

HEBREWS CHAPTER 11 – HEROES OF FAITH

Lesson #17**JEPHTHAH
Hebrews 11:32**

“And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets....”

Conflict characterizes the Book of Judges. After reading the book, one wonders how God could love such people! What is recorded reveals the downside of human nature. We wonder how the people could have acted as they did after God had done so many marvelous things on their behalf – until we look in the mirror! Unfortunately, for many, even today, these hundreds of years later, more lessons are learned in the School of Hard Knocks than in the School of Christ!

Much of what took place during the over four-hundred year period of the judges is unrecorded. There were many conflicts between various segments of the 12 tribes of Israel. However, six wars with other nations are recorded as taking place in this period, during which various Judges presided:

- Othniel delivered the Israelites from the Edomites (Judges 3:7-11);
- Ehud from the Moabites (Judges 3:12-30);
- Deborah, with Barak’s help, from the Canaanites (Judges 4; 5);
- Gideon from the Midianites (Judges 6 through 8);
- Jephthah led in the defeat of the Ammonites (Judges 10:6-12,17) and
- Samson (Judges 13 through 16) repelled the Philistines but did not conquer them.

When we come to Judges Chapter 11 it is the same old story again - Israel was trusting lifeless idols instead of the living God. The result? They are enslaved yet again, this time by the Ammonites. The people cry out to God again because they’re in trouble: “And the children of Israel said to the LORD, “We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray.” So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.” (Judges 10:15-16)

Their devotion is one of convenience, not commitment. They only wanted God when they needed Him. Note the sarcasm of God’s response, back in Judges 10:14, “Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!” Nevertheless, God doesn’t desert His people; instead He raises up another unlikely leader to deliver His people.

This time it was Jephthah to the rescue. You do not hear of many persons named Jephthah. It is a strange name, but then, Jephthah was a strange man! His is the story of a young man who went from being a zero, in the eyes of many, to becoming a hero; he was the loser who became a winner. His story is presented to us in Judges 11:1-40. Let us begin by looking at:

JEPHTHAH THE VICTIM. Judges 11:1

“.....he was the son of a harlot.”

Jephthah began life with three strikes against him. He was the unintended victim of his father's indiscretion with a harlot. Later, Gilead's wife gave him several sons who, when they grew up, ran Jephthah off from his home saying, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." (Judges 11:2) Even though he had no choice in choosing who his mother was Jephthah was treated as a reject. His step-mom and his half brothers looked down on him and treated him cruelly.

Since they did not share the same mother, his half-brothers made it abundantly clear that they did not want him around. He suffered rejection by his own family, was deprived of his home, his heritage and his inheritance. His father, evidently, permitted the half-brothers to mistreat Jephthah. Just when his son needed the support, confirmation and encouragement of a father, Gilead abdicated his role as a model and mentor and Jephthah was out on his own.

This is not a good way to begin life. It is now an uphill battle for identity, purpose and direction. Jephthah was left to figure out life for himself. Who are my people? Who are my friends? Where do I go from here?

JEPHTHAH'S VICIES. Judges 11:3

"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."

We are not surprised to read how Jephthah reacted to rejection at home. He leaves the area and goes to Tob, an area beyond the frontiers of the Hebrew territory, located near Damascus in Syria.

He is an angry and bitter man. He felt unwanted, severed from his roots and abandoned. Such a person who suffers ostracism as Jephthah did, either becomes withdrawn into oneself or becomes violent and vengeful. From the information we have, it would appear that he bordered on the latter.

The Hebrew word translated "worthless" in the NKJV, means "empty, idle." In other words, they had too much time on their hands and we all know that usually leads to trouble. They hung out together in the land of Tob. *The Message* reads: "Some riffraff joined him and went around with him." The NIV: "A group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him."

A roguish band of like-minded idle and daring men gathered around him and they became a band of brigands roaming the desert like Bedouins, raiding and creating havoc. Jephthah became a Robin Hood type of figure. His manner of life was similar to that of David when driven from the court of Saul.

Charles Spurgeon said in a sermon about David: "What was the way to the throne? Well, it was round by the cave of Adullam. He must go there and be an outlaw and an outcast, for that was the way by which he would be made king. Have none of you ever noticed, in your own lives, that whenever God is going to give you an enlargement and bring you out to a larger sphere of service, or a higher platform of spiritual life, you always get thrown down? That is His usual way of working! He makes you hungry before He feeds you! He strips you

before He robes you! He makes nothing of you before He makes something of you!”
(Spurgeon sermon #2282)

That appears to have been the process by which God made Jephthah ready for what lay ahead in

his life. Instead of Jephthah’s hurtful home life breaking him, it made him, toughened him and prepared him for what lay ahead of him in the service of his country, Israel.

JEPHTHAH’S VALOR. Judges 11:1

“Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior.....”

The very first words we read about Jephthah tell us that he was a “valiant warrior.” However, as we already know, one is not born with valor – valor is courage and bravery acquired through the rough and tumble of life. It is interesting that we are given that bit of information about him at the first. Perhaps that was to tell us the best news first.

Leading a band of marauders, living on the run with other outcasts from society would test one’s metal. He had to be tough to stay alive. It was in this context that he learned to lead hardened men.

He became a “mighty man of valor.” One of the reasons why Jephthah became “a valiant warrior” was that he had to in order to survive. He had to become tough just be able to survive in his cold world.

Jephthah did find acceptance – with the wrong crowd, as so often happens. Verse 3 says that some other misfits and outcasts rallied around Jephthah. Together they formed a gang and lived, for some time, as raiders and plunderers of Israel’s enemies.

Meanwhile, back at the old home-place things were not going well. News of Jephthah’s exploits had spread all the way back to his home and his not-so-kind-hearted brothers decided to pay him a visit. They wanted to enlist his help in confronting a challenge that they were not men enough to overcome themselves. Here is where we begin to see Jephthah’s virtuous side that up until now had been pretty well hidden.

JEPHTHAH’S VIRTUES. Judges 11:4-6

“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.”

As time passed, Jephthah developed a reputation for being quite a leader. His military exploits caught the attention of the Israelites, especially the Gileadites. When the Ammonites come to threaten Israel, they called on him to help. The very people who had rejected Jephthah and treated him worse than scum, came crawling back to Jephthah and begged him to come help them defeat their Ammonite oppressors.

The half-brothers who had run him away from home now begged him to come back. This is called poetic justice. This is similar to what we see when Joseph's brothers sold him and then went to him in Egypt for help. One could understand if both Jephthah and Joseph had said to their brothers, "I hope you get what's coming to you! Turn about is fair play! What you give is what you get!" However, it is here, in this context, that we begin to see the virtues of Jephthah:

- Remember that he is listed in Hebrews chapter 11 as a man of faith. That is the virtue that places him in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11.
- He had a heart for his nation of Israel. He was willing to overlook the injustice he had suffered at the hands of his brothers in order to help his country fight the Ammonites. So we read: *"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...."* (Judges 11:7-11)
- He turned to the Lord in prayer. Verse 11 concludes with these words: *"and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD in Mizpah."* We might be surprised that a ruffian like Jephthah would pray. Perhaps he prayed much in those days in the wilderness with that band of cut-throats.
- He was the ninth judge of the Israelites. He judged Israel for six years. (Judges 12:7) This was not without God's approval. God often raises up leaders from the least among us. Paul wrote: *"For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."* (I Cor. 1:26-29)

We have seen that principle repeatedly applied as we have studied the characters in Hebrews 11. In Jephthah's case, the headlines could have read: "From Obscurity To Officialdom." (Continued next page)

Jephthah had been tamed by God. He had experienced what Paul had experienced: *"We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."* (II Corinthians 4:8-9)

Something pretty ironic happened. The story of a fellow who nobody liked or accepted, was accepted by God and ended up a leader who wanted to follow God. For Jephthah to conquer the emotional trauma that he must have experienced as an illegitimate and an outcast from

his family; to survive his experience with worthless men in the wilderness of Tob, he must have been more of a man of faith than we have surmised.

JEPHTHAH'S VOW. Judges 11:30-31)

“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.”

Jephthah prepared for battle, but before attacking the Ammonites, he paused and made an unnecessary and an unwise vow, that if he were successful in battle, he would offer an offering to God of what ever came out of the doors to greet him when he returned home. Notice what he said: *“If you will deliver” ... “then I will offer.”* It was certainly a very strange vow for a man to make, but in it we see an indication of Jephthah’s faith in God. It is as though he said, ‘Lord, I must have your help, and if you will help me and give victory over our enemies, then I promise you I will...’ it was a rash vow that he made, but the point is he was willing to trust God.

We’re told in verse 29 that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.” He was anointed and empowered by God for the task before him. It is evident that the hand of God would enable Jephthah to deliver Israel. So why does Jephthah make a rash and foolish vow? Vows are very serious matters in Scripture. Ecclesiastes 5:5 warns, “It is better not to vow, than to make a vow and not keep it.”

We do not know beyond a doubt what Jephthah really intended when he made his vow. After the battle Jephthah remembered his vow. Returning home, the first to greet him was his daughter. Bible scholars become divided at this point. Some think that Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter. Others say she remained a virgin and therefore childless, which was considered a curse in that society. Consequently, she would be considered as good as dead. Such women often served at the Tabernacle in a religious vocation, similar to Nuns in the Roman Catholic Church today.

I believe that she went to serve at the Tabernacle. Here’s my line of reasoning:

- Human sacrifice was a heathen custom and an abomination specifically forbidden by the Law of God. Deut.18:10 states: “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire....”. (Also Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31) It was a heathen practice. The Ammonites, against whom Jephthah was going to fight, worshipped a god named Molech, who was their national deity (Lev.18:21; Jer. 32:35), and whose worship was accompanied by the burning of children offered as a sacrifice by their own parents! (Yes, God, in testing Abraham, did tell him to offer Isaac, but prevented it!)
- God would never accept a human sacrifice, and neither would the people of Israel allow it. God, Who knows the secrets of all men’s hearts, would not have given Jephthah success in battle if he had intended to sacrifice a human being.
- No Jewish priest would have approved or participated in human sacrifice.
- Nothing is said about him actually sacrificing his daughter on an altar.

- Jephthah would not be listed in Hebrews 11 if he had offered his daughter as a human sacrifice.

WHAT DID JEPHTHAH DO?

- Jephthah set apart his daughter for the Lord's service, which was in line with Jewish practice (Lev. 27:2ff). We see a similar promise made concerning the prophet Samuel, who was dedicated to God's service by Hannah, his mother. There were orders of unmarried females at the Tabernacle who assisted with the logistics of worship.
- Jephthah's sorrow came because his lineage would end with his only child, a significant loss.
- Her sadness centers on the fact that "she had no relations with a man," which shows that rather than being slain she was being devoted to an unmarried, celibate life. In responses to her father, here is what she said "'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. 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."
- Jephthah's daughter was dedicated to the Lord and remained a virgin – considered a curse in Israel, therefore the "lament." (Judges 11:37-40)

After making the vow to God, Jephthah proceeded to confront the Ammonites who were threat-ening Israel. At first, he tried diplomacy which did not work. (Judges 11:12-28) Then he went to battle against them.

JEPHTHAH'S VICTORIES. Judges 11:32-33

"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."

The Ammonites were defeated but his battles were not over. The Ammonites were outside enemies of Israel. Now, internal strife broke out. The Ephraimites, a tribe of Israelites, offended because they had had no share in the victory over the Ammonites, made war upon Gilead, but were put to rout by the forces under Jephthah and 42,000 Ephraimites were killed. (Judges 12:1-6).

As far as the scriptural record is concerned, these were Jephthah's only military triumphs. His life had a terrible beginning but a triumphal ending!

SUMMATION

1. The Holy Spirit's testimony of Jephthah in Hebrews 11 is that he was a man who had faith in God and that his faith was put into action. His life was a mixture of vice and virtue, good and bad, triumph and disaster, but the principle of faith was at work in his life, and it is for this reason that he is mentioned in Hebrews Eleven.

2. Considering his background, Jephthah could have resigned himself to obscurity, assuming, "People like me never amount to much." Yet he arose above his handicaps to serve God.

3. Others may be more talented, smarter, etc. but none of that matters to God. What does matter is whether we are seeking to do God's will for our lives. Paul writes, "I am what I am by the grace of God" (I Cor 15:10).

4. If we see ourselves as worthless, we will tend to back away from relationships and challenges. Jephthah had a healthy sense of self-respect, in spite of his past. Because God loves us, He never gives up on us. God will help us conquer the pain of our past and lead us a bright future.

LESSONS

1. He whom by humans is abused, is by God often used.
2. Earthly disfavor does not prevent heavenly favor.
3. Think before you speak! Hasty vows are most often regretted.
4. God can strike a straight lick with any crooked stick, provided that stick is yielded to Him!

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