 13] This will keep us from the kind of ignorance that led to Jephthah's folly. Now one practical way of checking whether we are doing this is simply asking ourselves questions like when was the last time I read the book of Judges or to Peter or Zephaniah or, or, or?

One of the things I do to make sure that I can answer this question is I make a photocopy of the contents page of my Bible and as I read the scriptures by myself through the week I cross off put a line through one of the books of the Bible on that sheet and eventually I work my way through all of it and when I'm done I photocopy the contents page again and start crossing off books once again.

I do this so that I don't leave bits out so that I don't end up just gaining a lopsided picture of who God is and a lopsided picture of what actually pleases Him.

I can know that wherever I do develop this lopsided picture of God and everybody does it will only be a matter of time before I come across the verses that will challenge that conception of God that is faulty.

And this is something that churches can do too churches can order the public reading of their scripture in such a way that there won't be passages of scripture that their congregations have simply never heard. One of the most stunning things for me as a pastor over four years was we had a reading of one of the most famous stories of King Solomon and there was a woman in our church who had a theological qualification and she said I've never heard that story before.

[23 : 54] That was a stunning moment of what I'm saying is it's not made up. There is a profound retreat of the scriptures in evangelicalism and even someone could hear for the first time as an adult one of the most well-known stories of the life of Solomon.

So in a very practical way we can learn I think from this personal dimension of Jephthah's folly just to take an audit of our ignorance. If Jephthah had Deuteronomy on his reading list he would never have made that vow.

It's as simple as that. Now that's the personal side. But you see Jephthah's folly had a very public side and I think it's hard for us to feel this but I actually think this is the weight in the book of Judges.

His actions held disastrous consequences for the nation. Absolutely disastrous consequences because he was a ruler. Now none of us are rulers.

I know some of us work with rulers but none of us actually are rulers. Even if we were there would be very important differences between the first minister of Scotland being the first minister and being a ruler of the tribes of Israel.

[25 : 03] But what's exactly the same is that we like the people of Israel stand to suffer if our nation is led into folly. This is why the Apostle Paul tells us that we should uphold our rulers in prayer.

In his first letter to Timothy Paul writes, I urge then, first of all, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and for all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

This is good and pleases God our Saviour who wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Because we stand to suffer under foolish leadership, Paul makes it really clear that we should pray for our rulers.

We should pray for them so that life can proceed under normal conditions. And note how this is linked to people coming to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus. It pleases God that we can live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness because God wants all men to be saved.

Now of course God is still capable of saving people in the midst of chaos, but from what Paul says, I think we can take it that peace and stability is what allows the gospel to flourish.

[26 : 23] And so we should be praying for Nicola Sturgeon and for the SNP. We should be praying for Theresa May and the Conservative Party. Irrespective of whether we support the agenda of these parties, their leaders deserve our prayers.

And we should pray, especially on behalf of our brothers and sisters around the world for the leaders of the less stable countries in the world. If things get out of hand between Donald Trump and King Jong-un, our Asian brothers and sisters stand to suffer tremendously.

Who can imagine what would unfold if the shenanigans we see in the papers actually escalated into some kind of armed conflict? Paul reminds us that we should pray, first of all, that all Christians can live quiet and godly lives and that this will result in a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, a saving knowledge of his gospel.

So as we leave church tonight, I think we need to remind ourselves once more that it's not just evil men that can act foolishly. I think that's actually the key to letting this really come home.

even people endowed with the Spirit of God can act foolishly. And the story of Jephthah is a good reminder. We shouldn't think that we're somehow immune to folly.

[27 : 40] And let's take note of the core problem of Jephthah's folly. Take that into the coming week. It was ignorance that led to his rash promise. And we too will act foolishly if we are ignorant of what is pleasing to God.

And we stand to suffer personally if we fail to uphold the leaders of our nations in prayer. But a failure to uphold our leaders in prayer risks hindrance to the progress of the gospel.

In the book of Jephthah we're given this portrait of what it looks like when a nation is ruled by fools. Why don't we pray that we'll be delivered from that being replicated in our lifetime.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Loving Lord Jesus we ask that you would preserve our lives from folly.

Fill us with the wisdom that comes from an intimate knowledge of you through your word and empower us Father to walk in wisdom.

[28 : 41] We pray Father that you would do that in our lives at a personal level. We also pray Father that you would have mercy on rulers of our nation of the nations of our brothers and sisters.

We ask this according to Jesus' name. Amen.