

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown
Bible Study Notes
3-20-24

Judges 11

Jephthah's Background Before His Rise To Leadership – Verses 1-3

¹ Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. ² Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman." ³ So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.

11:1-2 Jephthah, an illegitimate son of Gilead, was chased out of the country by his half brothers. He suffered as a result of another's decision and not for any wrong he had done. Yet in spite of his brothers' rejection, God used him. If you are suffering from unfair rejection, don't blame others and become discouraged. Remember how God used Jephthah despite his unjust circumstances, and realize that he is able to use you even if you feel rejected by some.

11:3 Circumstances beyond his control forced Jephthah away from his people and into life as an outcast. Today, both believers and nonbelievers may drive away those who do not fit the norms dictated by our society, neighborhoods, or churches. Often, as in Jephthah's case, great potential is wasted because of prejudice— a refusal to look beyond ill-conceived stereotypes. Look around you to see if there are potential Jephthahs being kept out due to factors beyond their control. As a Christian, you know that everyone can have a place in God's family. Can you do anything to help these people gain acceptance for their character and abilities?

The Elders Of Gilead Call Upon The Leadership Of Jephthah – Verses 4-8

⁴ Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, ⁵ the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites." ⁷ Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?" ⁸ The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead."

11:4-8 The people of Ammon made war against Israel: The nation of Ammon, the Ammonites, lived to the south of Israel. They were a semi-nomadic group of people who descended from Abraham's nephew Lot. Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon: Because of the crisis of the Ammonites, the leaders of Gilead were desperate for an able leader, and they turned to Jephthah. They were willing to give him the authority as head over Gilead.

Jephthah's Response To The Leaders Of Gilead – Verses 9-11

⁹ Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?" ¹⁰ The elders of Gilead replied, "The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say." ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and

the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

11:9 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: Jephthah was only willing to assume leadership in the crisis if he could also remain a leader after the crisis. He didn't want to be rejected again as a worthless man.

11:11 Before the LORD in Mizpah: This was the same place where the famous agreement between Laban and Jacob was made (Genesis 31:43-50). The idea of Mizpah ("watch") is "If you do wrong according to this promise, God will see it and may He punish."

11:11 What does it mean that Jephthah repeated his words "before the LORD"? Those making covenants in ancient times often made them at places of worship so that they would be witnessed by deities. Often a written copy was also deposited at the place of worship. This was much like a coronation ceremony for Jephthah.

Jephthah Negotiates With The King Of The Ammonites – Verses 12-13

12 Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: "What do you have against me that you have attacked my country?" **13** The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah's messengers, "When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably."

11:12 What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land: Jephthah asked a simple question: why are you in the land of Israel? Perhaps the whole dispute could be solved by negotiations and diplomacy instead of warfare.

11:13 Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt: The king of Ammon gave a simple reply, saying that they were in Israel because it was really their own land, and Israel took it from them unjustly.

Jephthah's Response To The King Of The Ammonites – Verses 14-22

14 Jephthah sent back messengers to the Ammonite king, **15** saying: "This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. **16** But when they came up out of Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh. **17** Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Give us permission to go through your country,' but the king of Edom would not listen. They sent also to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh. **18** "Next they traveled through the wilderness, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border. **19** "Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, 'Let us pass through your country to our own place.' **20** Sihon, however, did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He mustered all his troops and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. **21** "Then the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and his whole army into Israel's hands, and they defeated them. Israel took over all the land of the Amorites who lived in that country, **22** capturing all of it from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the desert to the Jordan.

11:14-22 Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king wanting to know why the Israelites in the land of Gilead were being attacked (11:12). The king replied that Israel had stolen this land and he wanted it back (11:13). Jephthah sent another message to the king (11:14-27). In it he gave three arguments against the king's claim: (1) Gilead was never the king's land in the first place because Israel took it from the Amorites, not the Ammonites (11:16-22); (2) Israel should possess land given by Israel's God, and Ammon should possess land given by Ammon's god; (3) no one had contested Israel's ownership of the land since its conquest 300 years earlier (11:25-26). To Jephthah's credit, he tried to solve the problem without bloodshed. But the king of Ammon ignored his message and prepared his troops for battle.

Jephthah's Response To The King Of The Ammonites – Verses 23-28

23 “Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? **24** Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. **25** Are you any better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever quarrel with Israel or fight with them? **26** For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn't you retake them during that time? **27** I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites.” **28** The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.

11:24 Will you not possess whatever Chemosh your god gives you to possess: Jephthah argued that the Ammonite god Chemosh must show himself worthy to conquer the land of Israel. Since Israel held this land for three hundred years, it demonstrated that Chemosh was not greater than the God of Israel. However, the king of the people of Ammon did not heed the words which Jephthah sent him: Jephthah's logical, reasoned response was of no effect upon the King of Ammon. War was therefore inevitable.

11:27 Over the years, Israel had many judges to lead them. But Jephthah recognized the Lord as the people's true Judge, the only One who could really lead them and help them conquer the invading enemies.

Jephthah Makes A Rash Vow, Thinking It Will Help His Cause Before God – Verses 29-31

29 Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. **30** And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, **31** whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”

11:30-31 In God's law, a vow was a promise to God that should not be broken (Numbers 30:1-2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23). It carried as much force as a written contract. Many people made vows in biblical times. Some, like Jephthah's, were very foolish.

11:30-31 When Jephthah made his vow, did he stop to consider that a person, not a sheep or goat, might come out to meet him? Scholars are divided over the issue. Those who say Jephthah was considering human sacrifice use the following arguments: (1) He was from an area where pagan religion and human sacrifice were common. In his eyes, it may not have seemed like a sin. (2) Jephthah may not have had a background in religious law. Perhaps he was ignorant of God's command against human sacrifice. Those who say Jephthah could not have been thinking about

human sacrifice point to other evidence: (1) As leader of the people, Jephthah must have been familiar with God's laws; human sacrifice was clearly forbidden (Leviticus 18:21; 20:1-5). (2) No legitimate priest would have helped Jephthah carry out his vow if a person was to be the sacrifice. Whatever Jephthah had in mind when he made the vow, did he or did he not sacrifice his daughter? Some think he did, because his vow was to make a burnt offering. Some think he did not, and they offer several reasons: (1) If the girl was to die, she would not likely have spent her last two months in the hills. (2) God would not have honored a vow based on such a wicked practice. (3) Verse 11:39 says she never married ("she was a virgin"), not necessarily that she died right away, which could imply that she was set apart for a life of service to God.

God Grants Israel Victory Over The Ammonites – Verses 32-33

³² Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands. ³³ He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.

11:32-33 And the LORD delivered them into his hands: God won a great and important victory for Israel through Jephthah. He overcame bitterness and family rejection to meet a great need. Despite his difficult past, God still wonderfully used him. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel: This was another victory for Israel won under the leadership of a Spirit-filled judge.

A Difficult Vow To Fulfill – Verses 34-35

³⁴ When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break."

11:34-35 Jephthah's rash vow brought him unspeakable grief. In the heat of emotion or personal turmoil it is easy to make foolish promises to God. These promises may sound very spiritual when we make them, but they may produce only guilt and frustration when we are forced to fulfill them. Making spiritual "deals" only brings disappointment. God does not want promises for the future, but obedience for today.

Jephthah Fulfills His Vow To God – Verses 36-40

³⁶ "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. ³⁷ But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry." ³⁸ "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. ³⁹ After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite tradition ⁴⁰ that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

11:36-38 He carried out his vow with her which he had vowed: Some think that Jephthah did really offer his daughter as a burnt offering. If he did, this was clearly an example of misguided zeal for God because God never asked him to make such a foolish vow or to fulfill it so foolishly.

11:38 She went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity... She knew no man: These words indicate that it is more likely that Jephthah set his daughter aside for the tabernacle service according to the principle of Leviticus 27:2-4, where persons set apart to God in a vow were not required to be sacrificed (as animals were) but were “given” to the tabernacle in monetary value.

11:38-40 Her committal to be one of the women who assembled at the tabernacle still seems like the best explanation because Jephthah is listed as a hero of the faith (Hebrews 11:32). It is hard to think of him as doing something so contrary to God’s ways as offering his daughter as a human sacrifice and still being mentioned as a man of faith in Hebrews 11.