

“Jephthah Made a Vow to the Lord ”

The one hundred and second in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 11:12-12:7; 1 Peter 2:1-12

We can all think of cases where people do the wrong thing for all the right reasons. The story of Jephthah is just such a case. After the death of Gideon, and the reign of terror brought upon Israel by Gideon’s son, Abimelech, the people of Israel enjoyed a relative period of peace. But during this time of peace, the people of Israel once again turned their backs upon YHWH, and were worshipping and serving the gods of the same seven nations that Israel was to defeat, and then cast from the land of Canaan. Exasperated by Israel’s continuing unbelief, God stirred up two of Israel’s fiercest opponents—the Ammonites and the Philistines—who are described as crushing and oppressing the Israelites. And so the cycle we see throughout the Book of Judges appears yet again in chapters 10-12. The people of Israel have turned their backs upon YHWH. YHWH sent several oppressors, so the people of Israel cry out for deliverance. YHWH then sends Israel another “judge” (a deliverer) who will rescue Israel from its current predicament. This time, the judge is a man named Jephthah, who is one of the most puzzling and perplexing men in all the Bible.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Judges, as we make our way through the balance of Judges 11-12. The context for this particular episode (the account of Jephthah) is given in Judges 11:7, when the author of Judges informs us that two of Israel’s long-standing enemies—the Philistines and the Ammonites—were bringing great distress to Israel. This declaration sets the stage for the final two major judges in this period of redemptive history, Jephthah and Samson. Jephthah will deliver Israel from the Ammonites (the ancestors of the modern day Jordanians), while Samson will deliver Israel from the Philistines (the sea peoples). We will finish up the account of Jephthah. And then we’ll turn to the story of Samson.

As we saw last time, Jephthah was the son of Gilead, and a prostitute. His family (half-brothers and Gilead’s other wives) completely disowned him, cutting him off from the rest of the family, as well as from his inheritance. We were also told that Jephthah left the area and had surrounded himself with a band of thugs. This sort of a personal history makes Jephthah a wild-card. But when a large Ammonite army gathers across the Jordan River from Israel—obviously preparing to cross the river and invade the land of Canaan—the Israelites respond by assembling an army of their own at Mizpah (in the land of Gilead). The problem they faced was that there was no one with the skills to lead the assembled army.

When someone suggested that Jephthah be summoned to lead the Israelite army against the Ammonites, the question is raised as to why Israel would seek out another potential tyrant like Abimelech. The similarities between the two men are obvious. Like Abimelech, Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, he was at odds with the rest of his family, and he had surrounded himself with men of unsavory character. And yet, Jephthah was known to have been a man of great courage—he’s called a mighty warrior in Judges 11:1. The elders of Gilead were so desperate for someone to lead them that they approach Jephthah, and offer to make him the leader of all Gilead, if only Jephthah would lead Israel into battle. At first, Jephthah seems dumbfounded by the offer. Understandably, he wants to know why the same people who had rejected him, had now changed their minds and were approaching him about leading the Israelites into battle. After brief negotiations, a deal was struck. The leaders of Gilead invoke YHWH as witness to their offer to make Jephthah the head of his people, and Jephthah eagerly agrees.

But up to this point in the story, the critical question remains unanswered. Is Jephthah another Abimelech? Is he just another Canaanite who will lead Israel after false gods? And unlike the other major judges we have seen (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Barak, Gideon) there is no mention here of a specific call of God. Jephthah will lead his people because he wants to regain that honor which his family had taken from him. The elders of Gilead will accept Jephthah as their head, because they are desperate to be rescued from another serious threat to Israel's national existence. So, there is no mention of a divine call, but only a *quid pro quo*. Israel's future hangs in the balance yet again.

We now pick up where we left off last time, as we turn to verse 12 of Judges chapter 11.

Having made his deal with the elders of Gilead in the presence of YHWH, Jephthah immediately takes charge. As we see in verse 12, Jephthah is acting much like a king, even sending personal envoys to speak to the king of the Ammonites as though he were the king's equal. And so we read, *"then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, 'What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?'"* Notice that Jephthah deals with the Ammonite king as though the impending battle was some sort of personal dispute between the king and Jephthah. Not only does he send his own messengers and challenge the Ammonite king's actions, Jephthah even speaks of the land of Gilead as his own. His chutzpah is pretty remarkable.

The Ammonite king's reply to Jephthah implies that the Ammonites are merely seeking to settle an old score. *"And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, 'Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably.'"* When the king states that Israel seized the land of Gilead at the time of the conquest, technically he is correct. But the king is completely mistaken about the boundaries of Gilead, claiming that the Israelites took land from the Ammonites which the Ammonites never occupied. It is hard to tell whether this is some sort of self-justification (excuse) for invading Israel, or a speech designed to play well to his own soldiers, motivating them to take back land which once belonged to their people. It is clear that the king is mistaken about the historical circumstances.

Jephthah responds to the Ammonite king's reply by sending yet another group of messengers to the king, this time with a very detailed refutation of the king's claim. Speaking through these messengers, Jephthah attempts to demonstrate that the Ammonite king is either lying, exaggerating, or just plain clueless. As we read in verses 14-15, *"Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said to him, 'Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites.'"* Again, the fact that Jephthah would respond like that to an enemy's king, informing him of the error in his official statement—even though that same king has a large army threatening to attack Jephthah's people—demonstrates a huge amount of chutzpah.

Jephthah's messenger now presents a point by point refutation of the king's challenge. According to verses 16-18, Jephthah's first point is that Israel showed great respect for official boundaries. *"But when [the Israelites] came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let us pass through your land,' but the king of Edom would not listen. And they sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab."* Israel didn't rob the Ammonites of any territory. They never even passed through Ammonite territory! Obviously, the Ammonite king is revising history for political purposes.

The second point made by Jephthah is spelled out in verses 19-21. *“Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, ‘Please let us pass through your land to our country,’ but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory, so Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. And the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country.”* The Israelites attempted to be diplomatic with those nations which blocked their entrance into Canaan. The Israelites did not fight with these nations until there was no other choice. When war finally came, YHWH gave Israel the victory.

The third plank in Jephthah’s argument is spelled out in verse 22. *“And the [Israelites] took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan.”* Defining the boundaries proves that the Ammonite have no historical claim to the land of Gilead whatsoever. The land of Gilead had originally belonged to the *Amorites*, not the *Ammonites*.

Although in verse 21, Jephthah had mentioned in passing that YHWH had given Israel its victory over Og and Sihon, in verses 23-24, Jephthah fleshes out the theological ramifications of this in more detail. In this part of his refutation of the Ammonite king, we get an important hint that Jephthah may indeed be a believer in YHWH’s promise, and not a murderous thug like Abimelech had been. *“So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess.”* It was YHWH who drove the Amorites out of the land, therefore it was YHWH’s land to give to Israel. As Jephthah puts it, the Ammonites will have to be satisfied with what their god “Chemosh” gives them. The fact that “Chemosh” was a principle god of the Moabites, and not of the Ammonites, is worth noting. In order to make the case that the Ammonites had no claim to Gilead, Jephthah makes his appeal to a Moabite “god” as a sign of complete contempt for the Ammonite king.¹ Jephthah is now openly mocking the Ammonite king and his “gods.”

While the Ammonite king must have boiling with rage, Jephthah’s messengers continue to present his refutation. In verse 25, Jephthah now insults the Ammonite king directly. *“Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever contend against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them?”* We could paraphrase this by noting that in effect, Jephthah is asking the Ammonite king, “just who do you think you are?” Balak never contested Israel’s claim. So what legal ground does the Ammonite king have for doing so? To press the argument to its conclusion, Jephthah offers up yet one final line of argumentation in verses 26-27. *“While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time?”* This time, Jephthah’s point is simply if the land of Gilead belongs to the Ammonites, why is the king just now claiming that this is the case.

By putting it this way, Jephthah is arguing that the Ammonite king is making this up to justify his invasion of Israel. Jephthah even goes on to issue a final challenge: *“I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The Lord, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon.”* Jephthah has made his case, the matter is now in YHWH’s hands. The king of Ammon will have none of it—which comes as no surprise. *“But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.”* The Ammonite king sees that Israel is weak, and that this is the perfect time to attack, before Israel can rally and organize a defense.

¹ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 362.

And some thug named Jephthah is not going to lecture him on the history of the land of Gilead.

As the story of Jephthah moves to its next phase (verses 29-40), we come to a very difficult passage, in which, through his misguided honor, Jephthah does the unthinkable.

Having confronted the king of Ammon with a number of well-framed arguments, and having been completely rebuffed, the nagging question remains as to how YHWH will respond to the deal the elders of Gilead made with Jephthah. In verse 29, we get our answer. *“Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites.”* Just as Othniel and Gideon had been given the Holy Spirit before him, Jephthah is now prepared by YHWH to lead the people of Israel into battle. With that, Jephthah now becomes the next in the long line of Israel’s judges. But this man will not be another Abimelech. YHWH will use this flawed and sinful man to accomplish his purposes and rescue his people. In fact, no sooner had YHWH empowered him to lead the nation, Jephthah traveled throughout the region, probably sounding the battle trumpets which summoned the men of Israel to war.

In what amounts to another indication of his bravado, before the battle even begins, Jephthah attempts to bargain with YHWH, seeking YHWH’s assurance beforehand for a favorable outcome. As we learn in verses 30-31, *“And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, ‘If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.’”* In making such a vow (which, it is important to notice, YHWH never answers), Jephthah paints himself into a tragic corner, which from Jephthah’s perspective, there was no way out.

Once Jephthah was given God’s Spirit, YHWH gives the Ammonites into Jephthah’s hand. According to verse 32, *“So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand.”* While there are few details of the battle given here, it is clear that Jephthah went on the attack, and YHWH ensured that Israel was victorious. So much so that in verse 32, we learn that Jephthah, *“struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.”* The Hebrew text tells us that Jephthah attacked twenty Ammonite fortifications, and caused great slaughter.² By eliminating these bases and killing many soldiers, the Ammonites were in no position to invade Israel, and their armed forays into the heart of Israel ceased.

With YHWH having given Israel the victory, and the battle now over, Jephthah returns home. But the joy of this homecoming, quickly becomes a tragedy. *“Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter.”* No doubt, the conditions of Jephthah’s vow to YHWH must have hit him like a ton of bricks. In exchange for a victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah vowed to sacrifice the first thing which came from his door (gate). But his own daughter appears in the door of his house—not a goat, not his obnoxious neighbor, not his mother in law, his beloved daughter—an only child—dancing for great joy at her hero father’s safe return home. Jephthah immediately recalls the vow he has sworn to YHWH. This is a tragic scene, and one which certainly tugs at our hearts.

The author of Judges does not give us this girl’s name. She is obviously the apple of Jephthah’s eye and

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 369.

completely unlike her brash warrior father. Her virtue and blamelessness in all of this is readily apparent. As we read in verse 35, “*And as soon as he saw her, [Jephthah] tore his clothes and said, ‘Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.’*” The rash vow of the conquering hero now becomes his undoing. As he explains to his daughter about the vow he had taken, and what he must do, his daughter’s reply must have crushed him all the more. “*And she said to him, ‘My father, you have opened your mouth to the Lord; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites.’*” The contrast between a man about to sacrifice his own daughter as a burnt offering, and that of his daughter, who is completely willing to submit to her father’s will even to the point of her own death, could not be greater.

The Jews believed that human sacrifice was an abomination. But Jephthah was so zealous to secure a victory that he risked his daughter’s life—probably not even considering this to be a possibility at the time he made the vow. While the law of Moses allows for annulments of such vows (Leviticus 27), Jephthah seems not to know anything about this. That Jephthah did not know the Mosaic legislation is another side sign of how far Israel had fallen. The knowledge of the law was a distant memory. Israel’s sin has compounded to the point where senseless things like this happen, even when done from the most sincere of motives. The people of Israel have done what is right in their own eyes for so long, no longer can they discern the will of God. But now this vow sets in motion a horrific act. The circumstances are made all the more painful by what follows in verse 37. “*So she said to her father, ‘Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions.’*” This girl will bear no children, leaving Jephthah no grandchildren.

Jephthah’s daughter requests two months in the mountains along with her companions to mourn her coming death without having had any children. In verse 38, we learn that her request was granted. “*So [Jephthah] said, ‘Go.’ Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains.*” The tragic outcome of this sorry episode is given in verses 39-40. “*And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.*” While the text does not specifically say that Jephthah went through with the sacrifice, it is clear that he did. The fact that the women of Israel lamented her death, proves as much. What should really hit us between the eyes is that Jephthah does not build an altar as Abraham did for Isaac. The women of Israel mourned her death, but nothing is said of Jephthah doing anything as a memorial to his daughter’s faith and courage. As one commentator puts it, “the conquering hero is reduced to nothing.”³

The final legacy of Jephthah—a civil war in Israel—is spelled out in verses 1-7 of chapter 12. “*The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, ‘Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire.’*” Once again, the men of Ephraim are angry about not participating in the battle, so they threaten Jephthah’s life. Just as Gideon had done with this same tribe, Jephthah now tries to talk his way out of another fight. “*And Jephthah said to them, ‘I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand. And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?’*”

³ Block, Judges, Ruth, 375.

Gideon's speech assuaged the men of Ephraim, Jephthah's did not. As we read in verse 4, "*Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, 'You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh.'*" Quite angry with the personal insult thrown at him, Jephthah attacked those men of Ephraim who crossed the Jordan into his territory. "*And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, 'Let me go over,' the men of Gilead said to him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' When he said, 'No,' they said to him, 'Then say Shibboleth,' and he said, 'Sibboleth,' for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell.*"

After this brief civil war in which many thousands of Israelites died, we learn in verse 7 that "*Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead.*" God gave the people of Israel a brief period of peace, but because of Israel's sins, the price of peace was very high.

What can we say by application?

Before we say anything else, we need to know that in Hebrews 11:32, we find the following. "*And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets.*" Despite the horrific nature of what Jephthah did in sacrificing his only daughter, nevertheless he is mentioned by the author of Hebrews in the hall of faith as one who believed God's promise to save sinners. If a man who did this could be forgiven, surely this serves to remind us that there is no sin so dark, so bad, so evil, that it cannot be forgiven by the blood of Jesus Christ.

We also need to take note of the fact that in the days of Jephthah, Israel's priests continually offered sacrifices for sins. The entire sacrificial system was designed to point the people of God ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ, and his once for all sacrifice for sin, which fully and forever satisfied the justice of God. But under an economy of repeated and perpetual sacrifice, we can certainly understand why someone like Jephthah, who was very zealous, and not well taught, rashly made a vow to the Lord, all the while thinking of securing God's favor in the coming battle by sacrificing the first thing to come through his door (or gate). No doubt, Jephthah envisioned an animal, maybe a prized animal. It is hard to imagine that Jephthah ever considered that his vow could possibly result in the death of his daughter. But having made the vow, Jephthah kept it, even though the law (which he seems not to know) provided him with a way out. Nevertheless, Jephthah did the wrong thing (sacrifice his daughter), for all the right reasons (to honor his promise to YHWH).

The point we need to understand is that the coming of Jesus Christ changes everything in terms of how sinners relate to God. Given our sinful nature, we are constantly tempted to fall back into the Jephthah-like way of thinking that *if only* we make the right deal with God—by offering to give up things dear to us, by offering to stop doing certain things, by making sacrifices, or especially by telling God that if he does x for us, we will do y for him—God will give us what we want. The fact is that Jesus Christ offered the final sacrifice for sin. The only deal God will ever accept has already been made. Jesus made it for us, on our behalf.

Given what Christ has done for us, fulfilling the entire sacrificial system, that is why the apostle Peter speaks as he does in 1 Peter 2, where he describes Christians as "*living stones, [who] are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus*

Christ.” It was only natural that during the era of judges an uncatechized braggart like Jephthah would think in terms of a sacrifice (as a *quid pro quo*) gaining him a victory. But it is vital for us to understand that Christ’s sacrifice for us as establishes such a firm and secure relationship with God that everything we do in faith, is now called “a living sacrifice” acceptable to God. In other words, Jesus because has paid our debt in full, we no longer need to make “deals” with God. We simply do what we do in faith, trusting that God will bring his will to pass. This completely frees us from all forms of superstition and works righteousness. There is absolutely no need, nor is there any justification for bargaining with God. Jesus has delivered us from sacrifices. He has delivered us from superstitious vows.

Once we realize the benefits of Christ’s death on our behalf, Peter now reminds us of how this will utterly transform everything we do. In verses 10-12, Peter goes on to say, “*Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*”

Beloved, because Christ made a vow to the Lord and fulfilled it, we now become living sacrifices, offering all we do to God through faith in Jesus Christ. And what great news it is to know that these sacrifices are acceptable to God, because of Jesus Christ’s saving work on our behalf!