



Central Peninsula Church

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Judges 10:6–12:7
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A Father's Story of Triumph and Tragedy

Sometimes it's hard to be a father. One of things that makes it hard is that things are changing so rapidly in our society. 100 years ago life wasn't nearly as complicated for fathers. Someone has written:

In 1900, a father waited for the doctor to tell him when the baby arrived. Today, a father must wear a smock, know how to breathe, and make sure film is in the video camera.

In 1900, fathers passed on clothing to their sons. Today, kids wouldn't touch dad's clothes if they were sliding naked down an icicle.

In 1900, fathers could count on children to join the family business. Today, fathers pray their kids will soon come home from college long enough to teach them how to work the computer and set the VCR.

In 1900, a father smoked a pipe. If he tries that today, he gets sent outside after a lecture on lip cancer.

In 1900, if a father had breakfast in bed, it was eggs and bacon and ham and potatoes. Today, it's Special K, soy milk, dry toast and a lecture on cholesterol.

In 1900, fathers pined for the old school, which meant a one-room, red brick building. Today, fathers pine for the old school, which means Dr. J and Mickey Mantle.

This morning, as we continue our study in the book of Judges, we are introduced to a father who probably had it more than any of us. As a father, his is a story of both triumph and tragedy.

I. The story of Jephthah (Judges 10:6–12:7)

A. Another Judges cycle (10:6-18): Let me recount the story for you in my own words, with a little sanctified embellishment. You can follow along with me in the text if you like, but there is far too much for me to read it all. In 10:6 another cycle begins. Remember this familiar cycle? It's more than a cycle, though, it's a downward spiral. Once again, Israel falls into sin and idolatry; once again God hands them over to their enemies; and once again they become miserable enough to cry out to the Lord for help. But this time the Lord doesn't respond so quickly. This time he says to them, "We've been through this before. I keep delivering you from these nations and you keep going back and worshipping their gods. Why don't you go see if they'll help you?" You see, God wants more than just 911 calls; he wants genuine change. He wants repentance. And

Israel finally gets the message. In v. 16 we're told they finally put away their foreign gods and served the Lord. But Israel was still in deep trouble, particularly on the east side of the Jordan river, in an area inhabited by the tribe of Gilead. The Ammonites gathered together to attack Gilead, and leaders of Gilead knew they had no choice but to fight. But who would be their leader in battle?

B. Jephthah is introduced (11:1-3): This is where Jephthah comes in. He's introduced in ch. 11. He was from this same area of Gilead. His father was an important man, but his mother was a harlot. If Jephthah had been a girl, she would have gone with her mother, but since he was the first born son, he stayed with his father. The father went on to marry a decent woman, and they had sons of their own. Bad news for Jephthah. I can see him trailing after his stepmother when they were going to the village. The town nudgers would say, "There goes that little 'you know what.'" His half-brothers never tired of telling him, "You'll never amount to anything!" Maybe he believed them. Finally his brothers said to him, "You get out of here. You're an embarrassment to our family. You won't inherit our father's lands. We want nothing to do with you!" He left and dwelt in a cave with a bunch of fellow outcasts. They probably lived a wild life, and Jephthah developed a reputation for being a man you didn't want to fool with. He was Clint Eastwood and John Wayne rolled into one man.

C. Jephthah is recruited (11:4-11): But there was still this problem with the Ammonites. The Israelites had forgotten how to fight, so they said, "Let's hire some mercenaries." They asked, "Where can we find mercenaries?" Finally, in the City Council meeting where all of Jephthah's stepbrothers were, someone suggested, "Why don't we hire Jephthah?" So a group of them went out, including I suspect, his stepbrothers. I can see the young Jephthah up in his cave when one of his fellow renegades came back to say, "You won't believe who is here!" The negotiating committee marched in and said, "We have a business proposition for you." Jephthah said, "What can I do for you, gentlemen? I'm sorry there aren't enough places to sit down, but you see I've been sort of forced to live in this cave." They said, "We want to hire you to lead us in attacking the Ammonites." Jephthah said, "Gee, you didn't need me before. Why do you come running to me now?" Jephthah's no fool, so he engages

in a little backroom political bargaining. "I'll do it on one condition. That when I return home triumphant, I'll get to be your chief." I can just see these men grinding their teeth. It's one thing to ask somebody like that to work for you. It's another to tell him he can be your boss when he comes home. But the deal was made.

D. Jephthah negotiates with Ammon (11:12-28): Now, as I said, Jephthah is no fool, and the first thing he does, instead of rushing off into battle, is try to negotiate peace with the Ammonites. Remember, this is on the east side of the Jordan. It really wasn't part of the Promised Land proper. There was plenty of room for everyone. So he sent messengers to the King of Ammon, "Why are you trying to take our land. Why don't we try to work this out?" The King says, "Because years ago when you guys came out of Egypt this land belonged to us and you took it from us. Now give it back." Kind of sounds familiar, doesn't it? But Jephthah isn't buying it. He sends the messengers back again, this time with a history lesson. Basically, he says, "You guys didn't have this land first; the Ammonites did. Without provocation they attacked Israel. When the Lord gave Israel victory, the land became ours. And by the way, we've been here for 300 years. Why haven't you said anything before this?" He even throws a little theology in, "It was our God who gave us that victory and this land that went with it. You have a god, too. Why don't you just stay in the land he's given you?"

E. Jephthah makes a rash and faithless vow (11:29-31): But the King of Ammon wasn't buying it, and the troops prepared for battle. On the night before the battle, two things happened. First, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah as he rallied the troops. We don't know exactly what this looked like or felt like, but it was a supernatural infusion of strength that would allow him to defeat his enemies. The second thing that happened is that he prayed. But this wasn't just a prayer for help; it was Jephthah trying to make still another deal. He's back at the bargaining table. He says, "Lord, if you will help me with the battle, when I come back to my house in town I will give you whoever comes out of my door first as a burnt offering."

F. Jephthah's triumph is met by tragedy (11:32-40): There was silence on the other end, but with that vow he went out and fought the battle. And he won. And he came home. Like the Pistons returning to Detroit after their conquest of the Lakers, he could expect to be greeted with a ticker tape parade. As he approached his house, certainly one of

his servants would come out first to present him with his robe and his symbols of honor. But wait a minute. Who is that? No, it can't be! In front of the procession skipped out Jephthah's lovely, charming daughter; his only child. She ran to her father and instead of being greeted with open arms, he recoiled, "Do you know what you've done to me?" Small potatoes as to what he would do to her. "Do you know what you have done to me?" How many parents have asked that question? He went on, "I made a vow to God and I cannot go back on it." Most daughters would have said, "Big deal. Just break it." But she said, "Okay, but first let me go up into the mountains to meditate and mourn what life could have been." And so she did, and she came back. We would have kept on going. But she said if that's what you vowed, that's what you've got to do. And he so he kept his vow and sacrificed his only child.

Jephthah judged Israel for six more years before he died. He had the job he always wanted. From what we read in chapter 12 he became a calloused and hardened man. He had the job he always wanted, but he was deprived of the family he always needed. This is a tragic story. And you're probably wondering what this story means for us today, especially on this day when we honor fathers.

II. The worst thing we can do for our kids

A. Jephthah had a sincere faith in God: Indeed, there a lot of good things about Jephthah. There is a lot about him that we fathers would do well to emulate. It's clear from this story that Jephthah had a sincere faith in God. Despite his background, perhaps because of his background, this despised son of a prostitute became a man of faith. In 11:9 when he was bargaining with the elders of Gilead he asked, "**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 then in v. 11 when they made him chief we're told, "**Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.**" We see his faith as he recounts Israel's history. And he concludes his message to the king of Ammon with these words in v. 27, "**I therefore have not sinned against you, but you are doing me wrong by making war against me; may the LORD, the Judge, judge today between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon.**" This son of a harlot, this redeemed outcast, has the faith and insight to tell us who the REAL Judge is in Israel! Finally, in a rather strange and twisted way, he shows his faith in keeping his vow. Don't get me wrong, it was the wrong thing to do, but sometimes we can do the wrong thing for the right reasons. As we'll see, he should have never made that vow, but Scripture says when you make a vow to God, you'd better take that seriously. Psalm 15 talks about about a man who "**keeps his oath even when it hurts**" (Ps. 15:4). Our problem today is rarely misguided religious devotion; rather it's no devotion at all. Today we would just say, "Oh yeah, I made that promise,

but I didn't really mean it. And certainly God understands that I had no idea it would be my only daughter." And isn't his faith reflected in his daughter? Like her father, she knew that a vow must be kept.

B. Jephthah experienced success: Not only was he a man of faith, but he was a man of success. And it was a success that the Lord gave him. It was the Spirit of God who gave him victory over the Ammonites. Verse 32 says, **"the LORD gave them into his hand."** Success isn't always a bad thing. Here was a man despised and rejected by his own family. Homeless and forced to live in caves with other misfits. But through his courage and skill as a warrior, his slick skills in negotiation, and his charisma, he rises to the top. That's not always a bad thing. There are men and women in this church family who came from nothing. Nobody handed you anything. You worked hard and you made some tough choices and you've provided well for your family. There's nothing wrong with that. You could even make a case for the fact that he did all for his family. Here was a man who never really had the love and support of a father and mother, trying to provide for his only child some of the things he was deprived of. There's nothing wrong with that.

C. Jephthah sacrificed what mattered most to him: But the tragic irony of the story is that in the end he lost the very thing that mattered the most to him. At the end of his life, when he looked back, who would argue that he would gladly trade a lifetime of worldly success for one more day with his daughter. In the end, he's an example of the worst thing a father can do to his kid, which is to make your child the victim of your own success. We should ask the question, why? Why did he do this? I see three factors.

1. His own personal baggage: The first is what I would call his own personal baggage. I don't mean to play amateur psychologist, but you can't help but see that Jephthah was a man who carried with him some unfinished business from his past. In every generation the family system that we grow up in does more to shape us than anything else. His mother was a harlot, used by who knows how many men, who had no place in that society. He had no place either. This rejection damaged and scarred him. The needs, hurts, uncertainties, sorrows, memories, and whisperings from the past were all part of the baggage he carried with him into adulthood. You see it in his bargaining with the elders of Gilead. The first thing he did was bring up the past, **"Did you not hate me and drive me from my father's house"** (v. 7). He didn't trust them; he didn't trust anyone. He says, "What happens after I lead you in victory? Will I be cast out again?" He was trying to undo the pain of the past. This is why he became such a driven man, willing to do almost anything to succeed. The

sad thing is he didn't even know it.

2. His own skills as a negotiator: The second factor which got him into trouble started out as an asset. Throughout this story you can see that Jephthah had a way with words. He was a skilled negotiator. He bargains with the elders of Gilead. Then, before he goes to war, he tries to negotiate with the King of Ammon. It's really quite a speech, especially for a man who lacked formal education. He understood history, politics and theology. People today wonder why Israel should have any more right to that Land than anyone else. You should read Jephthah's message to the king of Ammon. He had a way with words. If you were a car salesman, you wouldn't want this man on the other side of the bargaining table. That was a skill. That was an asset. He even passed this skill on to his daughter. She negotiates with him: "Just give me two months with my friends to grieve the fact that I will never have a family." But sometimes our assets can become liabilities. Jephthah took that skill and tried to use it to bargain with God. "God, if you will give me victory, then I will offer up to you as a burnt offering the first thing out of my house." He probably thought, how could God possibly resist a deal like that?" But this is where his faith is seen to be lacking. I mean, had not the Spirit of God already come upon him? Wasn't that enough to ensure him victory? Just keep your mouth shut and fight. God will do the rest.

3. His own misunderstanding of God: Which leads to the third factor which got him into trouble. He had a basic misunderstanding of God. He thought God could be bought off. In a certain way, he thought God to be much harder and stingier than he actually is. Without some costly offering on the table, how could God possibly bless him with victory? He may have even looked back on his past and thought, how could God possibly bless me without some kind of payment? He may have thought, "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. You had better make an offer to God he can't refuse." The sad thing is, the real tragedy, is that he could have had it all! He could have had success in battle and his daughter too! God is that good. God is that generous.

As fathers, we would never make the conscious choice to offer up our children on the altar of our own drive to succeed. We never intend to do this, but it happens all the time. And countless men look back at the end of their lives and think, "If I could just do it over.

I'd do it different. I would give up everything if I could just have my kids back at age 10." How can we prevent this from happening?

III. The Need to Step Back

I think the answer is simple. The answer is to STEP BACK. Not just once, say at mid-life, but as a part of our daily lives. Step back. Step back and examine your life; examine these three areas of your life that we have just mentioned. Examine them in light of the Word of God.

Examine your desire for success. What really drives you? For the past couple of years I've met with men on Thursday mornings in a group called Men's Fraternity. One of things we've talked about is what we call our suitcase. Every man carries around a suitcase with wounds from his past. Some of us have an absent father wound. Our dad just wasn't there for us. The important thing is not to get rid of the suitcase, but to unpack it. To step back long enough take a look at the baggage we're carrying around with us. Even those who come from the best homes, who have the most support, and who have been deeply cared for have some whisperings from the past that make us believe that we're not good enough, make us long for the acceptance of others, and drive us to succeed. If we don't do that, often times it's our kids who pay the price. If it's not our own success that drives us, it's theirs.

In one of the early scenes from the movie, *Forrest Gump*, Forrest's mom, played by Sally Fields, visits Mr. Hancock, the principle of the Greenbough County Central School. Mrs. Gump wants to enroll her son, but the principal informs her that the state of Alabama requires an IQ of 80 to attend public school. Forrest has an IQ of only 75. But Mrs. Gump insists on enrolling Forrest. She says, "My boy Forrest is going to get the same opportunities as everyone else. He's not going to a special school to learn how to retread tires. We're talking about five little points. There must be something that can be done." There is. Forrest's mom ends up in bed with Mr. Hancock. Later, he tells Forrest. "Your mama sure does care about your schoolin', son." That scene reminds me that not only can we sacrifice our children on the altar of our own success, but we can also sacrifice our integrity, our commitments, even our own faith on the altar of their own success. In either case, it's usually an unpacked suitcase that is at the root.

We should also step back and examine our words. Like Jephthah, some of us are pretty good with words. But our greatest assets can become a liability. Jephthah was wrong to make a vow that led him into sin. God's word prohibited his people from sacrificing human life to him. He should have weighed his words against God's word. He should have weighed his promise against God's promise. But at the same time he also shows us the importance of a word given; a promise made. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said not to play with our words. They're not trivial things. Don't make a vow carelessly or needlessly, which is exactly what Jephthah did. How many sons and daughters have been betrayed by their father's words? Step back. Have you promised something to your son or daughter that you haven't delivered on? Have you given up trying, hoping they will forget?

Finally, step back and examine your assumptions about God. Sometimes our kids pay for our own wrong thinking about God. If you think you have to earn God's blessing, you will project that on your kids, and you will make them earn your blessing. Scripture says he has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. It says by his precious and great promises he has granted to us all things pertaining to life and godliness. It doesn't matter where we've come from or what baggage we carry, God's intention is to bless us beyond anything we could ask or think. God is the ultimate promise keeper. You don't have to bribe him for his blessing. You don't have to offer up anything. He offered up his only son for you and there is nothing that you did to make him want to do that.

The worst thing you can do for your kids is to offer them up on the altar of your own success. The best thing you can do is step back. Unpack your suitcase. Watch and weigh your words. And examine your assumptions about God.

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