

Day 249 - WEDNESDAY: September 6th

Judges 11

Judges 11:1-40 NKJV

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah. Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him. It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel. And so it was, when the people of Ammon made war against Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon." So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the people of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the LORD delivers them to me, shall I be your head?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words." Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD in Mizpah. Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon, saying, "What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land?" And the king of the people of Ammon answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now therefore, restore those lands peaceably." So Jephthah again sent

messengers to the king of the people of Ammon, and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: 'Israel did not take away the land of Moab, nor the land of the people of Ammon; for when Israel came up from Egypt, they walked through the wilderness as far as the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, "Please let me pass through your land." But the king of Edom would not heed. And in like manner they sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained in Kadesh. And they went along through the wilderness and bypassed the land of Edom and the land of Moab, came to the east side of the land of Moab, and encamped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the border of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab. Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, "Please let us pass through your land into our place." But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. So Sihon gathered all his people together, encamped in Jahaz, and fought against Israel. And the LORD God of Israel delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. Thus Israel gained possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. They took possession of all the territory of the Amorites, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. 'And now the LORD God of Israel has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; should you then possess it? Will you not possess whatever Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the LORD our God takes possession of before us, we will possess. And now, are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel? Did he ever fight against them? While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its villages, in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities along the banks of the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time? Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you wronged me by fighting against me. May the LORD, the Judge, render judgment this day between the children of Israel and the people of Ammon.' "

However, the king of the people of Ammon did not heed the words which Jephthah sent him. Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed

through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands. And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith—twenty cities—and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel. When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it." So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon." Then she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I." So he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Daily Deep Dive:

The UCG reading program: "We come now to one of the most difficult passages in the book of Judges—the story of Jephthah. The story is more important than one would at first suspect, for the critics have seized upon it as evidence that God is self-contradictory, bloodthirsty and

devoid of any sense of equity and justice. Similarly, those who adhere to the belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture have found the story to be a stone of stumbling, especially since the book of Hebrews includes Jephthah *by name* in its famous catalog of the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32-34).

If the common understanding of the story is correct, we surely have a very odd series of facts to explain. Jephthah demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the history of his people, a history he could only have learned from the books of Moses (see Judges 11:12-28). Yet, if this is so, how do we explain his apparent ignorance of the blaring prohibition against child sacrifice contained in the books of Moses? (Leviticus 18:21; Leviticus 20:2; Deuteronomy 12:31-32; Deuteronomy 18:10-12) Again, immediately after sending the ambassadors to Ammon "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah" (verse 29). But if this is so, how could a person led by the Holy Spirit be so absolutely callous as to sacrifice his own child? In fact, Jephthah's vow is made *immediately* after receiving the Spirit (verse 30)—how is that to be explained? Moreover, if the common understanding of the story is correct, God gave Jephthah the victory over Ammon knowing full well that Jephthah would sacrifice his child, and yet He never said a word—not in person, not in a dream, not by a prophet.

And further, how could a man who was so scrupulous to keep his vow (verse 35) be so unscrupulous as to murder his innocent child in flagrant disobedience to God's law? Additionally, when his daughter learned of her father's vow, she *encouraged* him to keep the vow and asked only to be able to go and mourn her virginity for two months, at the end of which time she *voluntarily* returned so that her father could carry out his vow. Jephthah's daughter exhibits no terror, no pleading for her life—even the friends with whom she mourned her virginity allowed her to return! How is that to be explained?

And why didn't Jephthah avail himself of the laws for redeeming things vowed (Leviticus 27)—he said, "I *cannot* go back"—when such an option would have been open to him?

And finally, if the common understanding of Jephthah's vow is correct, where is that marvelous and self-evident *faith* that caused the writer of Hebrews, probably the apostle Paul, to unhesitatingly include him in his catalog of the heroes of faith?

The confusion can be cleared up by carefully examining Jephthah's vow. Let us notice it in the New King James Version: "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering" (verses 30-31). First, notice that it is a conditional vow (if...then). Second, the phrase "whatever comes out to meet me" is actually "the one who comes forth to meet me" in Hebrew, an apparent reference to a person. *The Nelson Study Bible* concurs: "The phrase *to meet me* seems to refer more appropriately to a human than to an animal" (note on Judges 11:31).

How then are we to understand Jephthah's vow? The Hebrew of verse 31 is the source of the difficulty—or rather, the *translation* of the Hebrew text is the source of the difficulty. The next phrase could just as well be translated, "...shall surely be the Lord's, **OR** I will offer it a burnt-offering." *The Nelson Study Bible* notes, "The conjunction in Jephthah's pivotal statement in v. 31, that whatever or whoever came out of the door 'shall be the Lord's, *and* I will offer it up as a burnt offering' could be translated *or*. Thus, if a person came out first, he would dedicate that person to the Lord, or if an animal came out first, he would offer the animal as a burnt sacrifice" (note on Judges 11:39). This explanation, however, has left out the possibility of an unclean animal, such as a dog, coming out. Presumably, a clean animal in this scenario would be

sacrificed while an unclean animal would be dedicated like a person. But there is a possibility that this translation is not *entirely* correct either, as it leaves out the possibility of nothing or no one coming out to meet Jephthah. This brings us to the next apparent problem in translation. The clause "or I will offer it up as a burnt offering" could also be rendered, "or I will offer Him a burnt offering." If that is correct, then we are left with Jephthah imagining a person coming out to meet him and stating, in a perhaps corrected rendering of verse 31, "The one who comes forth to meet me I will consecrate to the Lord, or [if no one comes out] I will offer Him [i.e., the Lord] a burnt offering." This changes the complexion of the difficulty entirely.

What emerges from a clear understanding of the Hebrew is significant. First, let's note that Jephthah was making a conditional vow with God. *If* God would give Jephthah the victory and bring him safely home, *then* Jephthah would either dedicate a person of his household to God or he would offer a burnt-offering to God if no one came out. Once God performed His part of the vow, Jephthah was bound to fulfill his part.

Second, and most important however, Jephthah left the choice in *God's* hands! Jephthah could not control who would come out of the doors of his house to greet him (or whether anyone would), just as Abraham's servant had no control over who would give him drink (see Genesis 24:12-14). The vow contained a choice to be made by God: either accept a consecrated person or a burnt offering. Therefore, Jephthah was perhaps, to a degree, acting on *faith*, allowing God to choose how Jephthah would fulfill his part of the covenant.

Yet it still appears that the vow was rash and unwise. Jephthah had apparently not thought this through well enough. He was shocked and deeply grieved that his daughter was the one who came out to meet him, stating that this had brought him very low (verse 35). He was clearly

expecting it to be someone else—probably a household servant. No doubt, he learned a powerful lesson that day.

Thankfully, as the evidence seems to support, Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter—he devoted her to the service of God, much as did Hannah devote Samuel to the service of God. As such, Jephthah's daughter would remain a virgin as she served at the tabernacle as part of a special class of dedicated women (compare Exodus 38:8; 1 Samuel 2:22; Luke 2:36-37). It appears that they acted as door porters, singers, musicians and workers in cloth (most valuable and needed when the tabernacle stood, as it did in Jephthah's day). This dedication meant that Jephthah would have no grandchildren—for his daughter was his only child—and thus no heir.

As we know, the Israelites viewed barrenness as a stigma, and for the family line to end was considered virtually a curse from God. Now becomes very clear the grief of Jephthah (for he would have no inheritor) and of his daughter (for she would have no children) and of her friends (for their friend would never become "a mother in Israel," and possibly mother of the promised Messiah) and of the people of Israel (for their hero would not leave them descendants and his name would "perish out of Israel")! It is interesting to note the contrast between Jephthah and the judges immediately before and after him. They both had 30 sons (Judges 10:3-4; Judges 12:8-9), while Jephthah had just this one and only daughter.

As a final observation, we must note verse 39 again. The sacred historian records that Jephthah "carried out his vow with her which he had vowed" and then adds, "she knew no man." It is not recorded that Jephthah *sacrificed* her—that is apparently a conclusion based upon an incomplete understanding of the above scriptures. Some will argue that this last clause just magnifies the tragedy of her death—that she died young without ever marrying. But if, indeed, Jephthah's daughter was

sacrificed in gruesome and flagrant disobedience to God, this added statement about knowing no man would seem to be superfluous and inane; it only appears to make sense if she continued in a state of celibacy after Jephthah fulfilled his vow.

The writer of Hebrews, then, is vindicated for including Jephthah in the heroes of faith. Though Jephthah was evidently rash and unwise in making his vow to start with, he nevertheless obeyed God's command to pay one's vows to Him (Deuteronomy 23:21-23), even when it was to his own hurt (compare Psalm 15:4). In that sense, Jephthah's fulfilling of his vow may be seen as a real act of faith! He was willing to give up his only hope of grandchildren and perpetuation of the family line, enduring a social stigma, in order to obey God. Why? Because he looked forward to the promises that he had seen and embraced (Hebrews 11:13), which would be bestowed in that country of God (verse 14) when he would be raised in that better resurrection (verse 35)! Truly, then, Judges 11 reveals Jephthah to be, in the end, a courageous man of integrity, faith and vision!" [END]

I don't have anything additional to add to this very thorough breakdown of this chapter.