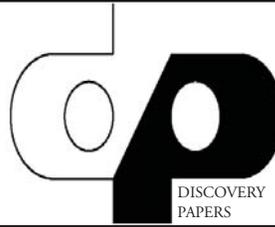


WHEN GOD SAYS NO

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 10:1-11:11
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Have you ever wanted something so badly that you were willing to do almost anything to get it? In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel, Jay Gatsby reinvents himself, moves to New York, becomes wealthy by questionable means, and throws lavish parties, all in the desperate hope that Daisy, a former flame, will leave her husband and return to him. Not many of us go to Gatsby's lengths, but most of us understand what it is to want something desperately and not get it. And if we've dealt with God for very long, we understand what it is like not to get what we want from him.

In Judges 10:1-11:11, the Israelites cry out to God, but he doesn't give them what they want. What will we do when God doesn't give us what we pray for, though we want it desperately, though we do what we're supposed to do, though we cry out for it with all our hearts? Let's see where the narrative takes us.

God plays hardball

Judges 10:6-16:

⁶Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, ⁷he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, ⁸who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. ⁹The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim; Israel was in great distress. ¹⁰Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."

¹¹The LORD replied, "When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, ¹²the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands?"

¹³But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. ¹⁴Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!"

¹⁵But the Israelites said to the LORD, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now." ¹⁶Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer.

After the rule of two so-called minor judges, Tola and Jair, recorded in Judges 10:1-5, the Israelites collapse into idolatry again. The narrator notes the names of two of the gods they worshiped and identifies the other gods by naming the five nations they represented. Two plus five equals seven, and seven in the Hebrew Scriptures connotes completeness. The Israelites have become completely corrupt.

The Lord responds, once again, by handing his people over to oppressors, but this time, he empowers not simply one nation, as he has in the past, but two nations, the Philistines and the Ammonites. The Ammonites are featured in Judges 11-12, and the Philistines are featured in Judges 13-16. These two nations not only oppress the Israelites, they also shatter and crush them. The Lord had warned his people that they would suffer such consequences if they were unfaithful to his covenant with them (Deuteronomy 28:33). The Ammonites dominated the tribes of Israel east of the Jordan River and were so powerful that they also attacked the tribes west of the Jordan.

Eventually, and predictably, the Israelites cry out to the Lord for help. This time, however, he answers with a little history lesson, casting their unfaithfulness against the backdrop of his acts of deliverance. If the number seven featured prominently in the corruption of the Israelites, then the Lord notes that he has delivered them from seven nations. They have become completely corrupt, but he has been completely—yea verily, abundantly—faithful. The Lord's patience has run out: he says he will deliver the Israelites no longer. The Lord chose the Israelites to be his people, but they have "chosen" other gods. Live with your choice, the Lord tells them, and lean on your other gods.

Whatever the other gods are good for, the Israelites know that they're not good for this kind of crisis, so the Israelites appeal to the Lord again. This time, in addition to acknowledging their sinful ways, the Israelites throw themselves on the mercy of the Lord. On the one hand, they supposedly trust him to do whatever is best, but on the other hand, they undercut their case by claiming to know what's best: deliverance now. The Israelites back up their words with actions, forsaking the other gods and worshipping the Lord.

Now what will the Lord do? The New International Version says that the Lord "could bear Israel's misery no longer," but, more likely, the Lord is frustrated with Israel's efforts to win his favor.¹ For the time being, at least, the Israelites can fend for themselves, and in the next sequence, despite their show of repentance, they show no interest in the Lord. The Lord sees the Israelites for what they are: utilitarian and manipulative, not repentant and worshipful.

In previous sequences in the Book of Judges, the Lord answered the cries of the Israelites by raising up individuals to lead them to victory over their oppressors. The change in the pattern indicates that, ultimately, the Israelites need the Lord to do something for them other than what they're asking for—something they don't even know to ask for. Israel's problem—indeed, the world's problem—needs a different kind of solution from repeated deliverance from worldly oppression.

Rebuffed by God

Sometimes, like the Israelites, we cry out to the Lord and he doesn't respond, at least not the way we want him to respond, and he leaves us to lie in the bed we've made for ourselves. What then will we do? Perhaps, like the Israelites, we will confess our sins, repent, worship, and throw ourselves on the mercy of the Lord—mostly to persuade him to give us what we want. Such an effort to win the Lord's favor, however, might only persuade him to become frustrated. I really want the narrator in Judges 10:16 to say, as per the NIV, "And he could bear Israel's misery no longer," but I'm convinced that he doesn't. I'm convinced he says that the Lord got frustrated with the Israelites. Sometimes, despite doing what we think we're supposed to do, everything we think the Scriptures tell us to do, the Lord, by all appearances, plays hardball.

Ah, but he's "faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness," right? (1 John 1:9). What about, "Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, / and to our God, for he will freely

pardon"? (Isaiah 55:7). How about the answered cries not only in Judges but elsewhere, most notably in Exodus 2:24, where the Lord heard the cry of his people, remembered his covenant with them, and delivered them from bondage in Egypt? What's it like to cry out, to confess, to repent, to worship, to throw yourself on the mercy of the Lord, and to feel that he is turning you away?

What do you do when you feel as if you're doing all the right things and getting nowhere with God? The Israelites take matters into their own hands.

Leaders choose Jephthah

Judges 10:17-11:6:

¹⁷When the Ammonites were called to arms and camped in Gilead, the Israelites assembled and camped at Mizpah. ¹⁸The leaders of the people of Gilead said to each other, "Whoever will take the lead in attacking the Ammonites will be head over all who live in Gilead."

^{11:1}Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. ²Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman." ³So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.

⁴Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, ⁵the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."

Up to this point in the book of Judges, the Lord has been involved in the emergence of every human deliverer, but the leaders of Gilead, a region of Israel east of the Jordan River, show no interest in consulting the Lord at this time. They speak to each other, but not to the Lord. Literally, they're looking for a "man," not the Lord, to take the lead in attacking the Ammonites. They will offer such a man, not the Lord, leadership over all of Gilead. None of the leaders wants to lead their people in battle, of course; they want someone else to do their fighting for them so that they can keep their hold on power.

Who will be the man? The leaders of Gilead determine

that Jephthah, a mighty warrior, is the man for the job, but Jephthah, the son of a prostitute, had been run out of town by his half-brothers, who had no interest in sharing their inheritance with him. We might imagine that Jephthah's gifts as a warrior were forged in the furnace of ridicule and rejection. Like Abimelek before him, Jephthah formed a band of cutthroats who literally "went out with him" on raiding parties and the like (Judges 9:4). He grew up tough and learned to survive by whatever means necessary.

The leaders of Gilead now have to convince the man who had been run out of town to come back and lead them. At first, they said that the man who led them into battle would be the political "head" over Gilead, but when they approach Jephthah, they ask him only to be their military "commander," a lesser position. The leaders feel the need for Jephthah's military prowess, but they are wary of granting political leadership to someone who might have a chip on his shoulder for the way he was treated.

The quick fix

If the Lord doesn't answer our cries, we may be inclined to do what the leaders of Gilead did: look for a quick fix. If the Lord doesn't give us what we want, we may be inclined to take matters into our own hands. Sometimes, as in the case of the leaders of Gilead, the quick fix involves persuading an individual to come through for us. How do you find such an individual? Well, if the Lord has refused to answer you, you might be inclined to forget him completely and consult wisdom of the human sort. If so, then you're likely to seek out an individual of your own choosing, not the Lord's. You might pin your hopes on someone like Jephthah, a man with great strengths but equally great character flaws.

Nations, states, and cities make such choices. Companies, churches, and individuals make such choices. Desperate for victory or success or love, they value charisma over character. For Gatsby, Daisy's character didn't matter to him; all that mattered to him was his desire for her.

If we seek out someone like Jephthah, what might such seeking do to us? Let's see what happens as the leaders of Gilead seek out Jephthah.

Jephthah becomes head

Judges 11:7-11:

7Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do

you come to me now, when you're in trouble?"

8The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead."

9Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?"

10The elders of Gilead replied, "The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say."

11So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

Jephthah negotiates with the leaders of Gilead from a position of strength. He knows they're needy and that he has what they need. Moreover, Gilead's earlier rejection of Jephthah further weakens the leaders' negotiating position. They're appealing to a man who has been driven out of their town. Jephthah holds all the cards, and both parties know it. He doesn't even have to play all his cards before the leaders increase their offer, handing him not only military leadership but political leadership also. Jephthah, not trusting the leaders' words, wants it in writing, so to speak, and the leaders respond by swearing before the Lord to make Jephthah the head of Gilead. Jephthah then seals the deal by speaking before the Lord.

The negotiations between the leaders of Gilead and Jephthah parallel the interaction between the Israelites and the Lord in Judges 10:10-16.² Back then, the Israelites appealed to the Lord, but he judged them to be utilitarian and manipulative and refused to help them. Now, the leaders of Gilead, employing language similar to that of the Israelites in the previous sequence, appeal not to the Lord but to a man, and they appeal to him solely on the basis of his military prowess. They're just looking for someone—the Lord, a gun for hire, anyone—to get the job done. Whereas the Lord saw through the Israelites and turned them away, Jephthah, though seeing through the leaders of Gilead, plays them to get what he wants. True, the name of the Lord is invoked by both the leaders and Jephthah but only as a silent witness to what amounts to "a purely human contract between a desperate but opportunistic people and an ambitious, opportunistic outlaw."³ Neither the leaders' appeal to Jephthah nor Jephthah's rise to power comes with the Lord's endorsement.

What are you giving up?

Rebuffed by the Lord, yet desperate for victory, success, or love, we sometimes pin our hopes on a particular individual with serious character flaws. If, so to speak, our “bargaining position” is so weak that we increase the offer before we even start negotiating, we might question whether we want whatever it is we’re bargaining for too much. At this point, we might want to ask, “What price victory? What price success? What price love?” What are you giving up to get what you think you need? What are you allowing into your life? What are you setting yourself up for? What are you becoming? What happens to your soul? Listen to Jesus: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

Someone like Jephthah might bail you out, but he also might destroy you in the end. Gatsby’s obsession for Daisy blinded him, consumed him, and finally destroyed him.

Advancing the story

We don’t need Jephthah to save us, but he does advance the biblical story, even if in a backward sort of way. Jephthah foreshadows both Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel. The Israelites chose Saul, a man in many respects like Jephthah, with great strengths but serious character flaws. The Lord, on the other hand, chose David, who was rejected by his family, persecuted by Saul, and driven to the wilderness, much in the manner of Jephthah.

David took refuge in the cave of Adullam, and in the cave, he took refuge in the Lord—unlike anything that was said of Jephthah. Alone in the cave, David penned Psalm 142, a spiritual masterpiece, discovering that the Lord was his “portion in the land of the living” and envisioning a new future: “Then the righteous will gather about me / because of your goodness to me.” Just as outcasts gathered around Jephthah, an interesting collection of outcasts found their way to the cave of Adullam, and to David: “All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their commander. About four hundred men were with him” (1 Samuel 22:2). The life emanating from the cave drew those who labored under the rule of Saul, but under David, they were transformed, and they formed the nucleus of the new kingdom.

Better to follow David, whom God has chosen, than Jephthah or Saul. Yet, it’s best not to worship David, or any human, of course. David’s greatest strength, unlike any of Jephthah’s strengths, was his relationship with the Lord, but he, too, had his flaws. Even so, though David

sowed the seeds for the demise of the kingdom of Israel, he, more than any other king, foreshadowed, in a positive way, the one we should follow and worship.

Like Jephthah and David, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of David, was rejected by his family (Mark 3:21). Like Jephthah, Jesus was driven out of his hometown (Luke 4:16-30). “He was despised and rejected by mankind” (Isaiah 53:3). Like Jephthah and David, he lived on the run: “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). Similarly, an interesting collection of people—including shepherds, fishermen, tax-collectors, and prostitutes—found their way to him, but when one of his followers took up a sword, he told him to put it away (Matthew 26:52). Who, then, may come to Jesus? Listen to him: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29). All who labor under the kingdoms of this world, come to Jesus. You won’t forfeit your soul; on the contrary, you’ll find rest for your soul.

Our problem—indeed, the world’s problem—needs a different kind of solution than those that are normally put forth. We need Christ, and the Father gives him to us.

Something deeper

Sometimes, we cry out to the Lord and he doesn’t answer us, at least not the way we want to be answered. At such times, we have a choice: go for the quick fix (Jephthah) or go deeper with God (Jesus). The quick fix may grant you relief for the moment, but it also may destroy you in the end. Many Israelites in the first century chose not to believe in Jesus because he didn’t effect the sort of deliverance for which they prayed, which was the same sort of deliverance for which their ancestors prayed in the book of Judges. In Jerusalem, they chose Barabbas, a sword-wielding zealot, over Jesus, the cross-carrying Messiah. Jesus was offering deliverance from Satan, sin, and death, but many of his contemporaries only wanted deliverance from their human oppressors. Jesus said their preference for the quick fix over the deeper deliverance that he offered would result in the destruction of Jerusalem as seen in Luke 19:41-44:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your

walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

His words were fulfilled in 70 A.D., when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and leveled the temple.

Jesus might not bail you out, but rest assured, he won't destroy you in the end. He'll disrupt utilitarian and manipulative notions of faith in which God is supposed to cooperate with your agenda if you do the right things. If he's offering a deeper deliverance, then he'll lead you to a place of deeper, more wondrous repentance, and in that place, he'll give you a deeper victory, a deeper success, a deeper love, and he'll draw out of you worship from the heart. He'll give you himself, and you will find rest for your soul.

When God says no, then, he's saying yes—yes to something deeper, something better, something eternal.

Go deeper with Jesus

As a parent, I often attempt to redirect my children. Instead of saying "no" to what they are asking for, I say "yes" to something they aren't asking for. In this way, I direct them away from something that I don't want for them and toward something that I deem better for them. I don't say no to candy; I say yes to fruit. In this way, I hope to minimize conflicts and disabuse them of the notion that I, as their father, mostly deny them what they want. (Redirection sounds good in theory, but let me tell you, it's not so easy to come up with alternatives on the fly. And, as with any approach, children figure it out and adapt.)

What about God? Doesn't he regularly say "no"? Most of the Ten Commandments, for example, begin with the words "You shall not." However, the Ten Commandments are introduced with these words, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:1-17). The Decalogue, which for the most part comprises prohibitions, is grounded in a powerful positive declaration that draws us into relationship with God. God says no to adultery, for example, because he says yes to relationship with him. Even more powerfully, God says yes in his Son: "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

God not only reveals himself to us by what he gives us but also by what he doesn't give us. When God doesn't give you what you want, he wants to give you something deeper with him. You don't need what you think you need; you need the Lord Jesus Christ. If God gave us the trinkets we wanted, we'd never keep digging for the gold. Go deeper into the cave. You might emerge with something like Psalm 142.

On countless occasions, like everyone else who has approached God, I have not received what I have prayed for. God has said no. Lately, however, I've sensed him answering me with a different kind of yes. Once in a while, as I've contemplated the gospel in prayer, I've sensed the Lord saying something like, "You're only beginning to understand how great this is."

Yes, we're just beginning, but, praise God, eternity stretches out before us.

NOTES

¹Similar wording in Hebrew texts clearly means something along the lines of frustration in Numbers 21:4, Judges 16:16, Job 21:4, and Zechariah 11:8.

²Scholar Daniel I. Block notes the following parallels (Daniel I Block, *The New American Commentary: Judges, Ruth* [Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Publishing Group, 1999], 354):

A The Ammonite oppression (10:7-9)

A' The Ammonite oppression (11:1-4)

B Israelites appeal to the Lord (10:10)

B' Leaders of Gilead appeal to Jephthah (11:5-6)

C The Lord responds sarcastically (10:11-14)

C' Jephthah responds sarcastically (11:7)

D Israelites repeat the appeal (10:15-16a)

D' Leaders repeat the appeal (11:8)

E The Lord refuses to be used (10:16b)

E' Jephthah seizes the moment opportunistically (11:9-11)

³K. Lawson Younger Jr., *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges/Ruth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 252.