

• *Wicked to make the vow and even more wicked to keep it*

It is a mistake to confuse faith with superstition

• *Jephthah's daughter like her father – a mixture of godliness and foolishness*

• *A possible alternative to the death penalty – nevertheless as stupid vow*

• *Faith and superstitious religion often get intertwined*

• *Sincere zeal without knowledge brings needless pain*

It was wicked for Jephthah to make his vow. It was even more wicked for Jephthah to keep it! Evil vows should not be kept; they should be the subject of repentance. The Old Testament law certainly required that vows should be kept. 'I have made a vow... that I cannot break', Jephthah said ^{Ⓜ1} (11:35) but some vows should be forsaken.

It is a mistake to confuse faith with superstition. Jephthah's daughter was like her father, a mixture of devotion and foolishness. Because she was willing to honour her father, she makes no protest but accepts what has happened. She is willing to lose her life rather than have her father break his vow ^{Ⓜ1}. She is as godly – and as superstitious – as her father! She asks for time to prepare for her being sacrificed and to say her sad farewells to her friends. They will all be specially sad that she will die without having married and had children ^{Ⓜ2}. Jephthah gives her the two months she wants ^{Ⓜ3} and then fulfilled his vow ^{Ⓜ4}. At the time when the Book of Judges was written it was still a custom to remember what had happened each year ^{Ⓜ5}.

Some have argued that the girl was not really sacrificed but the offering was changed to life-long singleness and work at the tabernacle. I hope they are right! There were situations when the Mosaic law permitted a person to pay money rather than forfeit his life. And we do know that a few years later there were girls who were specially attached to the tabernacle- sanctuary at Shiloh ^{Ⓜ1}. It does say 'Jephthah did as he had vowed, and she was a virgin'; it does not say 'Jephthah did as he had vowed, and she died'. So I hope the sacrifice was changed from the death-penalty to something equivalent which allowed Jephthah's daughter her life. But whatever way it was, it was a stupid vow that should have been repudiated with bold faith.

The fact is: faith and superstition often get intertwined. Some people suffer from unbelief. Others suffer from what I can only call over-belief! They get as religious as they can! They get themselves tangled in foolish regulations. They are fearful of enjoying God's world. They fast too much and sleep too little. They ill-treat themselves thinking it is part of their 'religion'. Jephthah was like this. He felt that it needed some kind of religious vow – as extreme as you could get – if God was to answer his prayers. He did not have enough faith in God's amazing grace and goodness. God would have answered their prayers without their foolish religiosity. Such religious regulations 'indeed have an appearance of wisdom', Paul tells us in a similar but different situation ^{Ⓜ1}. Jephthah's vow is similar to the 'false humility' that Paul referred to.

Of course Jephthah and his daughter were sincere people, godly people. So eager was the daughter to support her father and do what was right, she was willing to lose her prospects of normal married life as an Israelite girl. So willing was her father to be obedient to what he – superstitiously – thought he had to do, that he put aside all natural feeling. He was grief- stricken but (as he saw it) obedient. This is the tragedy about 'zeal without knowledge' (as Romans 10:2 has it). It brings such needless pain.

^{Ⓜ1} 11:35

^{Ⓜ1} 11:36

^{Ⓜ2} 11:37

^{Ⓜ3} 11:38

^{Ⓜ4} 11:39

^{Ⓜ5} 11:40

^{Ⓜ1} see 1 Sam 2:22

^{Ⓜ1} Colossians 2:23

We should have the boldness to go higher than the Mosaic law

• Better to break the law to fulfil the law!

• Repent of foolish vows!

• David's example after his murder of Uriah

• David at consecrated bread

• Rahab gave false testimony

• Trust Jesus and let His Spirit lead you

Many times we should have the boldness to go higher than the Mosaic law. 'The law is not of faith'. It is sad that Jephthah's faith could not go higher than the law. It would have been best to disobey the law concerning vows – and even concerning honouring one's father – in faith that this 'disobedience' would be God's will! There are times when we break the law in order to fulfil the law! Legalists like Jephthah do strange things. After the death of Jesus and after Pentecost, the Christian is released from being under the law and is under Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic law for us, and then puts us not under law, but under Himself. Those who walk in the Spirit will fulfil the law accidentally.

If you have made a foolish vow, repent of it! Fall on your knees and ask for mercy. Renounce and repudiate your vow, and never do anything so foolish again. Have faith to go higher than the Mosaic law. If someone else has made a vow on your behalf, it is a time for not honouring your father and mother. You do not honour your father or mother when they sentence you to death! In such a situation the law should be broken!

But 'The law is not of faith' and neither Jephthah or his daughter could rise to such heights. They were not able to think for themselves and sense the leading of the Spirit. David could do it but not Jephthah. When David murdered Uriah the law required David's death. But David ignored the Mosaic law and went directly to God. 'Against you ... have I sinned . . . Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean ... You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it...' ¹. He was disregarding the Mosaic law and casting himself on God's mercy. By faith he was freeing himself from the judgement of the Mosaic law. David had more boldness of faith than Jephthah.

David had bold faith on more than one occasion. He acted illegally when he helped himself to the consecrated bread at Nob ¹. Ritual law can be broken when necessary. Rahab was guilty of 'false testimony' when she insisted she did not know where the spies were ².

Trust in Jesus and let His Spirit lead you. Have bold faith. If you make a mistake, get up and move on with God. Don't get into legalistic bondages. Walk under Jesus. Live the life of love. Don't let yourself be led into harshness, severity, and ignorant small-mindedness – all in the name of religion. Jephthah was a good man, but foolishly ignorant. You are not to live like that. You will know the truth in Jesus, and the truth will set you free.

¹ Psalm 51

¹ see 1 Samuel 21:1–6

² Joshua 2:4-5

	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible</i> (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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