“Judges: Jephthah”

Judges 11:4-11, 29-31

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LESSON TEXT: JUDGES 11:4-11, 29-31

4) “And it came to pass in process of time, that the children of Ammon made war against Israel.

5) And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob:

6) And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon.

7) And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father's house? and why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress?

8) And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayest go with us, and fight against the children of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

9) And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the Lord deliver them before me, shall I be your head?

10) And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The Lord be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words.
11) Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Jephthah uttered all his words before the Lord in Mizpeh.

29) Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon.

30) And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands,

31) Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”

Introduction:

. . . and the series of sinning and turning back to false idols and false ways continues with the children of Israel.

It may not be a grammatically correct way to start a paper, but it’s completely, one hundred percent, true. As soon as Gideon (the subject judge of last week’s lesson) died, “the children of Israel turned again . . . and remembered not the LORD their God,” (Judges 8:33-34). Soon after, one of his sons by the name of Abimelech rose to power for three years through treacherous means by killing his seventy brothers. In the end, the same treachery Abimelech performed against his brothers came upon his own head literally when a woman cast a millstone down on his head from a tower and broke his skull (read Judges 9:23-57).

After that, two others judges arose by the name of Tola and Jair. Tola judged Israel for twenty-three years and Jair judged for twenty-two years. Immediately following the death of Jair we read that old familiar line in the text of the Judges, “the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD” and served false gods which caused them to fall into the hands of the Philistines and of the children of Ammon for eighteen years (read Judges 10:7-9). Once again, the
children of Israel “cried unto the LORD, saying, We have sinned against thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim,” (Judges 10:10).

This time, however, the response they received was different from before. God began to cite to them all of the times He had delivered them even though they continually turn their backs on Him and reject His ways, and follow after false idols. In that, He said, “I will deliver you no more,” (Judges 10:13). They continued to plea with Him and they “put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD” (Judges 10:16a). Their repentance touched God’s heart to the point that “his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel,” (Judges 10:16b).

After that, the men of Gilead began a search for a man who would “begin to fight against the children of Ammon,” (Judges 10:18). This brings us to the story of the subject judge who is highlighted in today’s lesson: Jephthah.

Lesson Summary:

Jephthah was considered a “mighty man of valour”, but he was also the “son of an harlot,” which made him a double threat to his brothers and their inheritance (Judges 11:1). Thanks to his brothers, he eventually became an outcast from his father’s house (Judges 11:2). But, I am here to tell you, my brothers and sisters, that God specializes in restoring the one whom the world considers to be an outcast; whom the world rejects and ostracizes (see Jeremiah 30:17). And, as we approach the text of today’s lesson, we see Jepthah’s restoration process, as a member of his father’s family; begin when his brothers come to seek his help in fighting against the Ammonites.

“The children of Ammon made war against the Israelites.” This was due to their prior disobedience toward God, and although they repented, there were still some residual affects they had to deal by way of the Ammonites.

Any moving of military forces for or against a cause of a person or a country brings with it the effects of war. People’s lives are lost. Property is destroyed. Some experience oppressive torture. Some give up everything for the sake of freedom. Other atrocities and deeds committed are too numerous or too heinous
to mention. Yet, “war” is exactly as it is defined by most in our culture. It is facing hostilities. It is fighting. It is a time of great conflict that usually brings with it great sorrow.

It is during such a time, when the children of Israel were facing a foe they could not handle, that they sought help from the last person whom they probably ever thought they would need: their rejected brother. An attack against their homeland and the people that lived therein was actively underway and they needed a valiant champion who would help lead the way to victory.

Prior to their coming to Jephthah he gained a reputation for being a man of battle; a man who went about raiding with other men who are termed as “worthless men” (Judges 11:3, NKJV). He obviously wasn’t afraid of the fight. He was bold. He was brazen. He was the man for the job they were looking for.

Therefore, “the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob: And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon.” How humbling and humiliating it must have been for these “elders” to seek the help of a man whom they previously cast out from their presence, their land, and their home. Someone once said, “Desperate times calls for desperate measures.” The choice they would have normally bypassed has now become their best option for success in their eyes. They were not only willing him to fight with them. They wanted to make him their “captain.” They wanted to put him in charge of their military force efforts and follow his lead and plan for the battle.

Jephthah’s response to the elders was, “Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father’s house? and why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress?” In other words, he was saying, “Now you want me? Now you want my help?” Once he was not wanted. Now, those same individuals look to him for help in their own personal times of trouble. We can readily see some of the same similarities in Jephthah’s story as we do Joseph in dealing with the conflicts of the brothers and they needing his help in times of trouble; in times of “distress.”
Jephthah was denied the privilege of everything his “father’s house” would have provided: stability, warmth, love, familial relationships, along with the usual things in life that support a healthy and balanced life along the lines of food, shelter, provision, and the like. The brothers took that from him. He built a life of fending for himself and banding together with those of ill report to get by. Jephthah identified their feelings toward him as nothing less than hatred. So, why should he be concerned by their “distress?”

**Please Note:** There is one thing we most stop and make note of. According to the reading of this chapter and story, it is men who are seeking Jephthah’s help to lead the people. We don’t see them seeking God’s advice in the matter of their choice or including Him in the decision making process. Humanity, in and of itself, has grown accustomed to being a people filled with self-sufficiency and pride. They have continually stepped out on their own authority and left out the Divine authority. Thus, reaping the repercussions thereof (for an example comparison read Joshua 9:14, it’s one of my favorite verses relating to this subject matter). God will later enable Jephthah through His Spirit, but it doesn’t appear He was consulted in these men spearheading this campaign to make him their champion.

Back to the elders request to Jephthah and to their stating their case before him again. Verse 8 of the NKJV reads as this: “That is why we have turned again to you now . . .” which appears to acknowledge not only their need for help, but their willingness to have him as their leading commander. In that, they fully expected him to, as they put it, “go with us and fight against the people of Ammon,” (Judges 11:8b, NKJV).

At the same time, after hearing his response to their initial proposal, rather than acknowledge it they decided to sweeten the pot and up the ante, as some put it today. Their first option was to make him their captain. Seeing his hesitation to come with them, they offered more. Not only were they willing to have him captain their army, they were willing him to be “head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.” A promotion before the process, if you will. A promotion that was only rightfully God’s to give. The last time the people chose for themselves who would be their leader it ended in disaster (remember Saul, Israel’s first king?).
Jephthah’s response was to rehearse their offer back to them as if to make sure he was hearing everything clearly and they knew what they were getting into. He spoke, “If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head?”

“If ye bring me home again.” I have to pause and wonder how long he must have waited for that invitation. How long has his heart longed to be officially a member of the place where he once called “home?” Did he lay awake some nights seeking reconciliation or an apology from the men who hurt him? Sometimes the day to day life of the human element can get lost in a story and it just makes me wonder . . .

Although, if he did have any of these questionings in his heart, he must have wished for it to be under better conditions that they ask him to come “home again.” Yet, their purpose was totally selfish for their own sake. To have him “fight against the children of Ammon.”

So, he continues his reiteration of their deal and questions if, “the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head?”

With everything laid out in the open, they reconfirm the deal by stating, “The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words.” “God as my witness” is a phrase I am sure you have heard on more than one occasion. Nowadays, people take words, oaths, and promises so lightly. So much so, it may be really hard for us to fully appreciate or identify with what was truly going on here. By them attaching “the LORD” to their statement, Jephthah knew there was no going back on the terms agreed upon.

In our day we are unfortunately accustomed to words being tossed about all willy-nilly and promises being broken and reneged upon that most don’t have the mentality that “word is bond” and may think it easy to back out of a deal they didn’t like. But, during the Bible days a promise mattered, especially if it had the Lord’s name attached to it. There was no going back on it. Something Jephthah himself would learn the hard way upcoming later in his story.
“Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them.” Jephthah agreed to the deal and it was done. He was not only made their captain, but he was in fact, their head, their leader. And, it was the “people” who put him there. They “made him head.” They established him as their commanding officer and chief over the whole land.

“And Jephthah uttered all his words before the LORD in Mizpeh.” A reiteration of everything that was done and spoken was given in public before God and man.

In the verses following (Judges 11:12-28, not in today’s text), Jephthah “sent messengers unto the king of the children of Ammon,” (Judges 11:12). The purpose of this delegation was to determine the reason for their attack (which was over the land the children of Israel currently possessed) and to state Israel’s case, through a brief history lesson, for why they now possessed the land which the king has come to war over. Jephthah very clearly stated, “The LORD the Judge be judge this day between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon,” (Judges 11:27; compare Genesis 18:25). It appeared he was confident in and recognized God as the Judge who will make the final decision regarding whom the land belongs to.

The king of the children of Ammon was not interested in what Jephthah or his delegation had to say. The Bible tells us he, “hearkened not unto the words of Jephthah which he sent him,” (Judges 11:28).

It is at this point in the lesson where we see the Lord become involved in confirming Jephthah as head over the people and empowering him in the fight through His Spirit: “Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah.” No one and I mean absolutely no one, can work for God or on behalf of His people without the empowering of His Holy Spirit. No man, woman, or child has this divine power of their own.

Zechariah 4:6 declares, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.” Man can try to operate under his own power but won’t have the effect for God’s kingdom as those who have His Spirit. This mission and all Kingdom missions have to be infused with His power!
Previously, I quoted E.M. Bounds saying, “What the Church needs to-day is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but *men whom the Holy Ghost can use* men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. *The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men.* He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men, men of prayer,” (Quote Source: OChristian.com; emphasis mine). And, it still stands true today and with this lesson and this judge. So, Jephthah is empowered by God to fight for His people Israel.

But, then, Jephthah did something that God never asked him to do. He vowed a serious vow, one which he could never take back and would feel the effects of it for a lifetime. “*And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.*”

“*Vows*” were serious business in the Bible and during that era. There was to be no reneging on what one promised to do no matter what (see Numbers 30:2). What one has offered as a tribute to God they are obligated to follow through. As a matter of fact, we are told, “*Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than thou shouldest vow and not pay,*” (Ecclesiastes 5:5; see also Deuteronomy 23:21).

And Jephthah probably wished he had never uttered those words out of his mouth. For out of the doors of his house, his one and only daughter came to meet him (Judges 11:34-40).

**Please Note:** We must remember, God never ordained or asked for Jephthah’s vow. God is wholly and completely against such actions of which Jephthah spoke out of his mouth and He will NEVER support such works. Such things are not allowed among God’s creation, especially among His people. God strictly warns, “*Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods,*” (Deuteronomy 12:31;
see also Deuteronomy 18:10 and Jeremiah 19:5). God doesn’t need such things to move for His people. That’s completely out of His Holy character!

God already empowered Jephthah with His Spirit. He didn’t need even the suggestion of such an awful act.

**Conclusion:**

The Bible never seems to stop amazing me of all the imperfect people whom God can use to work His behalf and for His people. Time and again we see the fault of mankind. Yet, time and again we see the power, strength, and love of God in delivering His people through those imperfect people.

That is until the perfect One did arrive on the scene in the form of Jesus Christ. To the one who makes Him head over their life, He delivers wholly and completely. Not by a rash vow, but by His personal sacrifice on the cross.