

# 7.21.2024 Sermon

## More Q than A | Hebrews 11:32

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

jephthah, gilead, verse, hebrews, vow, god, faith, meaning, word, ammonites, sex worker, text, gym, talmud, turn, sacrifice, daughter, continues, battle

### **SPEAKER**

Elder Kevin Brisbin

Good morning, church. The title of my sermon today is “Q&A”. And in the end, the “A” is scratched out if you can see that. Because I have a lot more questions than I have answers. So just, this is a tip-off from the beginning, no surprises there. This may be true every time I preach and every time anyone preaches for that matter, but I just am openly acknowledging that today. So, we're in this sermon series on the book of Hebrews, we're journeying through chapter 11 of Hebrews together. We started this year, walking through this particular section of Hebrews, right in the first Sunday of January. And we've, you know, we're continuing on all the way through, we're getting nearer to the end, I think we wrap it up sometime in September. So, we're actually getting closer to the end of our journey through this chapter in Hebrews.

And right from the jump, there's a lot that we don't know about Hebrews, we don't know who the author is, we don't know the exact audience, like we do with some of the other letters to fairly fundamental pieces of the puzzle and trying to understand text. Now we do believe it was written to early Jewish Christians, as the early Greek manuscripts added the title to the Hebrews, at the beginning of the letter, and it's apparent that the author was well versed in Jewish history and culture and equally well versed in the Greek language as the author's writing is esteemed as being eloquent. But from there, only God knows.

And while that answer, only God knows, is widely acknowledged and aspects like the authorship of Hebrews, that acknowledgment is often more narrowly applied to the balance of Scripture as a whole, at least sometimes, and in my Christian experience, Scripture was presented as much more of a like a singular truth, a truth that was right above questioning, one that was presented, you know, as gospel and ultimate truth. And we were to pursue that truth, that singular truth, we were given Bible study tools, especially in college, I remember that were intended to strip away as much of our personal bias and ourselves as possible to bring as little

of ourselves of the of ourselves to the text, as if our presence would somehow like taint or tarnish that truth. Yeah, I know, we kind of made an idol of the Bible, at least I know I did. Speaking for myself. And I know that's in part because we live in a post-enlightenment time, with the bias that there is an absolute truth that can be and should be discovered and then defended. I mean, this is still the structure of our scholarly postgraduate work to this day, you know, thesis, study, defense, with a heavy like, you don't get to the all the way through until you get to that defend your thesis.

But that wasn't the model for the Hebrews. Neither for the author nor the audience. And so, to do so with these texts, it's kind of to apply a modern-day expectation and interpretation that simply wasn't fair. We have to remember that before these were canon, they were letters, like regular letters, letters, letters. And before and after they were letters. They were stories, oral stories, and that doesn't make them any less valuable or true. This actually doesn't compromise them. Jesus Himself spoke in parables, did he not? And were they any less full of truth or their truth, any less rich? Because they were not actual events?

Is the truth of the prodigal son less moving? Because it wasn't an actual historical event? Is its truth less real, because its main character was not real? Is the last coin or sheep less valuable? Because they weren't physical? You see where I'm going here? Or is it perhaps more impactful because of the breadth of their generosity? Because story can be a safe place for us. In which we can sometimes be the prodigal son, sometimes be the prodigal father, and sometimes be the prodigal older brother. What which is not to say that I believe all scripture to be stories or fiction, rather that I am more comfortable with less certainty these days.

Question means I don't see questions as the enemy of truth. And so, my question for us this morning is, how comfortable can we be with the ambiguity of the Bible? Can we be? Or can we become as comfortable as the Hebrews which brings me to a little segment I like to call Hebrew grammar school a crash course for Christians. You know it, you love it. And here it is.

Today, it's before we even start our text. So, the Jewish faith has out of which all of our scriptures were born, has a tradition called Shivan, panna Lectora. Shivan, Panem, Lectora. And Shem is the Hebrew word for 70 Panem for faces, and the Torah to the Torah. So, these aren't obviously like a 70-faced beast like a hydra or something. Every time you cut one off another 70 More growing, but it's like a 70 faceted gem. And they're quite beautiful tradition of Shiva and La Panem. Latour includes turning the gem, holding it up to the light, examining it, questioning it, seeking your way through that practice, holding space for multiple opinions is much more normal in the Jewish faith. How many of us have heard of the Talmud? A few? Yes.

Well, etymologically, the word Talmud actually means “study and learning”, much like our core value of embracing learning and discovery. We are open to that; we embrace that. Practically, the Talmud is a compilation of rabbinic debates, holding multiple, diverse opinions.

All of them together in this one text that the Jewish faith holds as sacred. And the more I read about this, the more I realize how comfortable Jewish culture is with ambiguity as a whole. One comment I read on one of the discussion boards I was reading as I was just searching about the Talmud and the Jewish faith asked, how does the Talmud keep even the most objectionable opinions? And someone replied,

Judaism is a religion that is open to complexity and ambiguity. We do not expect people to be perfect, and we believe in discussing everything, even things that make us uncomfortable.

And that kind of reminds me of another core value we have which is staying at the table.

Even when we don't agree, and I love this part Rabbinic Judaism is based on argumentation and considering multiple perspectives, including extreme and objectionable ones. We do not study Talmud to learn what to believe. We study Talmud to learn how to discern and evaluate arguments and claims. And I want to read that last sentence just again, we do not study Talmud to learn what to believe. We study Talmud to learn how to discern how to evaluate arguments and claims. And I've said all of that to say this. I think that bringing this context along with us today will be a helpful, dare I say necessary? Companion.

We're picking up today's text in Hebrews 11:32 exactly one verse after the last time I preached six weeks ago, on Hebrews 11:31. What can I say? 11:32 has been a wild ride. So, let's read it again, shall we? Hebrews chapter 11, starting in verse 32, through 34, because this is all one sentence, so reading all the way through to the period. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith, conquered kingdoms, administer justice and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword whose weakness was turned to strength and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

In this verse, we pivot away from the standalone pistol statements that we've been getting all the way up until verse 31, pistas, being that the Greek word for in faith we get this in faith so and so blank in faith, so and so blank in faith, so and so blank until verse 32. And it's almost like a stream of consciousness run on sentence now that looks back at how far we've come in the first 31 verses, and then looks ahead at how far we have to go and decides to pivot and radically pick up the pace so that the author switches here and they kind of go, what can I even say?

I mean, I don't even have time to talk about Gideon Barak, Samson Jephthah, David Samuel, the prophets, and then almost comically goes on to do exactly that, and talk about them anyway. And in this modified rapid-fire structure, we get six additional names six additional exemplary heroes of the faith, if nothing else in the eyes of the unknown author. So, we've heard about three of these names already. Matt Kistler introduced us to Barak. And Barak active faith was seemingly not having faith to go into battle unless Deborah the prophetess went with him. See little Deborah up there with her scroll because she's the Prophet. She obliged but said because of your lack of faith, basically, the honor of the victory will not go to you but to a CASP woman. There she is Jael, she's got a little hammer and a tent peg. And still, Barak made it into the hall of faith. And out of Barak, Matt skillfully led us through small group discussions, sharing about what to do when we receive a challenging word.

Next, Reverend Sandra introduced us to Gideon, whose act of faith we're asking for a sign if this was really the Lord, then doing what the Lord told him but specifically saying he did it by the cover of night because he was afraid. Several more signs and dreams then bolstered his faith so that eventually he could go into battle with 300 Trumpets and lanterns and then watched from a safe distance as the enemy panicked, attacks themselves and fled. And out of Gideon Reverend Sandra, provokingly challenged us to listen as God tells us who they are, and also who they say that we are.

And last week, Pastor James introduced us to Samson, whom he termed a bit of a knucklehead, I think was the word, but a knucklehead with a fierce head of hair. And his act of faith was an act of hubris at best and stupidity at worst. And get out of Samson, Pastor James reminded us that even if we act as a fool, God is still faithful. And even if we walk away from our Nazirite, vow, whatever that might be for us, like Samson, we can always return to it. And God will always be there.

And I just want to say, when you look at what these three people were given, as texts, and then you listen to what they gave us, we are a blessed people. Because on the surface, it appears like these acts of faith are less acts of faith at all and more a list of military triumphs. And the male leaders who just so happened to be at the helm at the time of said triumphs, whether directly responsible or not. But this makes sense for a Jewish audience, both the Jewish audience for whom the Book of Judges is written in a pre-monarch period of geopolitical unrest where and they were laying out the case for the instability, the period of the Judges versus the promised stability of the coming monarchy.

And for and also for the Jewish audience of Hebrews and our text today, who in AD 55 to 65, is still under Roman occupation, and at a fever pitch of Jewish and Christian oppression under Nero. And certainly, sensitive to reminders of their own past military victories over foreign

oppressors and occupiers because they were feeling oppressed and their land was occupied. And all of that brings us to today's featured story of faith. Jephthah good old Jephthah. Last week, Pastor James asked us, for us all to call out facts we knew about Samsung, and quite a few facts were recounted. I mean, church really knew a lot about Samsung. And I'm just curious by show of hands, do any of you even remember Jephthah?

Like a couple, right? I mean that's kind of what I figured.

So here we go. Looking back as we've been doing, we've been starting Hebrews, but then we go back and look at the wider spectrum of their story. Today we learned about Jephthah that in the chapter Judges, chapter 11, and the beginning of chapter 12. So, we're going to start writing judges 11 verse one, Jephthah, the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. Ah, I think we can see why he may be included in this chapter in Hebrews.

His father was Gilead. His mother was a sex worker. How do I keep getting all of the sex workers of the Bible? If you missed it, my last sermon was on Rahab, the sex worker, and today right in verse one, my character is the child of a sex worker. And the Hebrew word used to describe Jephthah's mother, or two words, is SHA Zina is SHA meaning woman. And the NA, a verb meaning go a whoring the same exact word that was used to describe Rahab a verb that means go a whoring that is straight from the lexicon, you're welcome to check it for yourself. I could not and would not make this stuff up.

It continues in verse two, then Gilead's wife also bore him sons note, not the same woman. The author of judges is serving all the tea and leaving no drama left unturned. And for comparative context. The word for wife here is the same first word that's used for Jephthah's mother is SHA, meaning woman, but just left at that. So, we have Gilead woman and his go a whoring woman got it got it. And when the sons of Gilead's wife were grown up, they drove Jephthah that away, you are not going to get any inheritance in our family, they said, Because you are the son of another woman. So, Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob where a gang of scan scoundrels gathered around him and followed him. The commentators worked to clean this up a bit, and they say they were probably like warriors or like mighty men. But the actual Hebrew texts here is rakish meaning empty or vain and demeaning men.

So, Jephthah goes into Tob with his rakish gang, and meanwhile back in Gilead, things are not going so great. Picking it right back up in verse for some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob come, they said, Be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites. And you might be thinking, Wait, aren't these the same people who just kicked him out of Gilead? And you aren't alone?

Because Jeff, the continues? Didn't you hate me and draw me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now that you're in trouble? Verse eight, the 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 who live in Gilead. Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me, will I really be your head?" The elders of Gilead replied, "The Lord is our witness. We will certainly do as you say." So, Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. He repeated all of his words before the Lord at Mizpah.

And in case you're wondering why we get these fun little tidbits like why does it matter where he was? It's because Mizpah is noteworthy because it means watchtower, and it was the place where Jacob and Laban made a tower of stones—hence Watchtower—to mark their agreement with God as their witness. The Jewish audience would have understood the heightened gravity of the agreement here, as the elders of Gilead even say the words "the Lord is our witness, watchtower, we will certainly do as you say."

So mighty man, Jephthah, aka their illegitimate brother from their father's fling with a sex worker, the one who has been displaced in his heritage, becomes the commander, and one in power, seeing any symbolism here, folks? People who have been displaced from their land take back a potent position of power and control and agency. Now taking a page out of the author of Hebrews' book, we're going to need to pick up the pace here. Jephthah sends messengers to the king of the Ammonites and the exchange seems suspiciously kingly, like monarchy monarch for this to have taken place during the period of the Judges, but I digress. But de facto Commander Jephthah waxes eloquent for 13 verses to the king of the Ammonites, only for the king of Ammon to pay, and I quote, "no attention to the message Jephthah has sent him" in verse 28.

Verses 29 and 31 pick it back up with text, then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead. And from there, he advanced against the Ammonites, and Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." And some of you are now remembering who Jephthah is. And the realization is settling over you like a painful groan. Spoiler alert, the Israelites are victorious in battle.

Verse 34: when Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels, which somehow makes it worse. But also, like, what did he think was going to be the first thing to come out of his house to greet him



when he returned home from battle? Next slide. So, verse 34, here they are: Jephthah's unnamed daughter, with a will timbrel. It was more like a drum, but we think of them as tambourines. So, I kinda struck a balance there. Verse 34 continues: She was an only child. Except for her, he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh, my daughter, you have brought me down, and I am devastated." Right? She brought you down. "I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break."

And y'all, we have to have a major pause right here. Because why? Is there one of us here who thinks God desired Jephthah's daughter to be sacrificed as a burnt offering? Is there one of us here who thinks that God would be or could be possibly honored by that? Like, if there was ever a time for repentance, meaning to realize and confess the error of one's way and turn in the opposite direction? This is it. But this is the text I was given. Which, by the way, thanks, with friends like these who needs a gang of scoundrels. And alas, my text continues in verse 36, which is again, just another picture. "My father," she replied, "you've given your word to the Lord, do to me just as you promised, now,

I'm the only parent in the room. My kids are not this submissive over the type of macaroni and cheese we serve at dinner. She finds out that her father promised to let me kill the first thing that comes out of my house as a sacrifice, she finds out she is to be said sacrifice and she says, 'My Father, you have given your word to the Lord, do to me just as you promised.' Not any kids I have. She continues now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites, but grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends because I will never marry." Verse 38: Again, no slide, but "you may go," he said, and he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry.

And after two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite tradition that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah.

The only possible silver lining here is because the text doubles down on her being his only child and then explains what an only child is like: he had no other sons or daughters. This doubling down, and also all this talk about virginity—she's weeping for herself, going to die a virgin, and then she comes back a virgin—goes to an extra measure of mentioning her virginity, not her life. Because of all of that, there is a school of interpretation that believes she was given as a sacrifice to live out her life as a servant at the temple, basically like a modern-day nun with a vow of chastity, and that this satisfied the vow of sacrifice because this meant Jephthah's line died with his daughter, who again was his only child.

Old and a virgin. Did we mention she's a virgin? She went into the mountains of Urgent with a whole squad of chaperones/witnesses, came back a virgin, guaranteeing Jephthah has lived died with her. And since at this time, the commonly held belief of an afterlife was that the only afterlife one had was the one lived on through your children and their memories of you, to sacrifice his legacy in this way was a life sacrifice, sacrificing even his own pathway to eternal life.

Except that we're still talking about him today. But it's either that or he actually sacrificed his only daughter as a burnt offering because of a vow he made to win a battle. And I just need to say, I Kevin, do not believe God is honored by the carrying out of this vow. I Kevin, I do not believe God is honored by the making of this vow. And to think that God would not be more honored by repentance than by carrying this out is frankly unfathomable to me, but again, that is the story we are given today. And in case you are wondering if there is a wholesome, redeeming epilogue. Well, there is an epilogue.

Judges 12 verses one through seven: The Ephraimite forces were called out, and they crossed over to the Sivan. They said to Jephthah, "Why did you fight against the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We're going to burn down your house over your head." Jephthah answered, "I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with him, and although I called, you didn't save me out of their hands. When I saw you wouldn't help, I took my own life in my hands and crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave me the victory over them. Now why have you come up today to fight me?" Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead, his gang of scoundrels, and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because of the efforts and said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim, Manasseh. Sick burn." The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," they said, "Alright, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said "Sibboleth" because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. 42,000 Ephraimites were killed at that time. Jephthah led six years in Israel and then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in a town called Gilead. That ends the reading of our word. Thanks to God.

I feel like we need to have trauma counselors available in the gathering room after the service today. We start with the affair with the sex worker, followed that with family abandonment, war, child sacrifice. And then the cherry on top is prejudiced, phonemic purging resulting in 42,000 men who were pronounced guilty of mispronunciation and were killed on the spot for it. Which brings me back to Shivam Panem Lectora.



What do you do when things don't make sense? What do we do when we read stories like the one today, and parts of it or all of it don't make sense to us? You stay at the table and you keep turning the gem. I keep seeking. Where is the presence of God in the story?

If Jesus were to show up in the middle of the story, where would he be? What would he be doing, and with whom would he be doing it? In general, ask questions, as many questions as you can think of. We are so quick to want answers. We like answers, but Jesus was a big fan of questions.

He often even used questions as his answers. And what does that tell us?

Why would Jephthah make such a vow is such an easy judgment to pass?

It's a much harder challenge for us to approach him with curiosity.

How desperate must Jephthah have felt?

How much pressure must he have been under?

What must his worldview have been?

And what informed that worldview?

And don't stop now.

What must he have felt when he saw his daughter run out of his house to see him?

Did he start renegotiating with God?

What must have gone through Jephthah's daughter's head and heart and gut to go from elation at seeing your father returned home from battle alive and victorious, only to see him start weeping at the very sight of you, and then to hear the vow that he made. That's not going to affect you.

And from here, I challenge you to turn the gem around for yourself.

What do you see, you're under no obligation to agree with me on any or all of what I've shared. I share from the facets through which I turned the gem this week, and in the past several weeks, and I share by the light up to which I hold that gem. That light being for me, Jesus and

his radical love, and zeal for justice and reconciliation that we observed throughout the New Testament.

Another way I turned the gem, was by asking friends, lots of questions, sharing this challenge with them. And I got a lot of encouraging. Wow, that's a tough one. But I also got a lot of insight because we all look through the facets in our own way. Some responded with humor. Definitely not a WWJD situation, the J being Jephthah.

Others responded with pages of helpful contextual insight that helped me tune into Jephthah's displacement mirroring that of the nation of Israel's, which is a common theme in the Old Testament. And other insights still into why the author may have included Jephthah in the book of Hebrews. And in chapter 11, specifically, perhaps he will turn some of what he was seeing through this gem into a blog post or a podcast discussion. And hopefully, all of you will too, each according to your own gifts. If you're a gatherer, talk about it over lunch, if you're a journaler, take a moment before packing up this morning and jot down some questions that you can circle back to and consider more later.

The Bible wasn't meant to be an untouchable idol, the way I used to view it. And it also wasn't meant to be some dusty old book. It was meant to be a multifaceted gem. Through that gem, we can see the world, and others, and ourselves.

And where we can also observe the light and love of God refracting through every facet. And that relationship between light and a multifaceted gem itself is insightful, as a gem refracts light into a broader and more visible spectrum when it passes through the facets of that gem. And it does that in several directions. Because that's how a multifaceted prism works. It reveals the full spectrum of light in all directions, not just in one. No one is one thing.

I'm certainly not like light itself, we are all a spectrum. This is one reason that we receive and offer God's grace abundantly, another core value, because we all need it. And we all have the invitation to extend it to others.

So today, I bring you no final answers. No pins to pull out or circle back to. Instead, I want to give you all a box of your own pins that you can take and start pinning up questions of your own and circling back to them on your own. This gem is not a Rubik's Cube. You don't need to know all of the algorithms to solve it. God doesn't hide themselves to tease us as we just sang this morning. God, you don't play games. It's not who you are. You're not the type to mislead My heart. I can trust you here. We can trust them, church. God and our understanding of God is an unfolding revelation and journey.

So, in the wise words of Yogi Berra, when you come to a fork in the road, take it and when we get it wrong, and we will get it wrong, just reorient. Keep coming back to the light. Keep holding the gem of your own life up to that light. And then watch the light of God's presence light it up. Amen.