

A Surprising Saint

Forgotten Lives . . . Remembered Truths, Part 6

Judges 11

I attended the same Christian school from kindergarten through graduation.

I remember one student, by the name of Paul, who was a couple years ahead of me. He was an angry young man with a chip on his shoulder. You didn't mess with Paul. I also remember that sometime during his senior high years he began selling drugs and was eventually caught and expelled from school.

Several years later, when I was attending Bible College, I was walking down the sidewalk and who did I see but Paul. He was a student there as well. I got to admit, my first thought was, "Man, I wonder if he's selling drugs here too?"

We talked that day and Paul told me how he had come to faith in Christ – and the grace of God that had completely revolutionized his life. He told me that God had impressed on him a call into full-time ministry and he was now studying to become a missionary.

He would eventually plant a church in Mexico, City – one of the most dangerous cities on the planet – and his ministry to gang members and drug addicts brought great fruit for the glory of God.

I think if we're honest, we'd have to admit that we all know one or two, surprising saints.

I mean – someone that we would never imagine to serve Christ – much less believe the gospel and get saved.

I often think of John Newton – the author of *Amazing Grace* – and his rather well known admission where he said that when he gets to heaven he is no doubt going to be surprised to see some people there that he didn't expect to see.

We have a natural tendency to write someone off because of their past – or what we might know about their history.

And we are often surprised by God's grace . . . which is an indication that we think way too highly of ourselves – because the grace of God in saving us and using any of us is no less surprising.

And that's what grace is . . . it is unmerited, undeserved – and can I add the word – surprising – favor with God.

God stoops to redeem all of us . . . we were all dug from the same pit – the same mire of depravity and defiance and disobedience.

The grace of God isn't just a New Testament principle or truth. It is demonstrated and defined over and over again throughout the Old Testament.

What I want to do in this last message in the series, *Forgotten Lives, Remembered Truths*, is go back to an Old Testament passage and watch grace at work one more time.

Turn in your Old Testament once more to the Book of Judges.

Let me introduce to you perhaps for the first time one of the most colorful, fascinating judges to date. And without a doubt, one of the most surprising saints in Old Testament record of scripture.

Before we unpack some of his biography, let me set the scene for you.

The Book of Judges – and you may already know – is a cataloging of Israel's Ferris wheel relationship with God.

The spinning wheel never seems to stop –

- it's a cycle of **fellowship** with God,
- followed by **disobedience** and sin,

- followed by **subjugation** by surrounding nations,
- followed by **repentance**,
- followed by **deliverance** –
- and the cycle starts all over again with **disobedience**.

By the time you reach the end of *Judges chapter 10*, Israel has suffered for 18 years at the hands of the Ammonites and Philistines because of their disobedience.

But they repent of their idolatry and plead for God to help them. But God basically responds this time with “No . . . why don’t you ask your other gods to help you!”

In other words, Israel is doing what so many people – and nations – have done since. One author called it “bomb shelter theology” – don’t mention

God and don’t obey His word, but then there’s a national crisis and suddenly everybody’s praying.¹

In other words, we only want Him when we need Him. And if we don’t need Him, we really don’t want Him.

Well, Israel panics – as you can imagine – but instead of praying to their false idols, they have an idol burning revival and begin to obey the word of God.

Furthermore, they muster an army to fight the Ammonites and they call upon God for help.

And God – in His marvelous grace – responds.

Now, the problem immediately surfaces for the Israelites – they’re missing one key person as they prepare to fight for their freedom. They don’t have a commander in chief – a judge – who can lead them into battle.

God is about to choose for them the most unlikely leader Israel had ever known – his brief biography begins in chapter 11 and verse 1. *Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. And Gilead was the father of Jephthah. 2. And Gilead’s wife bore him sons; and when his wife’s sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father’s house, for you are the son of another woman.” 3. So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him.*

Now this isn’t exactly the kind of resume you would expect to ever pass the first round of candidates . . . this isn’t exactly someone you’d expect God to choose to deliver His people.

No doubt, the Israelites would read this and shudder . . . maybe even faint . . . or at least be embarrassed that God had not chosen a leader from among the upstanding or educated or some other well-groomed candidates.

Jephthah doesn’t fit the mold!

He was anything but upstanding and well connected . . . the truth was, he had a shady past and a gangster type of lifestyle at the moment.

Now if you slow down and go back and take a closer look, buried in these opening verses are volumes of disappointment and pain and sin and despair.

Jephthah had several strikes against him from the very beginning – four strikes, the way I counted them – they’re all spelled out here.

- **Strike #1** - He was illegitimate.

Go back to the opening line of *verse 1*; *Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. And Gilead was the father of Jephthah.*

In other words, Jephthah has no right of inheritance . . . no legal rights or privileges either.

He’s more than likely born in a brothel and will have to somehow grow beyond the scandal of his origin.

This informs us that Jephthah will grow up without any of the benefits and examples of a godly father and mother . . . he carries the pain of the sinful acts of his parents – so he immediately starts out without any spiritual pedigree.

I find it telling – and tragic – to read the way his biography opened – did you notice? *Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, but . . . he was the son of a harlot.*

Why not put a period after he *was a valiant warrior* . . . He was *a valiant warrior* – period!

I think it’s recorded simply and purely to reveal to Israel, and to us, the wonderful grace of God.

Strike 1 – Jephthah was illegitimate.

- **Strike #2** - His mother was a prostitute.

Now we just read that! I know, but don’t hurry past it . . . it was put there for a reason.

Gilead was unfaithful to his wife. Perhaps it was one night while away – he puts 20 shillings down and buys an hour of secret sin.

To his dismay, this harlot gets pregnant and can prove it's his.

Gilead seems to be a man of enough character to effectively adopt Jephthah, but the home seethes with resentment. Eventually the home of Gilead – and his marriage turn into a battleground of hatred and hostility and jealous rivalry.

Which leads me to . . .

- **Strike #3** - He was eventually rejected by his family.

Notice verse 2. And Gilead's wife bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman."

In other words, "Jephthah, we haven't forgotten . . . you're not one of us . . . you don't really belong. And if all you get out of it is food and roof over your head – that's fine enough – but don't even think about sharing in our father's inheritance . . . in fact, we think it's better off for everybody if you leave."

And Jephthah was literally driven away.

There's still one more strike against him . . . if you can imagine it:

- **Strike #4** - He becomes a gang leader

Look at verse 3. So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him.

That word translated worthless is translated by others as adventurers (NIV) – which is a bit too Hollywood for me.

Woodenly translated, it means, empty or reckless.ⁱⁱ

These were the shady characters from the back alleys of Israel.

The only people who seemed to want to have anything to do with a guy like Jephthah were the misfits and idle vagrants of his generation. They lived in the land of Tob – that name can mean wilderness, or even treeless.

In other words, they were a gang of nobodies living in Nowheresville, living hand to mouth.

Can you imagine this biography going anywhere but down for the count.

Born to a woman who wished he'd never been born; abandoned by her and taken into the home of a

father who didn't really care enough to insist that he be treated equally; in fact, this father's absence is rather obvious – perhaps evidently embarrassed by the constant reminder of his sin.

And so Jephthah is left to fend for himself – and he ends up in the wilderness of Tob."

This is the beginning of the story of a surprising saint – the coming, courageous leader of Israel who leads them to victory.

The famous Scottish preacher Dr. Alexander Whyte knew something of Jephthah's past . . . and pain. I have books written by this tremendous church leader and pastor who served Christ during the 1800's.

Alexander Whyte had also been born out of wedlock, which in his day carried nothing less than a lifelong stigma. He had to contend with the mockery of boys his age, the scorn of the girls and the whispers of the townspeople whenever they saw him in town.

When Alexander was born, his mother gave him his father's surname. She reared him in poverty, but with deep spiritual piety. In time he became apprenticed to a shoemaker and through hard work he was able to study at the universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh before entering the ministry.

He eventually became the leader among his peers and a famous author and pastor and educator.

His preaching, as you might imagine, was marked by a deep sensitivity for those around him and he identified with those who suffered.

Over the course of his ministry, he often preached on Bible characters and eventually those sermons were published.

I pulled my copy of Alexander Whyte's off the shelf in my study at home – it is nearly 800 pages long – and I turned to his chapter on Jephthah . . . I thought it would be especially interesting to read what he had to say about him.

And did he have something to say.

He writes, Jephthah was the most ill-used man in all the Old Testament, and he continues to be the most completely misunderstood, misrepresented, and ill-used man down to this day . . . buffeted about from his birth by his brothers; trampled upon by all men, but most of all by the men of his father's house; called all manner of odious and exasperating names; when a prophet came to dine, he was sent away to the fields to be out of sight.

The iron had entered his soul while yet he lay in his mother's womb; and both his father and his brothers and the elders of Israel helped [deepen]

Jephthah's affliction, till the Lord rose up for Jephthah and said, "It is enough" – and He . . . poured oil and wine into his lifelong wounds.ⁱⁱⁱ

Written by a man who understood.

Perhaps you can identify in some way with Jephthah in the endurance of a painful past . . . or the consequences of parental sins . . . or the doubts and questions that sometimes trouble you as to whether or not God has written you off . . . or that you're unusable or unwanted . . . let me reassure you, the story is about to change here – the grace of God is about to reverse nearly everything.

I want Jephthah to become a lasting encouragement to you that no matter what stains the pages of your past, God's grace isn't finished writing; He has some more to add to your biography . . . God's grace can reach down into the deepest pit – it's as if God mixes the ink for His pen of grace from the darkest moments of your past.

As Corrie Ten Boom used to say – after surviving a concentration camp during World War 2 – this Jewish believer would often testify – There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.

As far as Israel was concerned, Jephthah was beyond the grace of God! God has other ideas in mind.

Now, there's one other phrase I want you to see that provides some additional insight into Jephthah's early days of rejection and pain. When the elders of Israel decide, by God's leading, that Jephthah is the man to lead them into battle, notice what *verse 7 reveals. Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me from my father's house?"*

Imagine what this implies. The elders didn't want him around either; and they finally make a formal trip to the home of Gilead – their collars are starched and pressed; their hearts buttoned up tightly as well.

They knock on the door and are invited into the parlor; Jephthah can hear the low murmur of voices . . . he can make out a few words. "Gilead – your illegitimate son – an embarrassment to the community – your reputation is at stake – he needs to pack up and leave!"

So with his brother's sneering in the background; his own father cowardly and perhaps half-hearted apology; his mother evidently not around to say goodbye – Jephthah is effectively rejected by his people and exiled in the land of Tob where he gathers around him other men with shady pasts . . .

but with this one thing in common . . . **they have no future.**

Alexander Whyte points out that Jephthah becomes something of an illustration of Jesus Christ's own story; born amid suspicions of an immoral mother – conceiving out of wedlock; growing up to eventually be rejected by the elders of Israel and a companion and friend to sinners and tax collectors and harlots . . . people with a past . . . but people you'd never expect to see with any kind of future.

There's no way that kind of man will ever be considered as a deliverer – a champion for the people of God.

Ah . . . enter the grace of God!

The grace of God isn't given to those who think they deserve it . . . it's undeserved favor . . . and it's lavished, Paul wrote, by God upon people – people like Jephthah . . . people like you and me – for we are no more deserving of the grace of God.

The next stage in Jephthah's life is the expression of God's grace as the elders come to seek him out.

I'd love to have seen this meeting take place.

The people needed a fighter with the guts to face the sons of Ammon. Jephthah might not have a diploma from the rabbinical school of Judaism, but he has a doctorate in survival, from the school of hard knocks.

He's just the kind of scrappy, courageous leader they need. And all those years leading a company of misfits in order to survive their exile, Jephthah is now prepared to lead the armies of Israel.

Let's look back at verse 5. And it happened when the sons of Ammon fought against Israel that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob; 6. And they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our chief that we may fight against the sons of Ammon."

Can you believe the irony?! I can imagine the elders are stuttering and coughing . . . "*Come and be our . . . our . . . our . . . well . . . our chief.*"

Jephthah reminds them that they had hated him and had driven him away – *notice verse 7b. "So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?"*

That's a valid question! And you'll notice that they completely ignore answering it.

Notice verse 8. And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "For this reason we have now returned to you, that you may go with us and fight with the sons of Ammon and become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

“We are prepared to announce you as President and Supreme Commander without even voting . . . you’re our man Jephthah . . . what do you say we let bygones be bygones!”

Listen, I can imagine Jephthah responding – “Why should I care about you and the people who’ve rejected me . . . it’s not my problem and, frankly, I hope the sons of Ammon wipe you guys off the face of the planet – you hated me and kicked me out of Gilead – now it’s time you took your own medicine.”

That’s how most stories like this end.

Instead, the most amazing thing happens; *v 11. Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them.*

You might read these few verses and think that all that mattered to Jephthah was promotion . . . a presidency . . . that would be revenge enough.

No . . . he actually goes back and leads them to war – he risks his life for people who hadn’t really cared about his.

The lessons to learn are more than we will list . . . but let me give you two of them:

1. First, Jephthah teaches us that it’s possible to choose to move past your past.

It’s possible, by the grace of God, to move past whatever has happened to you in the past.

How?

The key in Jephthah’s own life is found in *verse 11. Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah.*

In other words, he had this ongoing conversation with his covenant-keeping Lord.

By the way, Jephthah will use the personal name of God more than any other person in the entire Book of Judges.^{iv}

Something had happened out there in the barren land of Nowhere . . . the garden-less, tree-less place . . . Jephthah had been found by the grace of God.

And instead of joining the Ammonites to destroy Israel, Jephthah risks his life – and then gives his life – to lead and rule and judge the people of God.

Isn’t it amazing today who God tends to use to reach the world; an evangelist named D.L. Moody who never went past the fifth grade; a sheep herder like Phillip Keller; a doctor to lepers like Phillip Yancey; an ex-con like Chuck Colson; the son of an

alcoholic like Josh McDowell; a college dropout like Chuck Swindoll.

Let me say it this way;

Not only does Jephthah teach us that it’s possible to move past your past.

2. Secondly, Jephthah shows us that it’s possible to help those who refused to help.

His buddies in Tob probably thought he was crazy! Why would you help your half-brothers . . . and all those elders . . . forget them . . . they had it coming.

Jephthah effectively chooses to show grace to those who had withheld grace from him.

How? He had an ongoing conversation with God – Who had not deserted him and had been a parent and a companion to him . . . out there in the wilderness of life.

Although everyone had abandoned him . . . he knew God had not.

He had somehow maintained a walk with God that was open and transparent; I can imagine overhearing Jephthah praying, “Lord, you’ll never believe what happened to me – you’ll never believe who came to see me – you’ll never believe who needs me . . . I’ll do it . . . I’ll lead them and give my life to them and serve them because I know that ultimately I am giving my life to you and I am serving you . . . and it is all for Your name sake.

A surprising saint . . . unbelievable grace for God to choose him, a remarkable demonstration of grace for Jephthah to choose to serve his family and his people, by the grace and for the glory of God.

A lot of people know of Josh McDowell and have read his books, and I have just about all he’s written, but very few know his testimony.

It’s interesting that this fellow was raised in a home with an alcoholic father, a very abusive father. Josh grew up defending his mother and, sometimes, when he wasn’t there, his father would beat his mother. It wasn’t unusual for Josh to come home from school and go out to the barn – he was raised on a farm – and find his mother lying in the manure behind the cows, beaten so badly she couldn’t get up.

When Josh would have friends over from school, he’d take his drunken father out to the barn and tie him up. And then he’d drive his father’s car and park it around behind the silo and he and his mother would tell all of his friends that his father had somewhere to go.

Josh McDowell writes in his book, entitled “The Resurrection Factor”, if there was anybody that I hated, it was my father.

Josh McDowell went on to a university and there, as a freshman, he heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. He didn’t respond. As a sophomore, he heard it again and this time he believed the gospel and trust Christ as his Savior. And he said, “God immediately began doing something in my life. The Spirit of God had come in and was now producing fruit.” The fruit of grace. And it was surprising. Josh wrote, “It took me about a year and a half before I could even look at my father. He said, only later I was actually able to tell him that I loved him.”

During his college years, Josh had an accident and had to spend time at home on the farm recuperating. His college studies were put on hold.

It was while he was home that his father, one day, came in to his room sober. And he said to Josh, “I don’t understand how you can tell somebody like me that you love me.”

And Josh had an opportunity, for the first time, to share with his father what had happened in his own life. He said, “Yes, I hated you. I despised you. But something has happened in my life and it came in the person of Jesus Christ. Because of Him, I can love you.”

Josh wrote, “Forty-five minutes after my father entered my room, he knelt beside my bed and he asked Jesus Christ to become his own Lord and Savior.”

This is the surprising grace of God . . . it rescued us . . . it still redeems others today that may still surprise us yet.

So, as recipients of the grace of God – and by the way, let’s not get over our own surprise – and then let’s demonstrate the gospel of grace to our world around us.

There’s no telling where those surprising saints will come from, in the days ahead.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/29/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, Such a Great Salvation (Baker, 1990), p.134

ii Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Available: Judges (Victor Books, 1994), p. 95

iii Alexander Whyte, Concise Bible Characters (AMG Publishers, 2010), p. 142

iv Gary Inrig, Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay (Moody Press, 1981), p. 184