

Jephthah, the 9th Judge of Isreal

Judges 11:1-35 (NASB)

The story of Jephthah reminds me a bit of an old western movie. The main character, we'll call him Jep, is somewhat of a scoundrel who struggles to find his way yet has a good heart. He does pretty well given his circumstance, but seemingly can't get out of his own way.

From the scripture, we learn that Jep was the child of a philandering father and a prostitute. His dad, Gilead, had other children born to his wife. The family lived in the northern hill country known as the land of Gilead and Jephthah lived with his father's family.

As the other sons of Gilead grew up, they ran Jep off from the homeplace. They determined he was not to inherit from their father as he was born to a different mother.

We pick up Jephthah's story in verse three where the scriptures reveal a special quality that others saw in him:

³ So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless men gathered ^[b] around Jephthah, and they went ^[c] wherever he did.

Different translations provide varying meanings for this verse. It is possible the word "worthless" implies men of little means, or those without property. It may also mean they were scoundrels, lacking in moral character. But the New King

James version reads: *...and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.* This translation clearly indicates these men were up to no good.

Regardless of his birthright, inheritance, or moral character, Jephthah had established himself as a man of his own making. He was recognized among his newfound community as a leader. His reputation grew and reports of his exploits trickled back to his hometown.

We can assume Jep was raised in the Jewish tradition so was at least somewhat aware of the law and God's promises. Once he gained hoodlum experience, earning a reputation as a fighter, the Lord placed Jephthah in a position of His higher calling. (Now we have the ingredients for a good old fashioned western.)

When the Ammonites decided to go to war against Isreal, the elders of Gilead found themselves in a quandary. They were not accustomed to fighting battles and lacked a leader. After running off their home boy, they now realized that his prowess as a warrior was just what they needed. So, they ate some humble pie and went looking for the outcast Jephthah to lead their army.

⁷ But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me from my father's house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?" ⁸ The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "For this reason we have now returned to you, that you may go with us and fight the sons of Ammon, and become our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

⁹ So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me back to fight against the sons of Ammon and the Lord gives them up^l to me, will I become your head?" ¹⁰ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The Lord is^l witness between us; be assured we will do as you have said."

Talk about flipping the script! The rejected scoundrel is now a military leader – *and* he has tremendous faith in the Lord! He knows that a military “win” would only occur because God allowed it. He believed that as long as the men of Gilead agreed to trust and obey God, He would defend Israel against their enemies. With agreement from the elders that he would become the head of the army and they would follow his orders, Jephthah returned to his homeland to fight the people of Ammon.

In verses 12 to 28, Jephthah showed some additional depth of character. He exchanged several written messages with the king of the Ammonites. In the letters, Jephthah reviewed the 300 year history of the warring tribes. He explained in detail why Israel had a right to the land even though the Ammonites claimed it was theirs. He argued that if it came to a battle, theirs would be a fight between the God of Israel and the false gods of Ammon.

Like any good movie, the tension rises as the king of Ammon paid no attention to the messages.

²⁹ Now the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon.

As he went forward to battle, Jephthah was filled with the Spirit of God. Can you imagine how this emboldened the new leader of the Gilead people? But then – big plot twist – something odd happened.

³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, “If You will indeed hand over to me the sons of Ammon, ³¹ then whatever comes out the doors of my house to meet me when I return ^[1]safely from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.”

Why did Jep feel he needed to make a promise to God? Was it a vow of true worship? Or was it a quid pro quo – a way to hedge his bet on winning the battle? Did he have a moment of doubt that God would see him through? What happened to his courage, his confidence, his trust in God's promise to protect Israel as long as they trusted and obeyed Him?

Just like the star of an old western, our man Jep had some character flaws. His commitment to the Lord was strong, yet this act of bargaining appears to be more like that of the pagans who believed they had to bribe their gods for success to be theirs.

With confidence, Jephthah raced headlong into battle and the Lord soundly defeated the Ammonites. Can't you envision the excitement when Jep and his victorious army returned to their village for a hero's welcome? As he approached his home, lo and behold, who should come out of his front door to greet him?

His only child, a beautiful daughter.

³⁵ So when he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Oh, my daughter! You have brought me disaster, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot take it back."

This sad state of affairs could have been avoided altogether had Jephthah been more familiar with the law. He would have known not to make the vow at all. He also would have known that God had made a provision for such a circumstance in Leviticus 27:1-8. He could have paid a ransom to buy back the sacrifice.

God also strictly forbade the sacrifice of humans in Leviticus 18:21 and again in Deuteronomy 12:31. Even though Jephthah was a man of deep faith he was either unfamiliar with or lacked understanding of the scriptures.

Like many well-plotted westerns, this story from the Old Testament leaves a trail of lessons. Jephthah serves as an example that for those who love the Lord. No matter who your parents are, where you are from, or what bad things you have done – the Lord will use you to fulfil His plans. God will also equip you for the unique work he puts before you.

It is a reminder that God wants us – our hearts, minds and souls – not empty promises we can't keep. We cannot earn or bargain for a relationship with our heavenly Father. We are to trust and obey Him.

Closing Note:

The rest of the story of Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 11:36-40 is interpreted in differing ways. Some think that Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt sacrifice. Others think it is more likely that she was set aside or “given” to the tabernacle in place of monetary value to appease the vow. (Leviticus 27:2-4)

Study Questions

- What was Jephthah concerned about when the elders from Gilead asked for help? What does this indicate about his character? His motivations?
- What claims did the Ammonites make? What were the real reasons for not returning the land to them?
- What does it mean in verse 11 where Jephthah “spoke all his words before the Lord”?
- Why do you think Jephthah made the vow?
- Did the “win” empowered by God give Jephthah any other success?
- What did you learn from this story of Jephthah?