

Bible Stories

JEPHTHAH

The Rash Deliverer

Judges 11:1-3
September 24, 2022

As noted last time, Gideon had 70 sons by various women. After Gideon died, his son Abimelech, whose mother was a concubine from Shechem, convinced the town to hire some assassins to help him *"do away with"* his brothers – only Jotham escaped.

All the citizens of Shechem and Beth-Millo made Abimelech king. He ruled Israel for 3 years.

After 3 years, Yahweh created division between Abimelech and the people of Shechem. A bloody war ensued, ending with the death of Abimelech – A woman dropped a millstone on his head from the top of a tower, cracking his skull. He did not want to be remembered for being killed by a woman – perhaps he was thinking of the story of Sisera and Jael – so he asked his armor-bearer to run him through.

– he did

– he died.

When the Israelites saw that Abimelech was dead, they went home.

After the time of Abimelech - Tola from the tribe of Issachar - rose to save Israel. He led Israel 23 years.

Tola was followed by Jair of Gilead. He led Israel 22 years.

- **AGAIN** the Israelites did evil in the eyes of Yahweh
 - They served the Baals & Ashtoreths
 - The gods of Aram
 - The gods of Sidon
 - The gods of Moab
 - The gods of Ammon
 - The gods of the Philistines
 - They forsook God and did not serve Him
- Yahweh sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the sons of Ammon for 18 years.
- The sons of Israel cried to Yahweh: "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."
 - **Judges 10:11-16** - Yahweh replied, "When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, ¹² the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? ¹³ But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. ¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!" ¹⁵ But the Israelites said to Yahweh, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now." ¹⁶ Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served Yahweh. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer.
- Yahweh raised up a **Jephthah** to deliver them

The Story of Jephthah – Judges 11:1-12:32

Jephthah was a mighty warrior from Gilead.

His dad was a prominent member of society.

His mother was a prostitute.

After his father died, Jephthah's brothers cut him out of the will and kicked him out of town.

Jephthah went to live in the land of Tob, where he became the leader of a band of outlaws.

Sometime later, the Ammonites made war in Israel. The elders of Gilead went to Jephthah....

Elders: *Come and be our commander. We want to make war against the Ammonites.*

Jephthah: *You shunned me and drove me out from my father's house. Yet, now that you're in trouble you want my help?*

Elders: *All you have said is true, but let's not dwell on the past ---- the point is we've come to you now. Help us fight the Ammonites and become our leader.*

Jephthah: *Let me get this straight.... If I fight the Ammonites, and Yahweh gives me the victory, you'll make me your leader?*

Elders: *Correct.*

After Jephthah was made Commander, his first course of action was to try diplomacy – he was the ONLY judge to do so. He sent a message to the king of the Ammonites: ***“What issue do you have with me that would cause you to make war against my land?”***

The Ammonite king replied: ***“Israel took my land when they came up from Egypt. I want it back. Restore it peacefully & nobody gets hurt.”***

After a significant history lesson, Jephthah concluded the diplomacy phase of this story with these words: ***“I have not sinned against you. You are the one who is doing wrong by making war against me. Let Yahweh judge between the Israelites and the Ammonites.”***

The Ammonite king paid no attention to Jephthah's message.

This can only mean one thing ---- WAR!

Before engaging the Ammonites, Jephthah made a vow to God:

- **Judges 11:30-35** - “If indeed you will give the Ammonites into my hand, whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return safely from the Ammonites will be Yahweh's, and I will offer it as a burnt offering.”

Jephthah was victorious and the Ammonites were subdued before Israel.

We now come to the ***“Elephant in the Room.”*** That part of Jephthah's story that makes us exceedingly uncomfortable. It is something that, if truth be told, we would rather just skip over and pretend never happened. Yet, it did happen and we cannot ignore it. We must deal with it.

- Jephthah came to Mizpah, to his house, and behold his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and dancing. She *was* his only child; he did not have a son or daughter except her. ³⁵ And the moment he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, “Ah! My daughter, you have caused me to bow down, and you have become my trouble. I made an oath to Yahweh, and I cannot take *it* back.”

What do we do with this story?

Well, obviously we have a problem. Some have suggested that Jephthah had something other than actual sacrifice in mind when he made his vow. Well, that's not what the text says and considering his reaction to seeing his daughter, actual sacrifice is exactly what he had in mind.

I believe that his vow was one made in haste, without thought, because of anxiety over the coming battle.

Jephthah would not have been the first in history nor the last to make a promise in the hope of getting out of a bad situation.

Have you ever heard of a foxhole promise ---- a promise made to God when we are caught in a difficult situation or when our back is against the wall, ***“Lord just save me and I promise to become a priest.”***

On one hand, God takes vow making very seriously:

- **Deuteronomy 23:21** - If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.

On the other hand, He hates human sacrifice – He destroyed entire nations because they did that very thing:

- **Deuteronomy 12:29–31** - When Yahweh your God has cut off the nations whom you *are* about to go to, to dispossess them before you, and you have dispossessed them, and you live in their land, ³⁰ take care so that you are not ensnared into imitating them after their being destroyed from before you, and so that you not enquire concerning their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods, and *thus* I myself want to do also.’ ³¹ You must not do so toward Yahweh your God, because of every detestable thing they have done for their gods Yahweh hates, for even their sons and their daughters they would burn in the fire to their gods.

But, according to 11:39 – Jephthah kept his vow.

At issue is not the vow itself, but the fulfillment of the vow that continues to be debated amongst biblical scholars – did he or didn't he?

For better or for worse, here's what I think.....

I don't think Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering before the Lord.

1st - Jephthah is not condemned for what he did.

Judges repeatedly provides details of the sins of Israel and the consequences they experienced. Even the Judges were not immune to such critique:

- Gideon made a golden ephod and “all Israel played the harlot and it became a snare to Gideon and to his house.” – 8:24-27
- Because of Samson's pride and arrogance, God eventually left him to reap the consequences of his choices – 16:20.

You would think that child sacrifice would call for the strongest condemnation, especially since Jephthah made the vow as a promise to God if He gave Jephthah victory over the Ammonites. But no, not a word of condemnation for Jephthah's actions.

2nd - God honored Jephthah and included him in the faith chapter:

- **Hebrews 11:32-34** - And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Do we really think that God would destroy nations because of child-sacrifice and then include someone who did the exact same thing - **in His name** - amongst the Heroes of Faith in Hebrews 11?

NOT. A. CHANCE.

There are 2 alternative theories:

- Camp 1 - A substitutionary sacrifice was offered in her place; however, this does not fit with the story.
- Camp 2 - She was dedicated to the service of God for her entire life – never marrying – never having children.

Camp 2 is the camp I find myself in.

A literal burnt offering, because it was entirely consumed, represented complete dedication to God.

One of the points scripture makes is that she went into the hill country for 2 months to mourn her virginity – not that her short life was about to come to an unexpected end.

Scripture also tells us that after Jephthah fulfilled his vow, she remained a virgin. This fact would be irrelevant had he taken her life.

I believe she went into the service of God for the remainder of her life.

God's great victory over the Ammonites was overshadowed by the ending of the story and is perhaps a cautionary tale of the danger in being rash in the promises we make to God.

Proverbs 20:25 - It is dangerous to make a rash promise to God before counting the cost. {NLT}