

Introduction

We've all heard of the Basketball Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. There is, of course, the Ice Hockey Hall of Fame and the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Hip Hop Hall of Fame. There's even a Hall of Fame for model cars. In the Model Car Hall of Fame we find Jay Leno. Jay Leno is not a model car...What on earth qualifies one for the Model Car Hall of Fame? There are all kinds of Halls of Fame. There is the "AIAS Hall of Fame". Apparently it's for, you know, *video games*. Obviously.

It seems that in every Hall of Fame are those members whom people wonder why they were inducted. Bobby Wallace is in the Baseball Hall of Fame, with his bonkers .268 batting average. I don't know much about baseball but I know this: that ain't good. Bill Bradley was inducted to the Basketball Hall of Fame for his, what, one All-Star appearance? That's only one more All-Star appearance than I have! He absolutely should not be in the Hall of Fame! This one is even more puzzling: why is the game "Phase 10" in the National Toy Hall of Fame? *What?* It's just Yahtzee with playing cards!

There's another Hall of Fame with inductees that make no sense. I'm referring to the "Hall of Fame" in Hebrews 11. The author lists men and women of great faith in history. He makes a big deal out of Abraham and his faith, completely overlooking the fact that Abraham lied at least twice about his wife, claiming she was *only* his sister. On one of those occasions a king took her into his household to join his harem; it was only the grace and power of God that protected Sarah from Abraham's foolishness. We come to this startling declaration in Hebrews 11:

Heb 11:32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Hebrews 11:32–34

Gideon's faith enabled him to defeat the Midianites. Then he took a bunch of gold and made an idol for Israel to bow down to. Barak had to be cajoled into trusting the Lord and while he defeated the king of Hazor, a woman received the glory for the victory, for his faith was so utterly weak it took a woman's household tool to defeat the army commander. David is listed as a man of great faith—the same David who forcefully took the wife of one of his closest men, got her pregnant, and then had her husband killed to cover up his incredible abuse of power. Samson, as we will soon see, was about as pagan as one could get throughout most of his life. It was only with his dying breath that he truly trusted the Lord. Even with all the flaws of these men listed, the one that is perhaps most shocking is Jephthah.

Our text this morning is one of the darkest. Jephthah commits an act so evil the author refuses to give it a higher word count than is necessary to convey the act. I'm struck that he's included among those who, through faith, rescued God's people. Perhaps the author of Hebrews is saying faith is less about the person who has it and far more about the one in whom the faith is placed. We're in Judges 11.

Jdgs 11:29 Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." ³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. ³³ And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow." ³⁶ And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites." ³⁷ So she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions." ³⁸ So he said, "Go." Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

Judges 11:29–40

The Spirit of the Lord

As we will see in the coming chapters, the book of Judges is not written in a strict chronological order. Some of the events that are yet to come actually happened near the beginning of Israel's time in the land. The author, inspired by the Spirit of God, was communicating something significant by structuring the book in this manner. He was illustrating Israel's increasing depravity, though that depravity, that unfaithfulness to God was, we will see, there from the beginning. He chose to reveal it in a progressive manner.

The series of Judges began with Othniel, who was presented as an ideal Israelite. He was faithful. He took his responsibility seriously. The Lord raised him up as a judge and

he engaged Israel's most powerful enemy during the time of the judges, defeating Cushan-rishathaim in battle and forcing the king of Mesopotamia to leave Israel alone. That Cushan-rishathaim attacked Israel so far from his kingdom demonstrates how strong his reach was; he was more than a king. He was an emperor seeking to expand his empire. Through Othniel's faithfulness to the Lord, God put him in his place and he never bothered Israel again.

We saw Ehud next. He, too, was faithful, yet relied on human cunning to defeat Moab. Then came Shamgar. Though little is said of him, he was faithful and rescued Israel. Deborah used her gifts and abilities to rescue Israel, though not on a battlefield. She was not a warrior yet she imposed justice on the people of God and helped them settle their disputes. Through her God urged Barak to engage in battle but because of his fearfulness and delay in engaging in the battle, the glory of war was given to a woman.

Gideon was a mixture of faith and a refusal to exercise faith. He required a lot of building up, and while God gave him what he needed, it quickly went to his head and Gideon began to grasp for more than what the Lord gave him. He sought the trappings of being king while refusing the title king. His son Abimelech also grasped for what was not given him. While his 70 brothers rejected him, he brutally murdered them one by one so that he could finally get the respect he thought he deserved. He, too, met a brutal end.

We find ourselves looking at Jephthah. Like Abimelech he was the offspring of an immoral relationship. In his case, his father adopted him and granted him an inheritance. After his father died, however, his brothers sued him to strip him of his inheritance and cast him out of their father's household. The city leaders sided with the brothers and Jephthah fled to live elsewhere. Until they were desperate.

They needed a warrior to lead them against the Ammonites who had been oppressing God's people. They agreed to make him their head and their leader. Not only would he be the commander of their army during the war against Ammon, he would continue to rule over them after the war. He, like Abimelech, would finally get the respect and love and admiration he had been longing for.

Just like Abimelech, the author does not say the Lord raised him up as a judge. He was chosen by the people. In fact, the Lord is strangely quiet during all this. When he negotiated with the leaders of Gilead to become their head and when he took his oath of office, he invoked the name of the Lord yet the Lord did not speak. All throughout our text this morning the Lord remains utterly silent. The only hint of the Lord's involvement is the remarkable declaration that "the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah".

Like faith, the Spirit empowering Jephthah says more about the Lord than it does about Jephthah. Remember: in chapter 10 we read that the Lord began to grow impatient with Israel's misery. He was preparing to do something about it.

Empowered by the Spirit, he traveled throughout the region, gathering more men to fight against Ammon. When the author says the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, he doesn't mean in the sense that we have the Spirit of God dwelling in our midst today. Paul told the Galatians the evidence they belong to the Lord was the Spirit of God was present and active among them. The Spirit coming upon Jephthah is not an indication of the Spirit's approval of Jephthah.

Rather than an indication of the Spirit's endorsement, the Spirit coming upon Jephthah was an indication that God was intending to rescue Israel. In chapter 10 when Israel put away their foreign gods we're told the Lord "became impatient over the misery of Israel".

Now that Israel has chosen someone to lead them in battle, God empowers that person for the specific task of delivering Israel.

A Vow

In verse 30 we read that Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. Such vows were understood in ancient Israel. Jephthah, however, is negotiating with the Lord. He negotiated with the leaders of Gilead to get more from them. Rather than merely being their military leader during the war, he will remain their leader after the war. Then he tried to negotiate with the Ammonites. This failed and failed badly, largely because he did not give them anything they might want.

When you negotiate you give up something the other side wants in order to get some of what you want. It's really just more sophisticated haggling. When Jephthah negotiated with Ammon he made sure he would receive all the glory and the Ammonites would receive all the shame. He gave nothing in return for them stopping their attack on Israel. That's a losing negotiating strategy, every time. When he negotiates with the Lord, he aims to correct this tactical mistake.

He promises the Lord that if the Lord will give him victory over the Ammonites, then when he returns home he will offer to the Lord the first thing that comes out of the doors of his house as a burnt offering. We're immediately struck by this because we're not Ancient Near Eastern people.

In the ancient world animals were often sheltered inside at night in order to protect them from predators and from thieves. Even if a bull or a goat were inside his house, it would be extremely unlikely that an animal would come out to greet him like a dog would. Israelites certainly didn't keep dogs as pets as we do today. It may be that he was expecting an *animal* to come out and greet him—very unlikely!—but his own words are deliberately fuzzy. Mark Boda and Mary Conway explained it this way:

It is likely that he deliberately left the terms of the vow ambiguous in order to leave himself a possible loophole; he planned his vow so that it would appear that he was offering his precious daughter; a valuable pledge in exchange for a highly desirable outcome, but connived that—or desperately hoped that—he could arrange to sacrifice an animal or lesser person instead. In effect, he planned to cheat YHWH.

Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, ZECOT

We saw that when he returned to Mizpah he took his oath of office “before the Lord”—and in front of the army. Jephthah understands the importance of image, of perception. By offering “whatever” comes out of his house, he appears to be offering to sacrifice his daughter as an expression of his desire to win the battle.

This seems really strange to us. It seems incredibly foolish and rash, but in the ancient world this would have appeared very pious and devoted. Remember why Israel is being oppressed in the first place. They abandoned the Lord and worshiped the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. One of the significant gods the Ammonites worshiped

was Molech. The law of Moses recognized the danger Molech worship presented and so commanded Israel concerning it.

Lev 18:21 You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.
Leviticus 18:21

Molech was worshiped through child sacrifice. By making this foolish vow to the Lord, the God of Israel, Jephthah is making himself appear to be very devoted and committed to rescuing Israel. How committed? He'd give up his own daughter for victory! The Ammonites and the Israelites—who worshiped the god Molech—would have seen this for what Jephthah intended. Jephthah, for his part, was desperately hoping an animal or at least a servant would be the first to come out through his door, but hey! *If you want to make an omelette, you gotta break some egg shells.* If you want to be great, you gotta be willing to do what no one else will do!

It could have been entirely appropriate if he had said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then I will offer a burnt offering”. It’s still a bit manipulative, though such an offering could well be the right response to God’s mercy and grace. He shouldn’t be negotiating but at least he would be offering something legitimate. He could have said, “When I return from defeating the Ammonites I will offer a burnt offering”. That would have been the right response. By inserting “whatever comes out of my door” into the equation, Jephthah is being rash and manipulative.

Notice throughout this story the utter silence of the Lord. When the people made him leader and head the Lord was silent. When Jephthah made his vows before the army at Mizpah the Lord was silent. When he makes this evil and wicked vow to the Lord the Lord is utterly silent.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Immediately after making this vow the text very swiftly and very succinctly states Jephthah met the Ammonites in battle, and the Lord gave them into his hand. Remember, the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, empowering him to be victorious. He pursued the fleeing Ammonites and destroyed twenty cities—think “fortresses”—so that the Israelites were finally freed of the oppression of the Ammonites.

Verse 34 says Jephthah then returned to his home at Mizpah. Remember that he had been living in Tob. It seems he has already taken the time to establish a home at Mizpah, complete with his animals and his household goods and most importantly, *his daughter*. Messengers would have already shared the news of victory so when his daughter sees Dad coming home as a conquering hero, she does what proud daughters do and greets him with tambourines and dancing. Her Dad’s a hero! Jephthah’s greatest fear has come true: his daughter was the first person out of his home.

In verse 35 he blames her. He barks at her that *she* has brought *him* low. *She* has become the cause of *his* great trouble. Except *she* didn’t make the foolish vow! Like his father Adam, he blames the closest woman he can find!

The real problem here is Jephthah has a made a vow to the Lord. The law of Moses was clear about making vows to the Lord:

Deut 23:21 If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Deuteronomy 23:21

However, the law was equally clear about the content of the vow Jephthah made!

Deut 18:9 When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. ¹⁰ There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer ¹¹ or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, ¹² for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you.

Deuteronomy 18:9–12

On the one hand Jephthah must fulfill his vow. On the other hand, Jephthah *cannot* fulfill his vow. He is truly between the proverbial rock and a hard place. He cannot turn to the one side and he must not turn to the other side. By attempting to manipulate the Lord into giving him victory he has placed himself in a very difficult spot.

All of this could have been avoided had Jephthah been a true Israelite and meditated on the law of God given to Israel. He, along with Israel, would have known child sacrifice was a great evil on the level of worshiping demons. Then again, had he, along with Israel, mediated on the law of God given to Israel, they would not have worshiped the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria and the gods of Sidon and the gods of Moab and the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. Had they worshiped YHWH God of Israel alone, they would not have been in need of rescue in the first place.

Son of a Prostitute

Jephthah finds himself compelled to keep a vow to the Lord that he must not keep. The Lord, however, has already provided for such an occasion. There is another option for fulfilling vows related to people.

Lev 27:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘If anyone makes a special vow to the LORD involving the valuation of persons,

Leviticus 27:1–2

The context is about making vows concerning people, vows that for one reason or another cannot be fulfilled. The law provides the opportunity to make monetary compensation for the vows based on a person’s age and ability to work. We see these sorts of vows in Scripture. In First Samuel a woman named Hannah was barren and asked the Lord for a child. She vowed that if the Lord would give her a son, her son would be devoted to the Lord—he

would serve the Lord his entire life. God gave her a son named Samuel. Samuel was given to the priests at Shiloh where the tabernacle was. This is the sort of vow the law had in mind.

If a person were for some reason unable to keep such a vow, there was a monetary cost to redeem the person. The amounts the law lists were quite high, encouraging the people to *not* make such vows. In the event there was a vow that could not be fulfilled—and surely Jephthah’s vow is one such vow—then provision was made—even if you couldn’t afford the price of redemption!

Lev 27:8 And if someone is too poor to pay the valuation, then he shall be made to stand before the priest, and the priest shall value him; the priest shall value him according to what the vower can afford.

Leviticus 27:8

Jephthah made a vow but the vow cannot be fulfilled in a way that honors the Lord so he should have paid the necessary price to redeem his daughter. He certainly had the financial resources. He could have gone to the high priest in Israel and made the right offering and therefore could have spared his daughter. His daughter understands the significance of keeping his vow and tells him in verse 36 that he’s the one who opened his mouth—I’m sure she said, “Your *big fat* mouth”—so give me time to weep and lament and then do the thing you said you would do.

She then spent two months with her friends to “weep for her virginity”. That is, she understood what her father would do, and she understood she would never marry, which means she would never have children. Since she was Jephthah’s only child, the line of Jephthah would end with her death. Daniel Block cuts right to the chase:

Tragically and ironically the man whose basic gift was facility with words falls prey to his own foolish utterance.

Daniel I. Block, NAC

Jephthah’s reliance on his ability to negotiate cost him everything. The truth is the Lord gave Jephthah another option. He could have redeemed his daughter. He did not. This wasn’t the only option, though! He could have spared his daughter and could have received the curse for his own sin, the foolish sin of a making such a foolish vow. He could have taken that curse upon himself. He could have faced the consequences for his own sin. He did not. He chose option number three. The author, with an obvious sneer, said he “did with her according to his vow that he had made”. He won’t give it another word. Jephthah kills his own daughter.

Increase Our Faith

Once again we see a deliverer raised up to rescue Israel from oppression becomes Israel’s oppressor. By sacrificing his daughter, Jephthah is the oppressor, just like Gideon and just like Abimelech. By engaging in the very sin and wickedness that led to the oppression at the hands of the Ammonites, Jephthah becomes the oppressor.

The story of Jephthah began in chapter 10 with the declaration that Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. We saw last week that this was a condemnation of the nation as a whole,

and not merely of his mother and his father. The economic system that led to his mother being a prostitute revealed how far Israel has fallen. The system itself condemns Israel for such an industry should not even be possible in the land where YHWH was worshiped.

That was the problem, however. The land was not the land where YHWH was worshiped. We saw in chapter 8 that when Gideon defeated the Midianites and rescued Israel he took gold from the spoils of war and made a golden ephod with the result that “all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare” to them. Then after Gideon died we read,

Jdgs 8:33 As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. ³⁴ And the people of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side...

Judges 8:33–34

Jephthah was, in fact, the son of a prostitute, for he was a son of *Israel*. Remember, much of the story of Judges is told out of order, so as to structure it in a series of increasing depravity and increasing unfaithfulness. We will see that the events that take place in chapters 17 through 21 take place during the time Phinehas was high priest. Phinehas’ grandfather was Aaron, Israel’s first high priest.

The author tells the story in this way to reveal something to later generations. Israel needed a rescuer, a real, true deliverer—a *Messiah* who would be righteous and faithful, who would gladly pay the price to redeem his people even though it meant taking the curse upon himself. These are the very things Jephthah refused to do. These are the very things the one true Messiah *would come* to do.

The structure of increasing depraving and increasing unfaithfulness reveals the truth that God did not claim Israel to be his people because they were so great. His choice that they would be his people, his holy nation out of all the nations on earth, had nothing to do with how great they were. He chose them to show how great he is.

When we read of Jephthah’s “faith” in Hebrews, we’re struck because we don’t see any real evidence that he possessed any faith in the God of Israel. He sacrificed his daughter on the altar of ambition, as an act of worship of the god Molech, while claiming it was for YHWH God of Israel. If the author of Hebrews had simply said, “For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, of David and Samuel and the prophets”, we would barely recognize the omission of Jephthah, for surely he doesn’t belong in the Hall of Fame!

What if faith says less about the person who believes and more about the person who is believed in? In Luke 17 the apostles plead with Jesus, “Increase our faith!” Here’s his response to this:

Lk 17:6 And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Luke 17:6

The particular tree he mentions was known for having a deep and extensive root system. Pulling up a tree by its roots would be a truly difficult undertaking. Jesus says that even a

tiny bit of faith was sufficient to tell such a tree to go jump in a lake, because it's not the faith that makes it happen. It's the one the faith is in who makes it happen.

It's hard to say that Jephthah had any faith at all based on his actions in Judges. The author of Hebrews, however, says by faith Jephthah put foreign armies to flight. It wasn't the greatness of Jephthah's faith that did this, but the greatness of the one he trusted in during the battle.

Application

The size of your faith doesn't affect the power of God in any way. The tininess of your faith does not diminish God's power to save in the slightest. God is who he is. His power is what it is. His desire to save is not dependent on those he would save. Yes, Israel was a mess, but they were *God's mess*, and he chose to rescue them.

This is why negotiating with the Lord is foolish, for he needs nothing we can offer him. When you negotiate, you give up something the other party wants in exchange for something you want. There must be give and take. The problem with trying to negotiate with God is there is nothing you and I can offer him that he could possibly need from us. If it were intellectually possible for the God who created all things to be in need, why on earth would any of us think that he would come to *us* to get that thing?

Faith is not something we offer the Lord as if he needed something from us. God lacks nothing and therefore needs nothing, yet the thing he *desires* from us is faith. Faith is the only currency he accepts.

What Israel needed from Jephthah—from any judge, any deliverer the Lord sent them—was one who would be faithful to the end. Israel needed a deliverer who did not pursue selfish ambition, who did not seek only what he could get. Israel needed a deliverer who would gladly take on the suffering of others, including the very curse of the law. Israel needed a Savior who would embrace the suffering caused by the sins of others rather than force others to make up for his own sins.

Jephthah was but a shadow of such a Deliverer. He was the darkest shadow of the King who is coming. He was supposed to point his people to the one who would truly deliver his people but rather than reflect the coming King's character, he was a grim reminder of what that coming King was not.

God has declared he would save his people. All those who respond to this promise in faith—even the tiniest bit of faith that is barely detectable to you and to me—receive the promise of salvation. This isn't because the one trusting him is so very great but because the one who promised is so very great. As the author of Hebrews put it,

Heb 6:13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." ¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath,

Hebrews 6:13–17

There is no negotiating with God. He determined to save and swore an oath to save all those who trust in him. That's a true vow, one that cannot be broken, one that cost the Lord everything to fulfill. That's the price he was willing to pay to save his people.