

Episode-221

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. Joining me today, as usual, is Jeff, the Managing Editor of BibleRef.com, and Kevin, the Managing Editor of GotQuestions.org, and we're continuing our series on difficult passages in the Bible. Today we're going to be covering a question that I remember the very first time I appeared on a radio show where people were calling in with questions, this was the very first question that was asked. I found that very interesting, and it's a popular article, common question. It's, did Jephthah, one of the judges, actually sacrifice his daughter to the Lord?

Shea Houdmann

Let me read the passage to you so you can know exactly what we're talking about here. It's in Judges chapter 11, and a little background on the story is that Jephthah was kind of an outcast, but when the Ammonites were causing a lot of problems in Israel, the Israelites were like, Jephthah, will you lead our armies in a battle to defeat the Ammonites? And Jephthah, with some hesitance, eventually agreed to, and then he starts off here in verse 30. It says, And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 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. So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. And he struck them from Eor to the village of Minas, twenty cities, as far as Abel-charanim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. Then Jephthah came to his home at Mishpah, 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. 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 great cause of trouble for me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow. And she said to him, My father, you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out from your mouth, now that the Lord has avenged you on your enemies, the Ammonites. So she said to her father, Let this thing be done for me. Leave me alone for two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions. 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. At the end of the 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. The daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter Jephthah the Gilead for days in the year. So Jeff, let me ask you this, did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter to the Lord? Exactly.

Jeff Laird

Yeah. Probably. And I think when you read the text the way it's written, you come to that conclusion because there's nothing in there that gives any explicit indication otherwise. So what he's talking about doing is offering something as a burnt sacrifice. And the terminology that's used in there is typically used of exactly that, where you're taking an animal, sacrificing it, and burning it. There's mourning involved, and there's just nothing in the passage that sort of mitigates it to the point that you would look at it and say, No, clearly, obviously, he did not.

Jeff Laird

Most of the reasons that we have to think did not, they're just not right there in front of you. One of the things that I found is that, so far as I understand, the traditional Hebrew interpretation of this, the commentaries from Midrash and stuff like that, I think, refer to Jephthah being condemned because he burned his daughter. And they even include condemnation of the priests at the time for not offering the absolution that the Old Testament offers for rash vows, which is something I'm sure that we'll get into.

Jeff Laird

So when you read what's actually put down there, you can read through that and say, Okay, if I read this through the lens that he actually did sacrifice his daughter, that's very plausible and very possible. And if we look at that and we say, That's terrible. That's awful. Yes. And so is the rest of the book of Judges. This is another example of where something is recorded does not mean that it is endorsed or that it is agreed to.

Jeff Laird

A part of the point of the book of Judges is that people were persistently doing things that God did not want. Most of the judges are some of the least perfect people in the Old Testament, which also is part of the point. So I think when you read this, it's entirely reasonable to go through it and say, Yes, from what I can see, I think he actually did this. That does not mean that he should have. That does not mean it was the right way to do it, but probably Jephthah did exactly and literally what he said he was going to do and sacrificed his daughter.

Kevin Stone

And I would agree with what Jeff said that when you take a look at the passage and just read it for what it says, it sure does seem like Jephthah

actually sacrificed his daughter. And there's nothing in the passage that would actually lead us to look for another answer to this.

Kevin Stone

However, there have been a lot of questions raised about this story and possibly that Jephthah's daughter was dedicated to the tabernacle.

She was given to the Lord that way instead of becoming a burnt offering. And there are several reasons why people have kind of come down on that side. And I lean toward that side myself. One is that Jephthah was a true man of faith. According to Hebrews chapter 11, he shows up in the hall of faith. His name is listed there. And of course, just being in Hebrews chapter 11 does not mean that everything he did was right. I mean, a lot was there too, but it's a mark in his favor.

Kevin Stone

Also, the immediate context in verse 29 of this passage in Judges mentions that God empowered Jephthah. The Holy Spirit came upon him. And so, like two verses later, he's making this vow. So if he truly intended a human sacrifice, then we know that that would not have come from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So this vow was maybe just something he did on his own, or he was still under the influence of the Holy Spirit and this vow actually meant something a little bit different than what we think.

Kevin Stone

There's also the argument, and it's not a real strong one, but the Hebrew conjunction that's used here in verse 31 is flexible in meaning. In other passages, this conjunction is translated or. In our passage, it's translated and. So it says that his vow went this way, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph will be the Lord's and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. But if that were translated as or, as it is in other passages, then he's making a distinction. Jephthah is making a distinction between what would be a proper sacrifice and what would not be a proper sacrifice, and it would still belong to the Lord, but it would not be offered as a burnt offering.

Kevin Stone

Trying to force Jephthah's vow to refer to a human sacrifice also brings up a whole lot of other questions. Like, Jephthah had to know that human sacrifice was wrong. He must have known that. So did he truly intend that when he made the vow, or did he give himself an option? It's true that he may have been influenced by the pagan culture in which he lived that surrounded Israel, and some of the pagans did practice human sacrifice. Maybe he was influenced by that. We don't know. But what if, you know, he makes this vow, what if an unclean animal comes out, an animal that could not be sacrificed

for the Lord? What if he was met by a neighbor's kid, you know, instead of somebody in his own household? So even if he did intend a human sacrifice, thinking one of his servants or something would be the first one to meet him, we still run into these other obstacles, these other questions that we have.

Kevin Stone

Also, the priest could have redeemed Jephthah's daughter according to the law that was in Leviticus chapter 27, which reads, if anyone makes a special vow to dedicate a person to the Lord by giving the equivalent value, set the value of a female at 30 shekels. So for 30 shekels, she would still be considered dedicated to the Lord, but she would not have been sacrificed.

Kevin Stone

Another argument for Jephthah's daughter actually living is that Jephthah's neighbors and friends surely would have intervened. We see this in 1 Samuel chapter 14, where King Saul made a very rash vow, and his son Jonathan was marked for death because Jonathan inadvertently broke the rule that Saul had laid down. But Saul's men intervened, and Jonathan lived. He was not executed.

Kevin Stone

Also, we have similar examples of a child being dedicated to the Lord.

1 Samuel chapter 1, this passage says that Hannah made a vow, saying, Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant, but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life. No razor will ever be used on his head. So Samuel was dedicated to the Lord. He belonged to the Lord, and it's possible that Jephthah did the same with his daughter.

Kevin Stone

Also, in the passage, in Judges, Jephthah's daughter's death is nowhere mentioned. She does not mourn her death during those months that she goes away, but she mourns her virginity. And then she returns to her father, verse 39, so that he could keep the vow. But as we've maybe intimated here, there's more than one way for this vow to be kept. So requesting two months apart would have been out of keeping with the account that she was to be put to death, if that's the way we go. To mourn one's virginity doesn't really mean that she's going to die a virgin, but that she has to live and remain a virgin is what that would seem to mean.

Kevin Stone

Also, the mourning takes place away from her father, and that'd be very strange. Child about to die would forsake her father altogether the last two months of her life instead of being with him, spending time with him. So, and again, she's mourning her virginity, not the fact that she's about to become a

burnt offering. So her remaining unmarried and childless must have had something to do with Jephthah's vow, the thinking is.

Kevin Stone

She also bewails the virginity on the mountains with her friends, who were undoubtedly female. So she gets away from town, and the thinking here is that she did this because it was a girl thing. She wants to be mourning away from men. And with her friends to commiserate with her. And so that would make sense too, that she's going to be alive when she comes back, but she is going to be remaining a virgin for the rest of her life, and that's what the mourning was all about.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin and Jeff, both great points, and I read this passage, and yeah, the one aspect of it where Jephthah says, I will offer as a burnt offering the first thing that comes out of my door. And then later in the passage it said, and Jephthah did to her as he had vowed. So that seems fairly clear in the sense of, yes, Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt offering, despite it being something forbidden in God's law, something that God literally says that describes it as abhorrent, the idea of making child sacrifices to him. So yes, if that's what happened, I think we can say very clearly, the Lord did not want this to happen, would not have accepted it as a valid offering because the law specifically commands against this.

Shea Houdmann

But then as Kevin described, there are a few things in this that kind of make you, hmm, you see the possibility that maybe that's not what happened. And to me, I've never been in a situation like this at all, but if I was about to be sacrificed, I think the fact of my life ending would be what I'm mourning, not whether I'm ever going to be able to get married. That just seems misplaced priorities in regards to what you're going to be missing. But so there's that aspect of it too.

Shea Houdmann

And obviously, I think we hope that Jephthah didn't do this.

Like Kevin said, he's in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11, in this passage he's nowhere described as being perfect by any stretch, but he was a follower of Yahweh. Surely he would know Yahweh does not accept human sacrifice. So there's enough hope in the passage that maybe she was dedicated to the Lord and served the Lord in the temple the rest of his life and remained unmarried rather than being sacrificed. We also just need to be open and honest. First read, just a literal read, it does seem that Jephthah did as he vowed, which would have been to offer her as a burnt sacrifice. So that's where I land, hoping it went one way, but also being realistic that a little

reading of the passage seems to indicate that it happened exactly as Jephthah had originally vowed.

Kevin Stone

It's certainly true that the time of the judges was a very corrupt time. And we read several times in the book of Judges how the people of Israel were chasing after the false gods. And you're getting mixed up in a lot of stuff they should not have been mixed up in. And so it is plausible that Jephthah actually did carry out the burnt offering and used his daughter as the victim, which would be an atrocious thing, but it would fit with the theme of the book of Judges, of people just falling away from the Lord.

Jeff Laird

Yeah, Judges is interesting. I use movies a lot as cultural parallels because they're things that we can use as touchstones. There's a lot of times when I'm reading things in Judges and I'm picturing a scene almost like Mad Max, where you've got this post-apocalyptic wasteland with all these crazy people. And it's not post-apocalyptic, it's not a wasteland, but there's a lot of crazy going on in Judges. Even the good guys are doing some really weird, strange things, which is part of the point is that when the people went in to take the promised land, they didn't follow God's instructions. They did not do exactly what they were supposed to. It led to this vicious spiral where things just got worse and worse and worse. Reading it and going, holy mackerel, that's nuts. Well, yeah, that's part of the point of what we're seeing in this. I would agree with you guys that the main thrust of this seems to be something along that line of don't do dumb things, which would be don't do something dumb and then argue about whether A or B was the dumber choice. The takeaway from Jephthah is not supposed to be don't vow to offer your daughter as a burnt sacrifice versus don't vow to offer your daughter as a temple maiden. It's that just don't do that. It was a really, really stupid thing for him to have done.

Kevin Stone

I think one of the stupid things that Jephthah did concerning the vow was that he tried to bargain with God. I don't see the wisdom in that at all. To come to God and say, you do this for me and I'll do this for you, and then we'll both benefit from each other. That's not how we approach God. I think one of the things with Jephthah is making this vow that was a bargain with God. I think our vows to God should be done out of gratitude for what he has done in our lives and not trying to bargain with him in any way.

Jeff Laird

Yeah. Shea, what you were talking about with the idea of being more worried about death, I can see both sides of that when it comes to whether she was

sacrificed or whether she was given to temples. In our culture, your own personal death would definitely be considered the most important thing. But I know that in the Old Testament sense, at least as it's presented, that having children passing along a lineage was considered to be really, really important. The passage says that this was Jephthah's only child. He had no sons. He had no other daughters. Part of what she could be mourning in that, whether it's sacrifice or going to the temple, is she's mourning the fact that she's going to die without passing along the family. This is the end of the line, that her father, her family, her clan is going to end with this. I can see both of those.

Jeff Laird

When I think of it that way, it does make me lean a little bit more towards the temple side of things, because I do agree. I think if she was mourning to say, oh, I'm going to die, you would sort of see that. Again, there's almost nothing in the story that you can look at that pins it down perfectly to one side or the other. Just about everything that's in there leaves room to interpret, which again, it's comforting to remember that we don't need to know every single detail to be able to get the major lesson from this, which in this particular case seems to be, be very, very careful about the vows that you make. And then don't be obnoxiously literal about the way that you handle. God is never going to hold us to legalism to the extent that he wants us to do something worse. Making a rash vow is stupid. Burning your daughter is a lot worse. So regardless of whether he did one or the other, what he did was not wise. And I think that's the main point of it.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, I think that's an excellent point. And typically when people preach this passage, the application is don't make rash vows, with the assumption being that if you make a vow, you have to fulfill it. It's like, okay, hold on a second. There's a passage that says in the New Testament that Jesus is saying, basically, be very, very careful with the vows that you make. Yes, let your yes be yes and let your no be no. But vows aren't supposed to be something we're supposed to do what's right, supposed to not do what's wrong. We're not supposed to vow, make promises as if, well, I promised I would do this. Well, if it's right, you should be doing it anyways. If it's wrong, you shouldn't be doing it anyways. So vows are not something that's supposed to be a normal part.

Shea Houdmann

But we get questions fairly frequently. It's like, okay, I made this vow and now I have to do it. And it's like, well, if the fulfilling of the vow, like you were saying, Jeff, the fulfilling of the vow is worse than breaking the vow, break the

vow. And even the Old Testament, and Kevin, you mentioned earlier the passage in Leviticus, there's an allowance for breaking a vow. It's still wrong to break your word, but it's better to break your word in a vow than it is to do something atrociously evil like sacrificing a child to the Lord, which I think the language used in the Old Testament about how much God hates human sacrifices is as strong as it could be. So breaking a vow bad, sacrificing your daughter in a pagan way, infinitely worse, break the vow and then deal with the consequences of that rather than breaking God's commandments in a much, much, much, much worse way.

Jeff Laird

Yeah, there's this idea that we talk about in prayer. And this comes in the conversation about when we say we can pray to God and He will grant any request that's according to His will. Well, it would make sense to say that if you pray for something that's explicitly against God's will, there's no validity to that. You have no reason whatsoever to think that God's even going to honor that in the slightest. It would be the same thing with a vow. If I vow to do something that is completely contrary to God's nature, it wouldn't make sense for God, say, to look down on that and go, oh, yes, that's what I want you to do. I want you to offend me by doing this thing. So I think it's one of those situations where if you make the stupid vow or the rash promise that that's the sin, that's where the sin is. You promise to do something that clearly God does not want you to do.

Jeff Laird

I don't think going forward from there, from a sin, a moral standpoint between us and God, that it's now a sin to not fulfill it. You committed the sin when you made a vow that was something that God did not want because that's dumb and it's offensive to Him. When you promise to give somebody something that you should know very well they don't want, you're not saying something very good about their nature.

Jeff Laird

Here's movies again. There's a scene in one of the Marvel movies where a character is fumbling to try to apologize to a romantic interest and he brings her strawberries, which she's allergic to. Her response is kind of like, do you even care? Do you even think? Are you that wrapped up in yourself? It's the same thing if you make a selfish, stupid, sinful vow to God. He's not going to respond well to that. That's where the sin is. The sin is not really in breaking that vow. The sin is in making it. So there is still the sense in which when you don't fulfill a vow to God, there is sin. Yeah, that's always going to be the case. But if you're making a sinful vow, it's making that vow in the first

place. God isn't looking at that afterwards and saying, well, you said you were going to do an even worse thing.

Jeff Laird

It's 1 Corinthians 10, 13.

God's always going to give us a way to be out. He's never going to put us in a position where I say, well, I can either sin by breaking the vow or I can sin by doing something that I know God hates. The better thing to do is follow that Leviticus model. And in the New Testament era, we can do the same thing. Just say, God, I'm sorry. That was silly. I know I shouldn't have promised that and move on from there.

Shea Houdmann

That's an excellent point. I'm just taking what exactly the sin was a step back. So actually breaking the vow in that case would not be the sin if you're making the vow to begin with. So that's an excellent point, a good reminder.

Jeff Laird

God's not going to sign off on that vow. So it's sort of never happened. Yeah.

Shea Houdmann

So this is such a fascinating passage. Lots of questions about it over the years. And as you can see where the three of us are struggling with, it seems to be that Jephthah did this, but we can all hope and see some possibility of this. But I don't know that we can explicitly say one direction or another whether Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter to the Lord. But I think the key lessons here is don't make vows that clearly violate God's Word to begin with. And if you do, definitely do not fulfill that vow. So that's the application we can all remember in this passage.

Shea Houdmann

So Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me. As always, a continuation of our difficult passage in the Bible series on did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter to the Lord? And our answer is, I'm going to say probably, but we hope not. So I hope our conversation today has been helpful to you and helped you understand this passage in the book of Judges. And again, remembering the context of Judges, I think is key here as well, that describing a people who were not following the Lord. Even when they were following the Lord, they were not following the law of the Lord. So there's so much to learn. Just familiarize yourself with God's Word. Don't make rash vows and definitely don't fulfill rash vows. So this has been the Got Questions podcast. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We will help you find them.