

Life Lesson 51
Tola, Jair, Jephthah
Text: Judges 10 & 11

Introduction

You should always keep your promises, right? Suppose you promised a friend you would go with him to steal some candy from the convenience store. Should you keep your promise?

God said in one of the ten commandments: "Thou shalt not steal." If you knew that, and if you cared about what God thought, you wouldn't have made such a foolish promise in the first place. A promise to do wrong should never be kept!

The Story

Our story today is about a judge who didn't know God or His Word well enough. His lack of understanding caused him to make a stupid promise -- and to keep it -- all the while thinking he was pleasing God.

One reason he didn't know God's Word was that the Israelites kept going around in their miserable circle. God blessed them, :) but they forgot him and worshiped idols.]:/ Then He sent another nation to conquer them and get their attention.:(They cried to the Lord for forgiveness :0 and He sent a judge to deliver them. For a while they enjoyed God's blessings, :) but then they forgot Him and began worshiping idols again.]:/ Over and over, all through the book of Judges, we see that happening.

The people didn't study God's Word and they didn't know what God was like or what He expected of them. As a result, tragic things happened.

After Abimelech died, the Israelites were again without a defender. This time God called

a man named Tola to be a judge. We don't know anything at all about him except that he judged Israel for 23 years.

After Tola there came a man named Jair. Jair had 30 sons. They each rode on a donkey colt and ruled a city. Jair ruled Israel for 22 years.

After Jair died, the Israelites went, once more, around their continual cycle. They forgot about all God had done for them and began to worship idols. The Lord was angry with them and allowed the men of Ammon to conquer them. Once they were oppressed, the Israelites again cried to God for deliverance.

"Didn't I deliver you from the Egyptians, from the Amorites, and the children of Ammon, and the Philistines?" the Lord asked them. "What about when I rescued you from the Maonites, the Amalekites and the Zidonians? Each time I delivered you, and you forgot me and worshiped idols. Go ask those idols to help you. I'm not going to deliver you anymore."

We know God is loving and longsuffering and forgiving. That doesn't mean, though, that He doesn't care if we sin, or that He will put up with it forever. God gets angry about sin. If God says don't do something -- don't dare do it!

But the Israelites kept on crying for forgiveness. Do you think God was glad to see them suffer? No, the Bible says He was grieved for their misery. At last God sent help.

The elders of the land went to the land of Tob and asked a man there whose name was Jephthah to come and lead their army.

"Why do you come asking me to lead you?" Jephthah asked them. "I'm living here in the land of Tob because my family kicked me out. Why should I come back to fight for you?"

"If you come back with us, you can be our ruler," the elders promised him.

So Jephthah returned to the land of Canaan with the elders. He began planning his strategy. First he sent a message to the Ammonites.

“We don’t want to fight you,” the message said. “We want to be at peace. Just leave us alone and we’ll leave you alone.”

The king answered, “Give us back the land you took from us and we’ll quit fighting.”

“We didn’t take your land,” Jephthah said. “God gave it to us. When Moses led our people through the Red Sea and into the wilderness, he asked permission to pass through the land of the Amorites. The king said no, and attacked the Israelites. God gave us a victory over the Amorites then, and gave us the land that used to be theirs. We aren’t going to give it back, because God gave it to us. You can live on the land your god, Chemosh, gives you.”

The children of Ammon didn’t pay any attention to the message, so Jephthah led the army into battle. As he fought he made a vow, or promise, to God.

“If you will give us this victory,” he prayed, “I’ll make a sacrifice to you of the first thing I see coming out my door when I get home.”

That was a rash promise, but that’s what Jephthah said.

The Lord did give the victory and Jephthah returned home in triumph.

As he neared his house his little daughter ran out to meet him. She was so glad to see him! She came singing and dancing with happiness because her father had come home and because he had won the victory.

Jephthah was glad to see her -- until he suddenly remembered his promise. He had promised to offer as a burnt sacrifice the first thing that came out his door. His daughter was the first one out the door!

Now, Jephthah had heard the word of God before. Moses had written down all the instructions from God. He should have known that God didn't want to have his little girl as a burnt sacrifice. In Deuteronomy 18 the Bible plainly says, "There shall not be found among you anyone that maketh his son or daughter to pass through the fire."

Jephthah didn't know God's Word as well as he should have. He made a silly promise, one that didn't please God. It would be disobedience to keep that promise. Yet, Jephthah, in his ignorance, thought he must keep it.

Perhaps part of his problem was that he had been living around the Amorites too long. They offered human sacrifices, usually a son or daughter, to their god, Chemosh. Maybe he didn't realize how different the real God is from the god of the Amorites.

His daughter was sad to hear that her father would offer her as a burnt offering. She was brave, though, and agreed to be the offering so the promise so foolishly given would be kept.

"Just let me go up to the hills with my friends and cry because I didn't have time to grow up and get married," she said.

Her father agreed to her request. Surely, during those two months, God would have told him not to do this terrible thing. I guess Jephthah wasn't listening. After she came back, he offered his little girl, his only child, as a sacrifice.

What a terribly sad story! It was a foolish promise, foolishly kept.. What heartache it caused!

The Life Lesson

It's best to be careful what you promise. If you promise to do something and find out it's

wrong, you shouldn't keep that promise. We should do what we say we will do, but foolish promises are better broken than kept.

Knowing God's Word will keep us from making stupid mistakes like Jephthah did. That's why we study the Bible in Sunday School, and that's why you need to read it for yourself every single day.

Review Questions

Who was judge after Gideon?

Tola

Who followed Tola as judge?

Jair

Which judge came after Tola?

Jephthah

What did Jephthah promise if God would give the victory in battle?

The first thing that came through his gate.

Did God give the victory over the Amonnites?

Yes.

What was the first thing out of Jephthah's gate?

His daughter.

Did God want Jephthah to sacrifice his daughter?

No, God had forbidden human sacrifice.

Did Jephthah sacrifice his child?

Yes

What do we learn from Jephthah's mistake?

Not to make rash promises, and to know God's Word so we don't make foolish mistakes like Jephthah did.