

JUDGE JEPHTAH

Judges 10:6-11:7

One of the most fascinating among the fascinating stories of the Judges is Jephthah's. Very much an unlikely candidate to lead God's people, but he did, and effectively even after a personal tragedy. His story is both inspiring and troubling—one from which we can learn great lessons.

The Cycle of the Judges (10:6-18)

This text completely illustrates the situation that existed during the period of the Judges in Israel's history. After a time of relative calm and prosperity under the twenty-two years of Jair's leadership, "again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." Once again they forsook God and turned to worship the gods of the Canaanites—Baal and Ashstoreth. Once more this led to God's discipline—allowing Israel to be defeated and oppressed by neighboring tribes. And this led then to the inevitable regret expressed by Israel crying out to God, "We have sinned against you," as well as removing the idols and recommitting to serve God alone. To this God ultimately responded by raising up another judge to lead his people—this time Jephthah. His story is within the larger story of Israel at this point in their history and in even the larger story of redemption within the entirety of the Bible.

A Misfit (11:1-11)

As God demonstrates repeatedly throughout history—he chooses some of the least likely people for significant roles in accomplishing his will. Jephthah certainly is an example of this. His pedigree was shaky. His reputation was criminal. Life had not been kind to him.

The first strike against him was his parentage. Obviously he had no choice in the matter, but when you are born out-of-wedlock with a prostitute for a mother life usually tends to be tough from the start. It was so for Jephthah. His half-brothers had no intention of sharing any inheritance with him and eventually forced him out of his home region, Gilead.

Jephthah's second strike came when he went to settle in "the land of Tob." There he became connected with what one translation calls "riff-raff." To say that Jephthah's activities with his gang in Tob were criminal would be accurate. His reputation became one as a "mighty warrior" as a result. Life had toughened him up. He did what he had to do and others noticed. So much so, that when it came to find someone to lead Israel against their enemies, they asked Jephthah.

Of course, Jephthah was skeptical—why wouldn't he be? The same people who pushed him out were now inviting him back in. But after some conversation and commitments—he agreed. The misfit became a just fit—the right man for the job. That he became a great man of God is testified to by the Hebrew writer in Hebrews 11:32. Again this demonstrates how God can use even the most unlikely to do his will—a great story for anyone doubting their value in God's kingdom.

Leadership Problems (11:12-40)

Jephthah immediately gets about business by contacting the king of the Ammonites, which were the largest threat to Israel. He attempts to reason with this king but is unsuccessful. The Ammonite king

basically ignores Jephthah. As the Spirit of the Lord descends upon Jephthah, one of the strangest stories of the Bible occurs. Jephthah asking God's assistance in overcoming the Ammonite threat makes a vow to God. He said:

If you give the Ammonites into my hands, 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.

The Lord did hear his appeal and provide him a total victory over the Ammonites, but as it turned out the first one out of his house to victoriously greet him was his only child—his daughter. Devastatingly, this set up a tragedy in which Jephthah would have to sacrifice his daughter. Or did he?

On the surface there is much to be troubled over in this part of Jephthah's story. Child sacrifice—a typical tenant of some idol worship (Molech)—was an abomination to God (Leviticus 18:21). Why would God allow for this? There is no recorded condemnation and as noted, Jephthah is heralded in the New Testament as a man of great faith. There seems to be some kind of disconnect here if, in fact, Jephthah sacrificed his daughter.

Then there is the reference of Jephthah's daughter's reaction—mourning more over never being able to marry than impending death. Couple that with the subsequent Israelite custom of young women enjoying a four day celebration of Jephthah's daughter. Contextually this seems to be related to the fact that never married than anything having to do with her death.

All of this has led many to develop another theory about the text, that is, Jephthah's vow was meant to be understood as an offering of dedication instead of a offering of sacrifice. With that—Jephthah's daughter sacrificed not her life, but her right to marry—in order to serve God in purity all of her life—a perpetual virgin. This then, also puts the subsequent remembrance celebration into an understandable context and eliminates the troubling problems within the texts. Is this interpretation is the correct one or did Jephthah's daughter actually die because of his vow?

Takeaways

Jephthah led Israel as a judge for six years. He continued to be a wise warrior taking care of a threat from Ephraim by cleverly using language (12:1-6) to trick his enemies. This outcast turned deliverer turned out to be one of the greatest judges. Here are some takeaways from his story:

- God sees gifts within us that we sometimes cannot see (1 Samuel 16:7)
- God continues to use the unlikely to accomplish his will so as to confound the world (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5), so that our faith “might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.”
- God always offers a rescue to his people if they turn to him (1 Corinthians 1:13)
- Be careful about making vows—they could come back to haunt us. As Jesus taught just let our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no” (Matthew 5:37; James 5:12)