

LENTEN SEASON FOR FIRST REFORMED CHURCH

Sunday March 22, 2020

MESSY PEOPLE, MERCIFUL GOD

We come to one of the most interesting and **SECULAR STORY** in the scriptures. I have been learning over the last few years the challenge of working through some issues in my past. When we look at Jephthah, the Gileadite we learn several things: the way to and not to discern God's will, the lack of wisdom of making vows, and the difficulty of bargaining with God.

Become a prisoner of your past (Judges 11:1–11)

Our story begins, **"Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior,"** but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah" (Judges 11:1). **"Mighty"** translates a Hebrew word meaning "powerful" or "brave." This man was a renowned fighter of great reputation. What's more, his father was Gilead, who was the head of their entire clan. Since his mother was a prostitute, his brothers sought to disinherit him: **"And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, 'You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman'"** (v. 2).

As a result, **"Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob"** (v. 3a). **"Fled"** implies that he ran from them, perhaps indicating that they sought to kill him. He chose to live in the **"land of Tob,"** a pagan area east of the Sea of Galilee. **"Lived"** means to "settle down" or "make a place your home." This decision may indicate that his mother was a Canaanite and that he fled to her relatives or acquaintances.

The story turns when **"after a time the Ammonites made war against Israel"** (v. 4). These were descendants of Ammon, living as a people east of the Jordan River. The threat was so severe that **"when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob"** (v. 5).

The elders made Jephthah an offer: **"Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites"** (v. 6). They were asking him to take charge of their military but not serve as their judge or national leader. Jephthah agreed only if they would make him their ruler: **"If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head"** (v. 9).

The elders were so desperate that they agreed (v. 10). The latter statement is interesting, since we have no indication that there was a sacred shrine at Mizpah. It seems that Jephthah took his vow of judgeship in the presence of the army encamped there, not before the Lord at his place of worship.

Please note that at no point in this narrative did anyone consult the Lord. Not Jephthah's family before they drove him away, or Jephthah when he fled to a pagan land. Not the elders when they faced the Ammonite threat or when they enlisted Jephthah to lead them. Not Jephthah when they came to him or when he entered the judgeship. This is as secular a story as you are likely to find.

From this part of the narrative, we learn that if you want to fail the will of God, become a prisoner of your past. Decide that what you have been is all you can ever be. There is an amazing amount of truth here. Consider how everyone in chapter 11 refuses to consult the Lord with their future. "Follow your own initiative and make your own plan." is how we often make decisions. Its about finances, or lack of education, or our past, or a vow

(I'll never do that again or I will never let anyone else do that to me again.). Decide that you know best and follow your direction rather than the Lord. But know this: **SELF-SUFFICIENCY IS SPIRITUAL SUICIDE.** Jephthah's lack of submission to the will of God will cost him more than he can imagine. The same is true for us.

Bargaining with the God of the universe (vv. 29–40)

Jephthah tried to reason with the Ammonites, but they refused his call to compromise and peace (vv. 12–28). So, he was forced to lead his nation into battle, and **"the Spirit of the LORD was upon him"** (v. 29).

This is a common Old Testament phenomenon. But this was a specific, one-time empowering by the Spirit for a particular purpose.

(In the New Testament, we find that the Spirit comes "into" us as Christians (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19–20) and never leaves us. This indwelling of the Spirit came as a result of Jesus' atoning death for us.)

In the text, the Spirit came **"upon"** Jephthah to lead and strengthen him. However, such empowering wasn't enough for him to be confident of victory in the upcoming battle. So he made a horrible, tragic mistake: **"And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering'"** (vv. 30–31).

Nowhere in Scripture does the Lord ask us to make such a deal with him. He is not a God we can coerce by bribery.

He is not a peer but the Lord of the universe.

We cannot bargain with his omnipotence.

Nowhere did Jephthah pray before making this commitment to God, or he would have been instructed by the Almighty not to utter such a foolish vow.

Jephthah and the army then defeated the Ammonites (vv. 32–33). But when he returned home, **"behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter"** (v. 34).

Watch what Jephthah does. Rather than focus on his daughter's plight, Jephthah focused on himself: **"As soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me'"** (v. 35a). His reaction transferred blame from himself to her, as though it was her fault that she came out of the house to greet him. People do this all the time. Psychologically it is caused transference. It is one of the kinds of responses that began in the garden of Eden when Adam shifted blame for his sin to his wife and she to the serpent. He explained: **"For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow"** (v. 35b).

Again, please note that he did not go to God with his dilemma. If he had, God would have made clear to him that this vow was not of God and that this father did not need to fulfill it.

Nor did Jephthah teach his daughter good theology. **Her response, while noble, was also unbiblical and made without first consulting God.** She said to him, **"My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites"** (v. 36).

She asked only that she be allowed two months with her friends to **“weep for my virginity”** (v. 37), a request he granted (v. 38). The word translated **“virginity”** is better rendered **“motherhood.”** She was grieving because she would not live to bear children.

Then, **“at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow that he had made”** (v. 39a). As a result, Jephthah’s family line died with her. But her story lived on: **“She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year”** (vv. 39b–40).

To recap: Jephthah did not consult God before going into battle, even though the Spirit of God had come **“upon”** him to empower him. He did not consult God before making his rash vow with him. He did not consult God when his beloved daughter appeared before him. Nor did she consult God when learning of her fate. Jephthah made a bargain with the King of the universe. This is always bad theology and a tragic way to relate to our loving Father.

Conclusion

Jephthah refused to ask God to redeem his past or to lead his future. As a result, he became one of the most tragic figures in Scripture.

What strikes me is the Messiness of people’s lives in the Old Testament. I am so amazed at the Mercy of God! This story is for our education and application. It contains a warning that brings a stance of looking at our God as trustworthy and open to leading and communication with us.

I found the story of Robert McFarlane insightful and illustrative of a Jephthah like life.

Robert McFarlane was Ronald Reagan’s National Security Advisor, a twenty-year veteran of the Marine Corps, and the architect of the Iran-Contra plan. When his plan failed, Mr. McFarlane resigned his position and later attempted suicide.

Several years ago, he spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast. He told his story. He described the incredible power he had achieved, the ladder to success he had climbed. But then Bud McFarlane told us with tears in his eyes that it was nothing. He got to the top, and there was nothing there. Only after he fell off that ladder did **he discover that it was leaning against the wrong wall—that life really consists of loving God and loving people. NOTHING ELSE.**

Then he discovered that God could redeem his past and use his present for a redemptive future. So, this man of such power and significance dedicated the rest of his life to telling his story and calling people to trust God with their lives.

You can follow the example of Jephthah or the will of Jesus, but you cannot do both.¹ Where are you today?

¹ How not to do the will of God, By Dr. Jim Denison, Topic Scripture: Judges 11