

Jephthah's Foolish Vow and Victory Over the Ammonites

Judges 11:29-40

Judges 11:29-40 - *"Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, ³¹ 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."*

³² So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands. ³³ 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.

³⁴ When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it."

³⁶ So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon." ³⁷ Then she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I."

³⁸ So he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man.

And it became a custom in Israel ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite."

Background Notes

Before we discuss the thorny question of Jephthah's vow, let's review the first half of Judges 11. Jephthah was an outcast. His brothers rejected and disowned him because he was illegitimate, and the son of a prostitute. So Jephthah moved away from his brothers. He became a mighty man of valor, with a small army of men following him. And it wasn't long before the leaders of Gilead recognized Jephthah's military ability, and asked him to lead Israel against the Ammonites.

Jephthah agreed, and with great diplomatic skill, he told the Ammonites that they were wrong in demanding Israel's land. However, the Ammonite king would not listen to reason, and so Jephthah fought the Ammonites. And the Lord gave Israel the victory. That's the good news.

The bad news is that Jephthah made a foolish vow to the Lord before he went out to battle: *"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" (v30-31).*

Who came out of his house when he returned from the victory? His only daughter = in fact, his only child! *"When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing. And she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter" (v34).* So the question is: Did Jephthah actually sacrifice his daughter? And my answer is, "I honestly don't know!" So here are what I feel are the three strongest points in favor of each position.

The three strongest points that he **did** sacrifice his daughter:

- 1..It's the most normal interpretation of the text. Verse 31 uses the term "burnt offering," the same Hebrew word that is used in the Old Testament for blood sacrifices.
2. When Jephthah made the vow, if he was thinking that an animal would come out of his house, that's not much of a sacrificial vow, is it? Let's say a dog walks out of the door of his house – as thanks for victory over the Ammonites, is Jephthah going to sacrifice a dog? And large animals, like oxen, weren't kept in houses. It wouldn't have been much of a sacrificial vow, if Jephthah were thinking he'd only have to sacrifice a small domestic animal. So Jephthah must have been thinking of a human sacrifice.
3. The surrounding pagan nations practiced human sacrifice, and Jephthah was living on the fringes of Israel. Thus, he may have become desensitized to the pagan practices around him. Furthermore, because he was living as an outcast in a pagan land, he may have been ignorant of the Mosaic Law against human sacrifice.

Now the strongest points that he **did not** sacrifice his daughter:

1. Verse 31 may be translated as follows: *"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, or I will offer it up as a burnt offering"* [emphasis added]. In other words, his vow was that if a person came out, they would be dedicated to the Lord, but if an animal came out, it would be sacrificed.
2. Verses 36-39 seem to indicate that Jephthah's daughter expected to be dedicated to the Lord to a life of celibacy, but not sacrificed. Verses 36-37: *"So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of*

Ammon.” Then she said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I.”

So it seems a case could be built that she was going to be dedicated to a life of celibacy – maybe to serve the Lord at the Tabernacle (or something similar to that), rather than her life being taken as a sacrifice.

3. Verse 29 says, **“Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah....”** It was under this condition, being empowered by the Lord, that Jephthah made this vow before the Lord. It doesn’t seem logical that under the power of the Spirit of the Lord, he would make a vow that could possibly entail offering a human sacrifice – especially when the Mosaic Law clearly forbade human sacrifice!

Doctrinal Points

1. Sometimes God superimposes His strength on great natural strengths.

We see this Doctrinal Point in the life of Jephthah. Sometimes God takes weak or timid people and makes them strong, like Gideon, or like Timothy in the New Testament. But sometimes God takes a strong person - a person with outstanding natural strengths and abilities - and superimposes His strength on that person’s natural strength. The apostle Paul was such a person. Even before Paul became a Christian, he was a strong person. He had a great mind, great natural leadership abilities, and he was a leader in Judaism. But when Paul became a Christian, God superimposed His strength on Paul’s natural strengths.

The same is true of the judge, Jephthah. Jephthah had a lot of natural talent and ability. He was able to organize a small army out of a bunch of unemployed, rag-tag ne’er-do-wells - and that certainly takes some ability! The elders of Gilead came to Jephthah to ask him to lead Israel against the Ammonites because they saw Jephthah’s natural strengths and abilities - not because they saw the hand of the Lord on Jephthah. However, the *“Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah”* (v29). The strength of the Lord was superimposed on Jephthah’s natural strengths.

There’s an important lesson here. Maybe you’re a weak and timid person – **but God** can give you strength! Maybe you’re a naturally strong person, like Jephthah. Maybe you have natural leadership ability, or natural administrative ability. Maybe you have raw courage! God can superimpose His strength on your strength and use you mightily for His kingdom. No matter whether you are naturally timid or naturally strong, if you dedicate yourself to the Lord and to His service, great things will be accomplished through you for the glory of God!

The Lord doesn’t take away your natural abilities and strengths and substitute His strength. No, He can superimpose His strength on your strengths. Sometimes God imposes His strength on great natural strengths.

2. Sometimes God gives victory in spite of grave human mistakes.

Jephthah made a rash and foolish vow. This was a bad mistake, a grave human mistake. Whether or not Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter, we don't know, but in any case, that vow was a mistake. It was a rash and foolish vow. Yet in spite of Jephthah's foolish vow, God gave him victory over the Ammonites.

Now that victory in no way condones Jephthah's foolish vow. Sometimes God gives victory in spite of grave human mistakes. (Look at Samson, for example.) Maybe you feel that you have made some really stupid mistakes – grave, human mistakes. Don't feel discouraged. God may still give you victory in spite of your mistakes. God doesn't condone your mistakes, but in His grace, God may still give you victory in a number of different areas.

I know a Christian man who made a grave financial mistake. He gave a huge amount of money to his "alma mater" -- a godless, secular university. This money could have been given for the work of the Lord. Instead, it was given to the work of the enemy! And yet in His grace, God is still using this Christian man in his home, church and community. Sometimes God gives victory in spite of grave human mistakes.

Practical Application

Let's not make rash and foolish vows!

In the heat of emotion, Jephthah made a rash and foolish vow. We could make the same mistake. And vows made before God are serious! So let's be careful not to make rash and foolish vows.

Some time ago one of my Bible college students told me that she believed God wanted her to be single, and that she would be willing to take a vow of celibacy. I encouraged her not to make such a vow at that point in her life, since that might be a rash vow to take so early in her Christian walk. That student is now happily married, and she and her husband are faithfully serving the Lord together.

Other examples of rash and foolish decisions could be given, especially in the areas of money or a life's work. Watch out for making binding decisions in the heat of emotion! Let's be committed and dedicated - but let's not make rash and foolish vows.