

Judges 11: 29-40
Message #4 in the series "Whose Verse is it Anyway?"

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Good morning. I'm Pastor John. I'm the pastor of Care and Connections here at St Paul's. And as you all know, these last few years have been a challenge to connecting and so we have a lot of work to do. But I'm very thankful for St Paul's willingness to follow God and to even forge new connections during a difficult time. You know, someone asked me this past week, okay, so how do you prepare for an extemporaneous sermon? And I said, well, I haven't done it yet. So not sure exactly how to pray besides praying that nobody asks for a verse from Obadiah. So that's kind of been where my prayers have focused. But actually, I said, you know, I do know what I think about what God wants us to do when we preach in general. And I think that the rules kind of apply to even extemporaneous preaching. And this is kind of illustrated for me by an experience I had when I was in Nashville about 20 years ago, had the opportunity to go down to Nashville. And when you go to Nashville, you will find all types of music. Don't just think you're going for country music down in Nashville. I was in a mall and in one section of the mall. There was a classical pianist playing. Another section of the mall there was a flutist playing. Another part there was a jazz guitarist singing original songs. Everybody in Nashville is a musician. You go to the CVS and the cashier is trying to sell your CD, you know, for \$5. If you're interested in music, everybody heads down to Nashville to get discovered. But at the Grand Ole Opry and when I was there, I'm not sure they do this every night, but I think every Friday night when you go to the Grand Ole Opry, you are going to see recorded for radio and for TV, half hour segments, which is a variety show. And so, we watched about six half hour segments taped and filmed. And, you know, there was always a host, different host. And then he would introduce all these different acts. So, you'd see about four or five bands or dancing groups get up each half hour. And that night I heard for the first time a band called the Mike Snyder Band. They were a bluegrass band. I was never a fan of bluegrass up until this moment. Partly it's memorable because they sang a song, typical country song, which the title of it was 'If My Nose Was Running Money, Honey, I Blow It All On You.' But besides that song which is memorable, what was very obvious is that each member of this bluegrass band, the banjo player, guitar player, fiddle player, bass player, harmonica player, they were all virtuoso musicians. And each song, after the verses were sung, each would take a chance, not so much competitively outdoing one another, but just in the love of the song and music kind of challenging one another on to greater feats of musicality. It was phenomenal. And Mike Snyder explained how they were different than what was going on in Nashville. He said, you know, in Nashville, you're going to find that everybody's here trying to either perform or write a song that you will love. And when you love that song and you support them, it's going to catapulted them to fame and fortune. He goes, our band does things a little differently. We're going to play songs that we love. And some of them are old traditional standards. But we're going to play them with all our hearts, and we hope that you find our love infectious and you'll love what we do too. See to me that's what a preacher does. See, when I'm assigned to preach, and usually I get my passage beforehand I'll spend time in my study studying that passage. And I used to think my job was to kind of master that passage. I want to be able to answer any question about this passage. I'm going to study it so thoroughly and know it back and forth

and backwards. And when you know Hebrew, you read backwards, but so forwards and backwards. No, it's so thoroughly that I can tell you anything about the passage. But it wasn't long before I realized I'm dealing with God's word here. And during the week I'm not just there to, you know, know all the ins and outs and all the technical aspects of the passage. I'm to be mastered by the author of the text. I want God to deal with my heart after I've spent this extended time in the passage, what does God expect me to do? What does He want me to believe about him? And what does he want me to do in obedience and worship and service to him? And that's, you know, in a sense, it illustrates the idea that Jesus says the mouth speaks to the overflow of the heart. In a sense, if a pastor is doing his job after he has spent time with God in the passage, he just gushes about Jesus each Sunday. I'm just gushing about how much I have fallen in love with that Lord of the text and let me tell you about it.

Okay, so I wasn't given the passage beforehand. I still think that's my job. And Jesus kind of defines it this way. He's debating with religious leaders, and he says to them something that is just amazing. He says, you search the scriptures because you believe therein you'll find life. But they bear witness to me. Yet you refuse to come to me to get life. It's so fascinating. He's saying, you know, there's two ways of saying scripture. There's a wrong way and there's a right way. Scripture, it's a good thing that you study it, it's a good thing you search it out. It's a good thing that you're a diligent student of the word. However, the point of the word is not to just gain Bible knowledge, though that can be impressive. It's not just to learn a moral standard, a code of ethics, and you become a good person, which is a laudable pursuit. It's to know the living God. You study his word to listen and overhear God speaking, in a sense, to know him. And that's abundant life.

So, we're going to look at this passage this morning with that goal in mind of what do we learn about God and his son in this word? Okay. So, people in the first service are much nicer than the people in the second service when picking from the book of Judges. This morning's first service was from the book of Matthew. Okay, now, just kidding. Just kidding. We're in the book of Judges. And just to put things into context; the Bible starts off with God creating. Everything. At one point there is nothing. And God effortlessly creates everything. You know, you get to the end of just one chapter in the Bible and you are astounded by God. Everything that he just speaks, it happens and it's exactly as he intended. Because he even sits back, looks at it and goes, It's good. It's exactly what I intended. He creates man in his image. It is the masterpiece of his creation. And yet man's sin turns his back on God. Says, God, you know what? I can handle life myself. I don't need your help. Big mistake when you turn your back on life. What are you choosing? Death, the source of life, you turn your back on him, you're choosing death. And so, in the fifth chapter of Genesis, there's a word that had never been used up to that point. You know, it's one of those passages that you go over quickly because it's a genealogy of all these names, but the word that's repeated over and over again, they lived X amount of years and then they died. Up until chapter five, there's no mention of death. But now it's part of everyone's experience. And in one sense, the whole rest of the Bible is God not turning his back on us like we did on him, but him relentlessly pursuing us? And so, after Genesis five, you get the call of Abraham, where God now is singling out one nation to reach the world. That's so clear right from the get-go. He's selecting one nation to bless all nations. And so,

after Abraham, the family starts growing. We see a dysfunctional family, but still it's growing. It's growing to the point of after a little mishap of having to get over to another location, they relocate to Egypt. It uses the same word, and it's a very rare word in Hebrew in the creation account. It says, you know, God has so filled the world that there's even swarming things swarming all over the place. Well, in Exodus 1, it describes the Israelites the same way the land swarmed with Israelites. It's almost like God's creative power is still at work in these people. And they are just very fertile, to say the least. Okay. They come under oppression and God miraculously delivers them out of Egypt and brings them to Sinai, gives them their national constitution, and then has them heading toward their promised land. The Book of Joshua and Judges is all about the conquest now that they are in the land God is giving it to them. And it's not just an instantaneous possession of a vacant land. It is conquest. And Judges is about the generation after the strong leader, Joshua. So let me read to you a little passage that happens right at the beginning of the book of Joshua that explains the situation.

This is found in Judge's chapter 2. When Joshua was Moses' his right-hand man, Moses was powerfully used by God to lead the people through the Red Sea, to oppose Pharaoh, the strongest man on the earth, and to lead them through the wilderness. And right before they get to the Promised Land, Moses dies but his right-hand man, Joshua, takes over. But as we enter the period of the judges, this is when Joshua dismissed the people. The people of Israel went each to their inheritance to take possession of the land and the people served the Lord during the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua. So even the guys who his posse or retinue or homies, they were around Joshua, the people as a nation followed who had seen the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. And Joshua, the son of none, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years, and they buried him within the boundaries of his his inheritance in the hill country of Ephraim north of the mountain of Gaash. And all that generation also was gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work he had done for Israel.

This is a very, very important kind of background to what we're going to be looking at with Jephthah. In this verse, it kind of spells the tragedy of just not passing on the heritage of the Lord. And honestly if you're a parent this weigh on you heavily. The responsibility that we have to pass on the truth of God's reality. And especially, you know, I have two teenagers who live in a radically different world than I do. And we are far outnumbered by people who support or even encourage faith in God. The voices of my children's friends, their parents, families or even teachers. They are not accomplices to me to raise my children in faith. A lot of it rests on the shoulders of my wife and I and our church family. This is why, you know, I was asked one time, it was just a question-and-answer period and the person said, Do you think you have to go to church to be a Christian? Do you have to read your Bible to be Christian? And my answer was, I do. What I get from going to church is the encouragement. When I look around the congregation, I see people and I know what they're going through I am so encouraged that they are holding on they are walking and sometimes fighting the fight of faith. They're running the race, and that's encouraging to me and that encourages me to hang on when I don't feel like it.

But reading the scripture too, I need to be exposed to the world where God is acknowledged as it often is in the Scripture, and you're encouraged to see a different world than what we see. My daughter was in a play of Mary Poppins last night. And Mary Poppins says to the daughter at one point, oh, when are you going to look beyond what you see? That's what all of us are called to do. There is a, as Francis Schaeffer used to say, a realer reality beyond what we see. A truer truth than what we see with our eyes. And it's that which gives us purpose which calls us on, which prompts us to live for the Lord. And we need to pass that on to our children. The odds are against us. They're stacked against us. And so, well, actually, you know what? Moses at one point kind of spells out what is the the culture war that we're up against. Hear what he says. And he says, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. This is the Shema. This is the famous prayer of Israel. 'Shema Yisrael, you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk to them when you sit in the house and when you walk, by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up, you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets before your eyes. You shall write them on the door posts your house and on your gates'.

Okay, so God's Word is supposed to be the song of our heart, the script of our speech. And it's to guide us in all that we do, whether we're resting at home, whether we're having a meal, whether we're walking around, whether we're outside, within our household, inside our gates and in the door posts, but also outside in society, it's to guide us. And, you know, in a sense, talking through with your child as they're going through different experiences and how the presence of God in the direction of God impacts those decisions or the choices that you're making, is very important. You know what, we have to do that our for ourselves and so, not so much me telling my children, because they so badly need it, it's actually modeling before them- me making those kind of thought processes myself. And so, they kind of just overhear what I'm doing. You model for them. And all too often we live in a world where God is not encouraged and so we have to remind ourselves.

So here's the map that Moses gave to the Israelite families that, you know, you're going to come in contact with different cultures when you go into this new land, but it's God's word that is what's going to define your family life and your outdoor life, your social life and your employment that really calls us to do. The first thing as we enter the Book of Judges is to find out the responsibility we have. We who know the Lord need to pass it on. And honestly, if we're living our lives in the presence of God or just trying to do so, then you don't come down, you know, like always the bad guy trying to scold your children is rather sharing with them because we're needy, too. In a in a very real sense, you know that thing about the pastor first falling in love with Jesus of the text as he's studying then when he comes in, he shares that need. It's not a need that I stand up in front and say, okay, all you sinners. It's no okay, all us sinners. Here's what we need to hear from God. So it's not ever that you know, us versus them of the pastor knowing his Bible and sharing it with us. No, it's all of us need the word of God.

I had a very good friend. He was the kind of guy who, whenever he taught the Bible, he was, now I'm not a really good judge of good-looking men, but by all standards, he was a really

good looking guy. My wife told me that. He had and not that I noticed this, actually, I did a full head of hair, good looking guy. And, you know, all guys noticed that, especially with a guy is older than you and he has a thick and a hair. He probably knew the Bible better than everybody in the class. He was a scientist. He had patterns all over a wall in his house. Brilliant guy. I said, you know, you're the smartest guy in the room and you know your Bible better than everybody in the room. But here's the one thing that you lack as a teacher. When you stand before people and share from the Bible, you almost get this smirk of like, wow, did you see what I did there? You see how ingenious I am? You see how smart I am? I said, I don't want you to teach again until you convey that you are dead without which you read and find life in the word. I want you to share a problem that you've had, that you've solved as you've gone through it with the class. And I knew a really good one in his life. So I said, I want you to share this first before you share the truth that you're going to share. And that changed his teaching completely, because no longer did people walk out of the room just going, wow, I'm not made of the same stuff he is. That guy's just so spiritual. He's so holy. No, all of a sudden, they said, Wow, he needs this as deeply as I do. And that's when people draw a life from meeting Jesus in the text, when we model that.

So that's the first thing. In this passage we see that people were not the heritage of the Lord, the truth of the Lord, the the gifts that God has given us in His Word, were not passed on to the next generation.

Here's another thing that happens before we get to Chapter 11 in the Book of Judges. Early on we see kind of a pattern emerge among the people. The people not only don't know the Lord, they, as they put it in my translation, they forsake the Lord. So not only do they not know and remember him, but they actually start pursuing alternatives. And look in our world as Walker Percy once said, you know, man is stark raving mad. He can't invent an earthworm, but he he creates gods by the dozen every day. You know, a god or an idol is anything that is of supreme value to you replacing God as that supreme value. So, it could be anything. It could be something, you know, we might think of, well, gee, pornography is a bad thing and its idolizing sex. Well, no. Even good things can become idols if they're taking the place of God. Some people who are really good parents make their families an idol, so much so that their kids and the demands of the kids are, be it sports or whatever replace God as the most important thing. And, you know, I think you'd agree with me, it starts as a good intention, but then it becomes nothing less than idolatry. So, it's anything that replaces God as first and foremost in your life can become an idol. And the people of Israel replace God with the different things that they see among the cultures that they're among. You know, in the ancient days, it did take a physical form. They might serve something, another god. But, you know, those gods represented promises. You know, the Israelites worshiped other gods, not just because they were attracted to, wow, there's something new and different, which is part of it. But it's these gods promised. Like they were fertility gods. So if we worship this god, it's going to make me prosperous and have a lot of kids. My plants are going to grow well. So they started worshiping these gods to get something from them. And this seemed you know, it's the same thing we do today. Know, we put all of our hope and and faith in accumulating a lot of money, money has become our God. And sometimes Jesus gets wrapped up in that. You

know, some people will say, well, if you really have faith, Jesus will make you rich. Interesting thing about that kind of thinking is that I see, I think the riches are still your God. Now Jesus is your means to your God. It's not that you're serving Jesus as God. You're using Jesus as an end to your God, whether it be happiness, whatever it might be. But you're using Jesus as a means to an end. The end is what really is your God. And so, when people say, Hey, look, you know, you follow Jesus.

I was in a church one time. I was a young guy, and I had a beat-up old Plymouth Fury 3. And the pastor said, if you're a Christian, you should have the biggest, the shiniest, the reddest Cadillac. Now, I love that Fury. But I just thought to myself, even though I'm a young Christian, I'm just starting with reading my Bible. I don't think that's how Jesus defines victory. That just doesn't seem the prosperity that he's talking about. So the Israelites and we ourselves so often can replace God with idols.

Early on as the Israelites are trying to find out their way after Joshua has passed away, is they pray. They actually ask God, okay, how do we go forward? And so, they go and they ask, you know, who's who was the first troop to go up in to fight our opponents? But as you get into the book of Judges, less and less instances of prayer are mentioned. And so even before, when we get to our passage, the thing that might stand out is, gee, he made a vow, and then the vow turned out to be, you know, is an open-ended vow of I'll sacrifice whatever comes out of my door. And it sounds like he's thanking God for you give me victory and I will vow anything that comes out of there. Anything. God, I'm not going to withhold anything from you. But then you get this funny little twist where, okay, it's a child that comes walking out and you've vowed to sacrifice a child. Should I keep my word to that? Okay, that's the issue we'll get to. But Jephthah himself is a leader. And Israel is not just a a group of people. This is God's special people. Whereas they had prayed about who would lead early on in this book. There's no prayer when it comes to Jephthah. And when you read early on in that chapter and you find out who Jephthah was, he was a successful warrior. He was known to be one who wins. There is nothing about his spiritual allegiance. It never bears on the story at all, nor in his qualifications to lead the people of God. He actually is the son of a prostitute. So, it's not even that he comes from, say, one of the families dedicated to God. He's not in the lineage that you would think kings come from. So, a whole bunch of questions about Jephthah himself. But the one thing they do know, he is a warrior. So, he has a good track record of winning. Let's go with this guy. So, the people of God have basically gone with who they think can win. Interesting thought about Christians following someone who they think can win their battles. That, I think, is a challenge for all of us in our nation, of the type of people that we pursue support and asked to fight our battles. And I use that in a as a figure of speech, because I don't think that we have actual physical wars to fight.

So how we choose our leaders is something that we really need to think about. So, the vow. Jephthah makes what looks like a really good vow. Unless he's bartering you really can't tell. There is sometimes the biblical writer doesn't always spell out everything that's going on and rarely, rarely does the Bible tell us the intentions of a person. When you're reading your Bible and you read through stories, see how many times they tell you what's going on in the thought

life. They'll tell you by words what they say or what they say to themselves. But it doesn't tell you, it's not like modern fiction where they tell you what's going on in the inner workings of the mind. You have to kind of think that through yourself. I think it's intentional. I don't I think that God, in the beginning of the book of Isaiah, he says, Let us reason together. God calls us in to think. He doesn't spell everything out, doesn't tell us the moral of the story at the end of each story in the Bible. You sometimes get to the end, and there are questions. I think that's intentional. God wants us to think. He wants us to imagine. He wants us to kind of put ourselves in those stories and think, what would I be thinking if I said something like that? What would I be thinking? What am I trying to twist God's arm by making this kind of, Oh, God, if you do this for me, I'll do this for you? God, you scratch my back. I'll scratch your back.

I have to admit this is how I prayed for a wife. A good friend of mine, Todd, had started going to singles groups and I was just too proud to do something like that. And I avoided them as much as I could. And I caught myself on my knees praying, you know, God, as a single guy as a pastor. I said, you know, I work awfully hard and I work really long hours. You know, when you're single, you can and you're not offending anybody. So, I, you know, got to work early and I worked till about 11:00 at night and would just come home. And I thought, you know, God, it would be really nice if you just brought somebody in my path. And then I thought, oh, wait a second, this is not the way to pray. Like, God, I do this for you. Could you please do this for me? Kind of. You know, I give a lot for you. Just give me a break. I just want one woman, just one. Not asking for much. Okay. Caught myself, God. And I laughed about that logic, saying that, you know, it's not like you owe me anything. And I met my wife within a week. And I said, you know, could you bring her into my path, you know, while I'm working so much for you, if you could just bring her in my path. Well, my wife came to my church with her mother who played piano, and I got talking to her. And within six months we were engaged. So, God and I laugh about that all the time that I hear. I prayed a wrong, motivated prayer. And in his sense of humor, he chose to answer it, even though it really was a wrong type of prayer.

Anyway, not sure how we got to that, but. He makes this vow. And then his daughter comes walking out. I think that all of us know in the Scripture, sacrificing a child is not condoned, is not encouraged, is not viewed as something laudable. So if you make a rash vow, are you still obligated to keep it? Well, I do think that all of this is wrapped up in the fact that. The Law of God, the Word of God has not been passed on to generations. The prayer about a leader has not gone into the selection of Jephthah. If we today make a vow in all good intentions and something happens where the fulfillment of that vow goes against God's clear stated guidelines and will, we're not to hold ourselves responsible to keep it. We need to realize that sometimes the stories in Scripture are not prescriptive in the sense of they're not told so that you go do it. Sometimes they're told so that you avoid doing the same mistakes and thinking of the context with which the Book of Judges is taught, where it's a nation that was called especially by God, gifted by God, enriched by God, blessed by God that is now going down the drain because that's what we see in the Book of Judges. The Book of Judges; if you have not read it, I encourage you to read it all the way through. When you get to the end of the Book of Judges, there are stories that should shock and appall you. When Aliya said before about, you know, when you study church history, it also happens when you study the Bible and you

go, God's people have the potential to do such thoughtless careless care. Just rough stuff. I mean, it's it's the kind of things that you go, should I read this stuff to my kids? Even reading through the Book of Genesis? My my wife grew up in a very, very conservative church. And we read into Genesis, and she goes, I never heard that story. And I thought, you've had an edited Bible because the Bible doesn't hold punches by telling the truth about the failures and faults of God's people. And it's with good intent because over and over again the message of the Scripture is that we drastically need God.

You know, when you think about it, at the very core of our faith, we believe that God came to Earth in Jesus Christ to die for our sins. Now. When you go to the doctor, if there is a really strict prescription for what's going to heal you, you come away thinking, okay, I have something really serious. If it takes that kind of solution to heal me, I'm in trouble. Well, that the solution to our problem is that God himself had to come down in the form of one of us and die in our place to win his back. That shows that we have a drastic problem. And all the books of the Old Testament contribute to that picture. That not only do we need Jesus but in Jesus God more than met our need. Over and over again the message of Scripture is we believe in God, not just because we're right and there is a God out there, we believe in God because we desperately need a Savior. We desperately need a Savior, and God has more than provided for our need. And the book of Judges contributes to this portrait of we are desperately in need of God saving us. And that's why we're committed to knowing the Lord and passing him on to the next generation because they desperately need it, and their friends need it too.

Let's pray. Holy God, thank you that your word is true and is genuine and accurate and holds no punches. We see even your people blessed and gifted by you making egregious mistakes. And we know ourselves that sometimes we catch ourselves and say, I can't believe I did that. Well, we shouldn't be shocked. We all have the potential of doing things that discussed you. It's easy to look at somebody else and say, oh, I can't believe they did that. But we need to be not surprised that we have that potential, because the solution to me, the solution to each one of us is that God died to win us back. So help us to have an honest appraisal of ourselves and a deeper appreciation for our Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray in Christ name. Amen.