

Judges Chapter 11 Part 3

From the previous lesson, negotiations between Jephthah and the king of the sons of Ammon failed. There wasn't going to be a peaceful settlement. Negotiations may have been the smart move from a human perspective. Why engage in a war if diplomacy might have worked? It also established Jephthah as the "chief" of the Gileadites from the king of Ammon's perspective. This is his point of contact. At this point, Jephthah may have realized that he might have been out of his league. If the king of Ammon thought he would lose, then he might have backed down. However, the leaders of Gilead talked Jephthah into becoming the troop commander of a rag tag farmer army to go against the well-trained and well-equipped army of the king of Ammon. I may be overstating this a bit. But, a king will have trained people and likely a standing army to defend his territory. A rag tag farmer army was in search of a leader. They had no training and little to no experience individually.

Judges 11:29 Now the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon.

The Spirit of the Lord. In other words, the Holy Spirit. God has enabled Jephthah to be successful by means of the Holy Spirit. God did this on His own initiative apart from anything Jephthah did. So far we have not seen anything from Jephthah to indicate he was a mature believer or spiritual in any way. God is in charge of history. The operation of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was very different from how it operates today in Christians. The Holy Spirit "came upon" believers and even unbelievers to accomplish God the Father's Plan.

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Passed through. The text does not specifically mention the farmer army that must have been with him. The Holy Spirit has propelled him forward to the battle lines.

Judges 11:30 Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, “If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand,

Judges 11:31 then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.”

This vow, on its surface is legalistic. You, God, will give me the victory and I, Jephthah will give to you whatever comes out the doors of my house. And then God gives Jephthah the victory.

And here I had to ask God to open my understanding of this passage. On the surface, it would appear that vows were OK in the eyes of God since there is no condemnation of them. If You, God, do this for me, then I will do this for you. But that does not appear to be grace. Ever since I became a Christian, this line of reasoning has been taught to me as legalistic, anti-grace. So either all my teachers who taught grace were wrong, or there is something missing.

There is something missing. What is it?

What does Merrill Unger say in his dictionary?

“Vow, defined as a religious undertaking, either, positive, to do something, or, negative to abstain from doing a certain thing. Under the old covenant the principle of vowing was recognized as in itself a suitable expression of the religious sentiment, and as such was placed

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under certain regulations. It was not, except in a few special cases, imposed as an obligation on the individual conscience. The Lord never said, Thou shalt vow so and so; but, If thou shouldst make a vow, or when thou dost so, then let such and such conditions be observed. The conditions specified in the law related almost exclusively to the faithful performance of what had been freely pledged himself before God to render in active service or dedicated gifts. He was on no account to draw back from his plighted word, but conscientiously to carry it into effect, since otherwise a slight would manifestly be put upon God and a stain left upon the conscience of the worshipper (Deut. 23:21-23; Eccles. 5:5; Psa. 50:14; Nah. 1:15).”

“Vows were entirely voluntary, but once made were regarded as compulsory, and evasion of performance of them was held to be contrary to true religion (Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21; Eccles. 5:4)”

I don't know about you, but that makes vows about as clear as mud to me. So we need to take a journey through the Bible together. The “treasure” is finding what is missing.

I. Observations

A. Grace is God's Policy

1. Grace is everything God is able to do based upon the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. (from R. B. Thieme)
2. God does the work and man trusts/faith/believes.
3. Human righteousness is abhorrent to God. In other words, He doesn't like it: Isaiah 64:6.

B. Laws of Hermeneutics: Context, Context, Context

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Herman told us this many times. The three most important laws of hermeneutics are context, context, context. In this case, a) Context of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, b) Context of the Old Testament under a system of covenants and c) Context of the book of Judges and in particular chapter 11.

II. There are four vow narratives that are usually used to illustrated “vow.”

A. Jacob’s Vow – Genesis 28:20-22

Genesis 28:20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear,

Genesis 28:21 and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord (Yahweh) will be my God.

Genesis 28:22 This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

This sure looks like Jacob is saying, God, if you do such and such for me then I will do this for you. But that does not appear to be grace. What is missing in our understanding?

B. Israel’s Vow – Numbers 21:2

Numbers 21:2 So Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, “If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.”

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This, like the previous vow looks like Israel says If you will do such and such for me, the I will do this for you. What is missing?

C. Jephthah's Vow – Judges 11:30-31

Judges 11:30 Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand,

Judges 11:31 then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

This appears similar to the previous vows, but it is not. What is different?

D. Hannah's Vow – 1 Samuel 1:11

1 Samuel 1:11 She made a vow and said, "O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head."

Again, what are we missing that makes this grace.

Is God a legalist after all? MAY IT NEVER BE, quoting Paul.

So, what is missing? What has Herman told us over and over again is the three most important rules of Hermeneutics? Context, Context, Context.

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And so it is here. These vows were taken out of context and then meaning read into them.

We will look at each one IN CONTEXT, and determine what is really going on.

III. Jacob's Vow – Genesis chapter 28 (the whole chapter, not just a couple of verses) Read the entire chapter before proceeding.

Key verses that set the context:

Genesis 28:1 So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him, and said to him, “You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.

Genesis 28:2 Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother.

Genesis 28:3 May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples.

Genesis 28:4 May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.”

The context is Isaac blessing Jacob, invoking the Abrahamic Covenant.

Genesis 12:1 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you;

Genesis 12:2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;

Genesis 12:3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

This promise was given by God to Abraham and his line. Isaac received confirmation from the Lord:

Genesis 26:2 The Lord appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you.

Genesis 26:3 Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham.

Genesis 26:4 I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed;

Genesis 26:5 because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.”

Isaac provides a supplemental blessing to Jacob invoking the Abrahamic covenant/promises in Genesis 28:4

Genesis 28:4 May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.”

So now, in Genesis 28, God confirms the covenant to Jacob in a dream.

Genesis 28:12 He (Jacob) had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Genesis 28:13 And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants.

Note, the covenant was initially with Abraham and then Isaac. Jacob is next in line. But this is a dream. This is not a face-to-face meeting with the Angel of the Lord.

Genesis 28:14 Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread

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out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Genesis 28:15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Now we can look at the vow of Jacob IN CONTEXT:

Genesis 28:20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear,

Genesis 28:21 and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord will be my God.

Genesis 28:22 This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

He received notice of the covenant in a dream. So Jacob is saying, something like Gideon’s tests, if this dream is real, then I know Yahweh (God’s name) will be my God. But how will I know this dream is real? If He does what He said He will do, then I will know He is God and I will trust and worship Him as my God, The God.

Remember, Jacob has been involved in deception and lies and cheating. He wants to be sure the Lord Yahweh is truth. He had no Scripture that

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told him that. He had the words of his father Isaac. But was that sufficient?

Subsequently, Jacob returns to this spot:

Genesis 35:1 Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” (The Genesis chapter 28 passage)

Genesis 35:2 So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments;

Genesis 35:3 and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.”

Genesis 35:4 So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem.

Observations:

1. Jacob had no written Torah to consult. There is no written guidance from God during Jacob’s time. All information from God either came directly from Him or through oral tradition which had originated in revelation to someone else. Jacob had to depend upon oral tradition passed down from Abraham to Isaac and then to him. And the culture in

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the Old Testament is to show your faith rather than just say you have faith.

2. The narrative is set in the context of the Abrahamic covenant/promises. Isaac had passed that on to Jacob as a blessing. Then God gave Jacob a dream confirming Isaac's blessing.

3. Now, Jacob is referring back to God's promise. Jacob is saying that assuming God holds up His end of the promise, then Jacob will trust God.

4. This passage suggests that Jacob had not picked the deity he was going to follow. He had received the blessings from Isaac by a ruse. He did not merit them. So how would he know that God is not involved in a ruse against him?

5. The wording reminds me of Ruth's statement of faith statement:

Ruth 1:16 But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.

Ruth 1:17 Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me."

6. In Genesis chapter 35, Jacob has the family put/bury the "foreign gods" (idols) and other pagan god items. In other words, he got rid of "foreign gods" and now he is making good on his commitment. God truly is a God who is in charge of history. He is The God, so Jacob has now picked the God he will trust. He now shows his faith. Until Genesis

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35, his family had their idols of foreign gods. Then, he found that the Lord/Yahweh was indeed truthful and faithful. He is now The God of Jacob and his family.

7. The Genesis chapter 28 passage is less of a deal made with God than a recognition of the Abrahamic covenant/blessings and Jacob's commitment to faith/worship of Yahweh. It may even be like Gideon's test of God. Gideon didn't know who he was talking to until the Angel of the Lord passed both his tests.

From Bruce Waltke's commentary on Genesis:

“This is the longest vow in the Old Testament. In Bruggeman's words, “Vows are not contracts or limited agreements, but yieldings that reorient life.” Regarding Jacob's vow, Roop comments, “The vow reorients Jacob's journey. The journey had originated as flight to avoid assassination and a trip to find a wife suitable to his parents. Now, however, Jacob's journey becomes a pilgrimage with theological content. He goes to the same place for much the same purpose, but now he travels as a carrier of God's promises and with divine assurance of aid. In turn, accompanied by God's ‘traveling mercies,’ Jacob has committed himself to living with Yahweh as his God (v. 21)...The promise and the vow transform Jacob's journey as surely as an encounter with God changes a stoney place into a sanctuary.””

On vows, Waltke says, “The old Testament looks with favor upon making well-considered, realistic vows. Isaiah prophesies of a golden age when the Egyptians “will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the Lord and keep them” (Isa. 19:21). The vow, which aims chiefly to secure the Lord's aid in crisis, is a vital part of Israel's worship. The Mosaic law provides for votive sacrifices (Lev. 7:16; Num. 30:1-15), and frequently to royal psalmists make or pay vows as part of their petitions and thanksgivings (vows) (e.g., Ps. 22:25; 50:14;

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56:12-13; 66:13-15). These vows also signify a commitment to continue relationship with God even after being delivered from adversity. The Lord looks with favor on Hannah's vow to offer her son to God for life if he takes away her reproach of being barren (1 Sam. 1:10-20), and with her vow she indirectly delivers Israel from the Philistines. Although vows are not required, once made they have to be kept (Deut. 23:21-23[Heb. 22-24a]; Prov. 20:25; Eccl. 5:4-5[Heb. 3-40]."

IV. The next narrative concerns the nation Israel.

Numbers 21:1 When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim, then he fought against Israel and took some of them captive.

Numbers 21:2 So Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, "If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities."

Numbers 21:3 The Lord heard the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites; then they utterly destroyed them and their cities. Thus the name of the place was called Hormah.

This passage is not the complete context. You must understand that God had given Israel a promise of the land. They were expected to fight and win in order to take possession of the land. If they trusted God by obeying his instructions, then they would be blessed. If they failed to trust God, trusting in themselves, they would fail. I am keeping comment

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on Israel's vow short. Were I to dig into it, there would be more details than I could cover in an hour.

V. I am going to skip over Jephthah's vow and deal with Hanna's vow and then return to Jephthah.

From <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/barren-women-in-the-bible>

“There are six stories of barren women in the Hebrew Bible: three of the four matriarchs, Sarah (Genesis 11:30), Rebekah (25:21), and Rachel (29:31); Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1-2); the anonymous wife of Manoah, mother of Samson (Judges 13); and the “great woman of Shunem,” also called the Shunammite, an acolyte of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-44).”

Sarah:

Genesis 21:1 Then the Lord took note of Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had promised.

Rebekah:

Genesis 25:21 Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived.

Rachael:

Genesis 30:22 Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb.

Hannah:

1 Samuel 1:5 ...the Lord had closed her womb

1 Samuel 1:11 She made a vow and said, “O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.”

So, assuming Hannah understood the grace precedents of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, she would have known that a) God (the Lord) had closed her womb, b) God answers prayer and c) God had a plan, perhaps a very special plan, for any child she bore in response to her prayer. As a result, she “dedicated” her expected son to God.

VI. Now Jephthah’s vow

The context of the vow is man’s efforts to defend against the king of Ammon. The Gileadites did not inquire of the Lord. They did not seek His will. They were going to accomplish this on their own. God had already imparted the Holy Spirit to empower Jephthah.

However, Jephthah may have been expecting God to answer his vow. There was precedent in previous deliverers. Note that the Israelite vow previously mentioned, is in the same chapter of Numbers as the defeat of king of Sihon that Jephthah relates to the king of Ammon. Jephthah made the vow to God. But what he vowed to “offer” God was not specific, did not mesh with God’s plan, indeed it ended up being human sacrifice. This was wrong. This appears to have been legalism on Jephthah’s part.

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Here are some summary points. I don't claim that these are all-encompassing as far as vows are concerned, but they move us forward in our understanding of them.

1. Vows are made to God.
2. Vows are voluntary. This should emphasize the grace aspect of a vow.
3. Vows, once made, must be kept. If God is faithful, then the person making the vow must follow God's lead and also be faithful.
4. Vow offers should be specific. They should not be worded "whatever comes through my door."
5. Vows must be made in the context of God's plan. They are based upon promise or precedent.
6. I do not see vows such as are offered in the Old Testament as applying in the Christian Age.
7. Jephthah has not been conversing with God. Instead, he is trying to solve the problem from man's perspective. It appears that this was a bad vow. I would not say that the victory God answering Jephthah's vow. It was His plan all along to deliver Israel. God just needed a man who in a crisis would for a short period trust Him to deliver Israel. In spite of his shortcomings, Jephthah did trust God, even if for a short period as is evidenced by his name in the book of Hebrews chapter 11.