

DHW

Bible study class

LESSON 10

JUDGES 11 & 12

INTRODUCTION

These two chapters give extensive attention to Jephthah as the next judge of Israel. Much has been told about him than Othniel, Ehud, or even Deborah. One could probably say that there are many things in Jephthah's account that is rich in spiritual significance. He was not like the previous traditional judges in some ways. His background was customarily unacceptable and he suffered for it. But he proved himself to be a person of exceptional qualities and abilities which placed him in good stead. Selfish ambitions can drive many a person to acts of cruelty and wickedness. Such people were Jephthah's step-brothers. Under such circumstances which are beyond a person's control, what should he do? Should a person permanently harbour an attitude of bitterness for the rest of his life or should he get on with his life? There are precious lessons which can be drawn from the account of Jephthah and his step-brothers. But more significantly is that God can turn the tables; He can use and work through the outcasts of society for his glory and honour.

The following outline helps in the study of the two chapters:

- 1) Jephthah Recalled to Deliver Israel from the Ammonites (11:1-11)
- 2) Jephthah Justifies Israel's Possession of the Land (11:12-28)
- 3) Jephthah Keeps His Vow (11:29-40)
- 4) The Greatest Enemy Is From Within (12:1-7)
- 5) The Other Judges (12:8-15)

STUDY THE WORD

Jephthah Recalled to Deliver Israel

Jephthah was a Gileadite, one who lived on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The stretch of land from north to south was formerly occupied by the Moabites and the Edomites respectively. He was a strong and brave man. But he was the illegitimate son of Gilead because his mother was a harlot (prostitute). This could suggest that she was not an Israelite. Gilead was married and his wife bore him several sons. When his sons grew up, they resented their step-brother Jephthah and consequently drove him out of the family. The reason for driving out Jephthah was the issue of their father's inheritance. They deprived Jephthah of any share of the inheritance. His step-brothers made it very clear to him that he was not wanted. They even disgraced and defamed him that he was the child of "a strange woman." Obviously, the brothers were motivated by greed.

Being chased out by his step-brothers, Jephthah went to settle in the land of Tob, a district on the east of

Jordan, about 13 miles south-east of the Sea of Galilee. His banishment did not deter nor discourage him. On the contrary, he showed ability of leadership. He attracted a group of “vain men” who joined him. It seemed these men were adventurous and unemployed and Jephthah moulded them into effective fighting men. They were unlike the “vain” men whom Abimelech hired (9:4)—men who were cut-throat hirelings. These men who joined Jephthah did not seem to be of the same kind. The word “vain” in the context should be understood as men of low in status, rank and pedigree just like that of Jephthah himself. There is nothing in the text indicating or suggesting that they were wicked and reckless people. Together with these men, Jephthah built himself a reputation. He clearly had gifts of leadership.

In the passage of time, the Ammonites declared war against the Gileadites and were under their oppression. The elders of the Gileadites were desperate. There was no one in their community who could stand and lead them against the Ammonites. The best solution they could come up with, although it was humiliating, was to seek the help of Jephthah whom they had banished. So they went to the land of Tob to fetch him. They requested him to return and they offered him the position of military commander-in-chief to lead them against the Ammonites. Observe that in their desperation they did not seek the guidance of the LORD God.

Jephthah reminded the elders that they had not long ago driven him out of his family. He asked for a

reason why the change of attitude and at the same time not hiding the fact that they were in distress. Their response was quite interesting. Their reply that they turned to him again at this time indicates that Jephthah had previously helped them but they had been ungrateful. Now they wanted Jephthah to risk his limbs and life to fight against the Ammonites. They increased their offer of reward promising that they would make him “head” or ruler over all Gilead (8). Clearly, Jephthah was in a position of strength to demand whatever terms and conditions he wanted, whereas the leaders of the Gileadites were helpless and hopeless. Jephthah repeated their promise to make him ruler over all of Gilead. He also accorded that his victory over the Ammonites would be the LORD’S. The elders readily reassured Jephthah and called upon the LORD to witness the agreement between them. This means that if they did not keep their promise, they would suffer the wrath of the LORD. Jephthah wanted their promise to be formally given in a ratification ceremony before the LORD. This official ceremony took place in Mizpeh where the army was encamped. Jephthah took the lead by repeating all the words undertaken by the elders and invoking the name of the LORD. He was officially and formally sworn into office and became the “head” of all Gilead (11:12). At this juncture, can we say that Jephthah was truly a godly man who feared the LORD, or was Jephthah cunningly manipulating the name of the LORD to seize power and to maintain power and status?

Jephthah Justifies Israel's Possession of the Land

Having been installed as the ruler of the Gileadites, Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites. His first move was to find a solution to the situation through diplomatic means. Jephthah proved to be a skilful negotiator. Jephthah asked the king of the Ammonites to state clearly the basis for him to attack the Gileadites (11:12). The Ammonite king obliged by stating that since the Israelites had come out of Egypt, they took possession of their land stretching from the river Arnon to the river Jabbok and to Jordan. The Ammonite king demanded that this stretch of land be returned to them (11:13).

Jephthah appealed to the history of the land to defend the Gileadites' right to settle in the land (11:15-27). He gave the Ammonites a history lesson. Israel when she came out of Egypt did not drive out nor overrun the Edomites nor the Moabites. In fact, the Israelites bypassed their territories. When they came to the eastern side of Jordan, they sent emissaries to Sihon, the king of the Amorites and the king of Heshbon. These kings did not trust Israel but they made war with Israel. The LORD God of Israel defeated the enemies and gave them to Israel. The Israelites then took possession of all the land. The LORD their God had given the land to them, and they could not reject it. Jephthah then posed a rhetorical question: would they not accept a piece of real estate or land if Chemosh, their god gave them? The answer is obvious. So the LORD had given to the children of Israel the land where they had settled for the past

three hundred years. Why did they not claim for the recovery of their land then? Why now (11:26)? Hence Jephthah concluded that Israel had not done any thing wrong nor did she deserve the declaration of war by the Ammonites. The king of the Ammonites was speechless. He had no answer for he could not rebut the testimony of Jephthah. The Ammonites refused to accept the words of Jephthah, and war was inevitable.

Jephthah Keeps His Vow

The Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah. This was significant for it indicates the LORD'S approval and the certainty of success in the war. But before he led the Gileadites to war, he did a foolish act. He made a vow: if the LORD delivered the Ammonites into his hand, "whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (11:30, 31). This was a foolish act. The LORD worked in accordance with His sovereign will. He did not need Jephthah to promise Him anything to give him the victory. It was not necessary for him to make a vow to the LORD. In other words, he literally made a bargain with the LORD. Could one bargain with God?

However, victory was certain because the LORD was with him. It was not for Jephthah's sake but for His own sake. They were His people whom the Ammonites had oppressed for eighteen years (10:8). Jephthah returned to his home after the war. He got a rude shock when the first thing that came out of his house to meet him

was his daughter (11:34)! She gave his father a hero's welcome—with timbrels in her hands and dancing with joy she greeted her father. She was his only daughter and he had no son. Jephthah saw her and he “rent his clothes” (11:35). This act was usually a sign of mourning or grieving. He remembered his vow to the LORD. Jephthah kept his vow. His action showed that he feared the LORD and he kept his promise. Now the question among many commentators is: did Jephthah literally offer his daughter to the LORD by killing her?

Commentators are divided concerning the interpretation of this text. One group supports the view that Jephthah literally offered his daughter on the altar before the LORD according to his vow—“I will offer it up for a burnt sacrifice.” The other commentators however reject this interpretation and explain that she resigned to a life of celibacy and service in the tabernacle of the LORD. An investigation of each view should help us to decide which one is most appropriate and acceptable in the sight of the LORD. The first group argues purely on the basis of the literal form of the vows. It was clear that Jephthah said that “whatsoever cometh forth out of his house” he would offer it for a burnt offering. There is no question about the nature of a burnt offering. Israelites knew what it meant—a blood sacrifice of an animal acceptable to the LORD in accordance with the Law. If a sheep or cattle were to come out of his house, it would without question be killed and offered as a burnt offering to the LORD. Since it was his daughter, Jephthah, who was understood to be a

godly man, kept to his vow, killed his daughter and offered her to the LORD. In other words it was a human sacrifice to the LORD. Jephthah should have given much deeper thought about his vow. In this respect, he was not wise. But a vow is a vow, and he had to keep it.

The other group basically described Jephthah as a God-fearing man. Every Israelite knew that human sacrifice was forbidden and an abomination to the LORD.¹ The Canaanites who lived among them practised this abominable thing. The LORD made it emphatically clear that His children must not practise human sacrifice. Jephthah would not have any reservation at all of offering a sheep or cattle if it had been the first to come out of his house. But it was his only daughter. Could he offer his daughter as a burnt offering? Did he not know that human sacrifice was forbidden by the LORD? If he knew that human sacrifice was forbidden by the LORD, then he could not have done that. Jephthah's daughter would also know about the Law. She could also not agree to a human sacrifice. In addition, for the burnt offering to be acceptable, it must be presented to the priests to perform it on the altar before the LORD. The priests, who knew and taught the Law, would not have agreed to it. If the text is closely examined, the conversation between the father

¹ Deuteronomy 12:31 Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods.

and daughter did not dwell on the offering of herself as a burnt offering to the LORD. But rather she supported her father that he must keep his vow. She further asked the father to give her two months of grace before she “bemoan her virginity” (11:37). This is understood as resigning herself to a life of celibacy—“and she knew no man.” And this practice was not unusual for a woman to do in Israel. Jephthah’s grieving could have been twofold: one that her daughter could not marry and raise a family, and secondly, he could not have descendants of his own. This writer agrees with the second interpretation. The strongest ground is that human sacrifice was and still is abominable to the LORD. God wants His children to offer our “bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Romans 12:1).

The Greatest Enemy Is From Within

The victory and deliverance from the oppression of the Ammonites should have brought about great celebration, thanksgiving, and joy to the children of Israel. But this is not always the case. In this case, the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together to confront Jephthah. They charged him for not calling them to join him in defeating the Ammonites. They even threatened to burn and destroy his house and him (12:1). This is an unthinkable reaction to the victory which had just been secured. This was not the first time that the Ephraimites had behaved in this way. They had the same attitude towards Gideon (8:1-3). It shows clearly that the Ephraimites considered themselves

to be the leading tribe of Israel, and to be side-lined in any war against the enemy surely hurt their pride. Since they could not get the dignity and the accolade they purportedly deserved, they trumped up the charges against Jephthah. They accused the Gileadites of being renegades (illegitimates, bastards) of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

Jephthah’s response to the Ephraimites was swift and decisive. It was unlike that of Gideon. Jephthah justified his actions with an accusation against the Ephraimites for not offering him and his people help when they were being oppressed by the Ammonites. Jephthah had called them but they did not come to their rescue (12:2). And since they would not help, Jephthah put his life at risk and testified that it was the LORD who gave them the victory. Jephthah counter-charged them for fighting against him, and in a veiled way of going against the LORD and his anointed deliverer (12:3). Without any delay, Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and attacked the Ephraimites. Those Ephraimites who tried to escape by crossing the Jordan River, which was guarded by the Gileadites would have to identify themselves with a simple language test. They would ask the escapees to say, “*shibboleth*”, and if they said “*sibboleth*” pronouncing it wrongly, they would kill them (12:6). The Ephraimites lost forty-two thousand men. This sad incident was unnecessary. A person’s greatest enemy sometimes could be his own people or relatives, and the result might be an unnecessary disaster. Jephthah judged Israel for only a short

period of six years. Jephthah died and was buried in one of the cities of the land.

The Other Judges

After the judgeship of Jephthah, three judges followed. They were Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. Very little are known about each of them. Ibzan judged Israel for seven years. He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. For his daughters he took in thirty sons from “abroad” for them. The word “abroad” should not be taken as from a far country. The usual meaning was that he took husbands for his daughters from families who lived at some distance away from his own. It is mentioned here to show the man’s attempt to gain prestige through such marriages. Both sons-in-law and daughters-in-law probably were from fine families since they took the trouble to find them even from a distance.² Ibzan most probably was from Judah because when he died, he was buried in Bethlehem.

After Ibzan, Elon was the next judge of Israel. He was from the tribe of Zebulun which was in the region of Galilee. He served in this area. He served for ten years, the longest period of the three judges. When he died he was buried in Aijalon in Zebulun. Nothing further is recorded about him.

The next judge after Elon was Abdon, who was the last of the minor judges. He was the son of Hillel and he lived in Pirathon which was in Ephraim. His family was large—forty sons, and thirty grandsons (“nephews”,

Hebrew literally, ‘sons of sons’). The fact that they rode on “ass colts” indicates that their father was wealthy and powerful and influential. When he died he was buried in the land of Ephraim after serving for eight years.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Several pertinent lessons can be learned. It is encouraging to learn that God does not discriminate a person just because he is born out of wedlock. Such circumstance in which the child is born is beyond his control. God treats the child according to His sovereign will. In the case of Jephthah, he proved to be a person who knew the LORD God of Israel, and the history of the nation, Israel. In spite of being disgraced, rejected, and driven out of his father’s family, he did not resign himself to self-pity but went on with his life. Although disadvantaged, he made himself useful and gathered a group of men and organized them to become a useful band of mercenary soldiers. He was capable and clear about what he wanted in life. And God used him to fulfil His purpose. But we should not behave like the Jephthah’s step-brothers who were selfish, greedy, and unjustly mistreated him. We should evaluate a person more fairly on grounds of his character and conduct rather on his birth-rights.

It is interesting to note that the step-brothers had to eat humble pie. They had to seek the help of Jephthah to save them from the oppression of the enemy and none of them would be willing to risk their necks to save themselves. Such instances are not uncommon in life. Let us learn not to adopt such an attitude towards others.

² Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, p.271.

On the other hand we could say that Jephthah was not completely flawless. It must be admitted that he capitalized on the situation and bargained to be the ruler of Israel, and not just a military commander. The fact that God used him to fulfil His purpose to save Israel does not ensure his spirituality. The same is also true that just because the Spirit of God was upon Jephthah, he was spiritual. The Spirit of God came upon him was for the purpose of ensuring victory over the enemy. Subsequently, Jephthah did not show much wisdom and a sound knowledge of the Word. He made a vow to God without much thought. It was a foolish and rash act. Making the vow before God actually shows that he lacked faith in God, and that God had to be bargained or bribed to gain success. However, we can commend him for carrying out the vow. Even in this case, his daughter could have been instrumental in fulfilling the vow in the way it is given.

Jephthah showed considerable ability and intelligence as a negotiator. His initial move to use diplomacy before a declaration of war is commendable. His reasoning was sound and the Ammonites should have agreed to a peaceful solution. This is a better way of solving the problems of strained relationships in our daily life. Diplomacy is better than declaring war on others. Both parties should be honest, fair, and transparent when going to the table of negotiation.

Finally, it is very sad to learn that sometimes our greatest enemy is not from without but from within the family. More often than not, in order to prove one's point, the "enemy"

resorts to false charges and accusations. And there is no lack in using strong words and threats. Such demeanour builds only more resentment and eventual retaliation. Christians should not resort to such attitude and tactics in our relationship with one another, and in the church, which belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, who purchased it with His precious blood. The Ephraimites should be jubilant and congratulatory to the Gileadites, instead of being jealous, arrogant and proud. It would be a very sad day when two brothers go to war and destroy one another.
AMEN