

Week #:	207	Series:	God's Judgment	Title:	Judge #8 – Jephtha – Jephtha's Vow
Scriptures:	Judges 11:29-40				
Songs:	Medley: Come Now is the Time to Worship / Open the Eyes of My Heart / Here I Am to Worship				
	Prayer	Plead the Blood – Chris Davenport (8:37)			
Videos:	Judges Song – What's in the Bible #4 (Time- 31:31-33:25)				

Judge #8: Jephtha's Vow

We talked of God raising up Jephtha as a judge after the people had, once again, gotten stuck in the dreaded cycle of apostasy. The people of Israel turned back to God. Then the king of Ammon tried to claim that the land belonged to them, giving several convoluted reasons as to why Israel should give it up, move out, and turn the land over to him. Historically, Ammon had no legal claim to it. Theologically, Ammon had no religious claim to it. Even from a conquest standpoint, Ammon had no claim to the land because they had never conquered it, ruled over it or possessed it. Jephthah realizes that there is no hope to continue the negotiations; if Ammon wants Gilead they'll have to take it by force.

Judges 11:29-33

²⁹ Then the spirit of *ADONAI* came upon Jephtha; and he passed through Gil'ad and M'nasheh, on through Mitzpeh of Gil'ad, and from there over to the people of 'Amon. ³⁰ Jephtha made a vow to *ADONAI*: "If you will hand the people of 'Amon over to me, ³¹ then whatever comes out the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the people of 'Amon will belong to *ADONAI*; I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." ³² So Jephtha crossed over to fight the people of 'Amon, and *ADONAI* handed them over to him. ³³ He killed them from 'Aro'er until you reach Minnit, twenty cities, all the way to Avel-K'ramim; it was a massacre. So the people of 'Amon were defeated before the people of Isra'el.

The first words of verse 29 say that it was only at this point (after Jephtha had been chosen to lead Israel's militia), and after this diplomatic confrontation with the King of Ammon, that the Lord moved and anointed Jephthah as a Shophet. Thus we see the phrase that, "then the spirit of Adonai came upon Jephtha..."

In Hebrew it says that the Ruach of YHWH *hayyah Jephtha*. Back in chapter 3 we discussed that this concept of the spirit of God covering or anointing or coming upon a man (in this case a Judge) was generally expressed using one or the other of two different Hebrew words: *labesh* or *hayyah*. These two words represented substantially different ways in which the spirit of the Lord acted upon a human. *Labesh* meant **to clothe a person in the Holy Spirit (like putting on a garment) in such a way that the person took on a certain amount of divine power that enabled them to do miraculous deeds, or to gain superhuman strength or insight**. But here in Judges 11 it is the word *hayyah* that is used, and it indicates that **Jehovah's spirit overcomes a man in such a way that the man becomes especially obedient to the Lord; or that the Lord's will operates in that man in a way that almost replaces that man's own will**. So Jephtha was operating very much in the Lord's will; yet as we will see, obviously not entirely.

Here this move of the holy spirit upon Jephtha represents that moment in which Jephthah's status changed; he went from being a normal run-of-the-mill human leader to a directly divinely appointed Judge for God.

The first thing Jephtha did was to travel through the land Gilead and the tribal territory of Manessah (the 1/2 of Manessah that was in the Trans-Jordan), and added to the size of the Israelite militia to

prepare for the coming battle with the forces of Ammon. Once he did that, he acted in a way that has perplexed and bothered Jews and Christians for centuries: in anticipation of going to war, Jephtha made a vow to the God of Israel; a very rash vow that would cause him the greatest pain.

It is this vow that forms one of the most infamous stories in the entire Bible, and therefore is usually the focus of study of Judges chapter 11.

To seek God's favor Jephthah vows to Jehovah to offer as a sacrifice the first thing that walks through his door to greet him as he returns home from battle with Ammon (assuming an Israelite victory). The reason for the vow was Jephthah's recognition of the need for divine intervention because indeed this was going to be Holy War.

Judges 11:34-35

³⁴ As Jephthah was returning to his house in Mitzpah, his daughter came dancing out to meet him with tambourines. She was his only child; he had no other son or daughter. ³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Oh, no, my daughter! You're breaking my heart! Why must you be the cause of such pain to me? I made a vow to *ADONAI*, and I can't go back on my word."

In verse 34 we read that Jephthah was victorious and when he arrived home his daughter came out the door to greet him. Jephthah was devastated because he felt he could not go back on his vow to God since God had indeed given Israel victory, so he felt that he was stuck carrying through with his promise to YHWH. Jephthah saw a direct connection between his vow and the complete victory of Israel over Ammon.

Judges 11:36-39

³⁶ She said to him, "Father, you made a vow to *ADONAI*; so do whatever you said you would do to me; because *ADONAI* did take vengeance on your enemies the people of 'Amon." ³⁷ Then she said to her father, "Just do this one thing for me — let me be alone for two months. I'll go away into the mountains with my friends and mourn, because I will die without getting married." ³⁸ "You may go," he answered, and he sent her away for two months. She left, she and her friends, and mourned in the mountains that she would die unmarried. ³⁹ After two months she returned to her father, and he did with her what he had vowed; she had remained a virgin. So it became a law in Isra'el ⁴⁰ that the women of Isra'el would go every year for four days to lament the daughter of Jephthah from Gil'ad.

His daughter made it clear that she understood that her father had no choice and in a selfless gesture told him that he should do to her what it is he vowed. We're told in verse 39 that after a two-month reprieve, her father followed through with his promise to God.

The usual English rendering of the original Hebrew is that Jephthah vows to God that "*WHATEVER comes out of the doors of my house to meet me... will be offered to Adonai as a burnt offering.*"

The first keyword of this sentence is "whatever." *Whatever* is a very poor translation that reflects a predisposition of the translator to what he thinks was in Jephthah's mind when he made that vow. The Hebrew word is **ASHER**, and it decidedly does NOT mean "whatever" or "whatsoever." It means **who, which, or that**. This is very important because by slightly altering the meaning of the word *asher* to "whatever", it means that ANYTHING that comes out of the door first upon Jephthah's triumphant return home will be sacrificed. It could be an animal or a human, but if we correctly translate *asher* as "whoever" or "whichever," then it points towards that offer of sacrifice being a human; the only

question being which human. Obviously, the word “what” refers to an “it,” and the word “who” refers to a person. We don’t called people “it,” and we don’t call animals “who.”

In other words it has become a rather standard Christian apologetic to explain that when Jephthah made that vow to the Lord, what he innocently had in mind is that some kind of an animal would be the first out of the door to greet him and thus he would use that animal as a sacrifice to God. But in addition to the fact that using the term *asher* refers to a person and not an animal, is that even if it was referring to an animal it is still problematic.

The problem is that clean and unclean animals mingled and lived together in and around Hebrew households. Dogs and chickens lived side by side with sheep, goats and cattle. What is more likely when the master returns home; that a dog would run to greet him first, or that a cow would? Some answer this problem by saying that in a very real sense Jephthah was turning the matter over to Jehovah; that it was God’s will and prerogative to determine WHAT it is that would come through the door first to greet Jephthah, and thus becoming the divine sacrifice. Essentially it would be God doing the choosing of the sacrificial object.

However because the word *asher* is employed, almost certainly no animal (clean or unclean) was being contemplated by Jephthah. The ancient Rabbis say that it was probably a household slave or servant that Jephthah was envisioning. Indeed in ancient times it was the standard protocol for the chief house servant to race to the master when he approached, to be the first to greet him, wash the dust off of his feet, and give him food and drink. That was his job; to fail at that could mean severe punishment because it was considered a great insult to not offer the master such respect.

Another keyword is in the translation concerning the words **“burnt offering.”** That is that Jephthah said that who or whichever came out of his door he would offer to God as a burnt offering. In fact the Hebrew word used is **“Olah.”** While it is generally correct to define the Olah as a burnt offering, in fact it doesn’t necessarily mean the burning up of a sacrifice. It more means a **“near offering.”** The ***Olah is the offering of a gift to the Lord in order to make yourself (or someone else) acceptable to Him.*** It is a kind of sacrifice that allows you or another to be declared sufficiently holy to come “near” to God. In general this kind of sacrifice is of animals (scripturally well-defined ritually clean animals), and the Olah is presented to God by MEANS of it being burned up on the altar. The point being that the nature of Jephthah’s offering to God was that it was to be a kind of offering that was a gift to God for the purpose of making a person or a nation acceptable to God. Whether it was actually burned up on an altar after it was offered wasn’t technically a requirement of an Olah.

The word used in this passage of Judges is Olah, so the offer of Jephthah is of a very specific culturally well understood kind of sacrifice, not just some general offer to give something to God.

When Jephthah’s unnamed daughter understood that she was the subject of the sacrificial offering in her father’s vow, her piety was so great that she voluntarily agreed to accept the consequence, but first, she asked if she could have two months to go away and mourn because she would die without getting married. Jephthah agreed. Then we’re told that after two months she returned and her father did to her what he had vowed and thus she remained a virgin. Further, it says that Israel established a yearly remembrance of this poor girl during which time the women of Israel would “lament” the daughter of Jephthah.

Beginning sometime after 500 A.D., some commentators decided that this was code for meaning that her sacrifice was not being killed; rather it was agreeing to remain unmarried and thus a virgin for her

entire life as a fulfillment of her father's vow to Jehovah. Later yet, it was added that she became a worker at the Tabernacle, and that any female Tabernacle worker had to be a virgin. The logic was that indeed this was a great sacrifice because it was considered a terrible thing for a woman of that culture and era to NOT produce children, as it was her main duty in life.

Since the text clearly states that this girl was Jephthah's ONLY child (he had no sons), that whether she was killed or whether she simply remained a virgin, Jephthah effectively had no heirs and thus his family line would end upon his death (or at best upon his daughter's death). And THIS was the cause of his great distress as expressed in verse 35 when he cried out: *"Oh no, my daughter! You're breaking my heart. Why must you be the cause of such pain to me? I made a vow to Adonai, and I can't go back on my word."*

I have no doubt that Jephthah never imagined his own daughter would in any way be involved. He may have been a leader of a gang, but the reasoned way he conducted himself with the elders of Gilead who wanted his help, he sought no real revenge on his family, he approached the enemy king of Ammon in a thoughtful way without rushing into battle, and he showed himself to be very concerned that Jehovah was with him, all indicates that he may have been rough, but he was no ignorant thug by nature.

Jephthah was a very flawed man, operating like all the other Hebrews in that time who were so terribly compromised by evil. He had mixed pagan practices with the Torah, came to all sorts of conclusions about what was proper worship and proper sacrifice that were way off the mark, and yet God used him just as he was for Kingdom purposes. Everything Jephthah did was not good. Everything Jephthah did was not in obedience to the Ruach, the spirit of God; but some things were.

It is difficult for us to wrap our heads around the idea of human sacrifice, and thus why we try to find another more humane way for this story to play out. However, it is not always easy the things God requires of us. While I doubt He would require the killing of a human life now, we certainly are called to give up – or sacrifice – a lot in our own lives that fundamentally change everything around us. Such is the life of a Believer. We will fail far more than we'll follow God's will as we should. Yet that does not mean that God doesn't love us, or that He'll abandon us. The test is not our perfection; the test is our abiding trust in Jesus Our Savior.