

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

**DHW BIBLE CLASS
LESSON 10
JUDGES
CHAPTER 11-12**

Judges 11:9-10, *“And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words.”*

INTRODUCTION

These two chapters give extensive attention to Jephthah the next judge of Israel. Much more 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 are rich in spiritual significance. He was not like the previous traditional judges in many 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 to acts of cruelty and wickedness. Jephthah’s step-brothers are examples of this. Under such circumstances 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 that 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 the outcasts of society for his glory and honour.

OUTLINE

1. Jephthah Recalled (11:1-11)
2. Jephthah’s Justification (11:12-28)
3. Jephthah Keeps His Vow (11:29-40)
4. The Enemy Within (12:1-7)
5. Other Judges (12:8-15)

COMMENTARY

Jephthah Recalled – 11:1-11

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 half-brother Jephthah and consequently drove him out of the family. The reason was the issue of their father’s inheritance. They deprived Jephthah of any share of

the inheritance. His half-brothers made it very clear to him that he was not wanted. They even disgraced and defamed him — he was the child of “a strange woman.” Obviously, the brothers were motivated by greed.

Being chased out by his half-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 leadership abilities. He attracted a group of “vain men” who joined him. It seemed these men were adventurous and unemployed whom Jephthah moulded 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 status, rank and pedigree, like that of Jephthah. There is nothing in the text suggesting they were wicked and reckless people. Together with these men, Jephthah built himself a reputation. He clearly had the gift of leadership.

In time, the Ammonites declared war against the Gileadites and oppressed them. 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 humiliating, was to seek the help of Jephthah whom they had banished.

So they went to the land of Tob and asked him to return to lead them against the Ammonites, offering him the position of military commander-in-chief. 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 for the change of attitude. 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 life to fight against the Ammonites. They increased their offer of reward — promising that they would make him “head” or ruler over all Gilead (v8). Clearly, Jephthah was in a position of strength to dictate terms and conditions. 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. 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, was Jephthah truly a godly man, who feared the LORD, or was he cunningly manipulating the name of the LORD to seize power and to maintain power and status?

Jephthah’s Justification

– 11:12-28

As ruler of the Gileadites, Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites. His first move was to find a diplomatic solution to the situation. Jephthah proved to be a skilful negotiator. He asked the king of the Ammonites to state clearly the basis for him to attack the Gileadites (11:12). The Ammonite king’s response was that since the Israelites had come out of Egypt, they had taken 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, citing history to defend the Gileadites’ right to settle in the land (11:15-27). When Israel came out of Egypt, she 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 and made war with her. The LORD God of Israel defeated them and gave their lands to Israel. As the LORD their God had

given the land to them, they could not reject it. Jephthah then posed a rhetorical question: would they not accept land if Chemosh, their god gave it to them? The answer is obvious. So the LORD had given to the children of Israel the land where they had settled for the past 300 years. Furthermore, why had the Ammonites not sought to recover 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 could not rebut the accurate historical testimony of Jephthah. From this encounter, we see that Jephthah was well versed in the history of Israel. Nevertheless, the Ammonites refused to accept Jephthah’s arguments, and war was imminent.

Jephthah Keeps His Vow

– 11:29-40

The Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah. This is significant as it indicates the LORD’S approval and the certainty of success in the war. But before Jephthah led the Gileadites to war, he was most foolish. 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). The LORD would work in accordance with His

sovereign will. He did not need Jephthah to promise Him anything in order to give him victory. In other words, Jephthah literally made a bargain with the LORD. Can one bargain with God?

Victory was certain because the LORD was with him. It was not for Jephthah's sake, but for His own. The Israelites were His people whom the Ammonites had oppressed for 18 years (10:8). Jephthah returned to his home after the war. Imagine his shock when the first person that came out of his house to meet him was his daughter, his only child (11:34)! She gave her father a hero's welcome — with timbrels in her hands, dancing with joy as she greeted her father. Upon seeing her, Jephthah "rent his clothes" (11:35). This act was usually a sign of mourning or grieving. He remembered his vow to the LORD and kept it for he feared the LORD. Now the question amongst 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." Other commentators reject this interpretation and explain that she was 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 on the words of the vow. 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. The word for burnt offering can mean only one thing as it has always been used in the Bible to refer to a whole sacrifice to be burnt on the altar. Israelites knew what it meant and so did Jephthah as he was very well versed in the OT—a blood sacrifice of an animal acceptable to the LORD in accordance with the Law. If a sheep or cow were to have come out of his house, it without question would 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 his vow, killed his daughter and offered her to the LORD. Please note that it was a period of Judges where every man did what was right in his own eyes. The spiritual decline grew from bad to worse. Jephthah knew that no one would keep animals in their homes. For him to say that he would sacrifice the "thing that comes out from the house" has to refer to a human and not an animal. This was an emphatic statement on Jephthah's part. He was making a vow pertaining to human sacrifice. He just did not expect that it would be his daughter. Jephthah's vow reflected the sad spiritual state Israel had fallen into. Whether he should or should not make the vow is moot

because he did make it. He did keep the vow and offered his daughter as a burnt sacrifice. Her father gave her opportunity to mourn as she requested before her death. The biblical phrase, “he did to her the vow that he vowed” (verse 39) is very emphatic where the vow is mentioned twice in succession for confirmation that he actually did offer her.

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 practice human sacrifice. Jephthah would not have any reservation at all in offering a sheep or cow 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 did, then he could not have done that. Jephthah’s daughter would also know about the Law and could not also agree to a human sacrifice.

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.

In addition, for the burnt offering to be acceptable, it must be presented to the priests to perform 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 and daughter did not dwell on the offering of herself as a burnt offering to the LORD. 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 “bewail her virginity” (11:37). This is understood as resigning herself to a life of celibacy — “and she knew no man.” 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.

The period of Judges was a not a period of God-fearing men. That assumption is weak and has no substance. If the second interpretation is based entirely on this assumption then it cannot be accepted. It is trying to paint over the dark moments of Israel’s existence in the period of Judges. Furthermore human sacrifice is not wrong when it is offered to the one living and true God. It is only wrong and forbidden when offered to idols and Satan. Did God not ask Abraham to offer Isaac in Genesis 22? God would not ask His servant to do anything that was unbiblical or wrong. Christ is also a human sacrifice and He actually died.

He was offered to God as our sacrifice. To say that human sacrifice is always wrong is unbiblical.

The fact that the burnt offerings involved all the above people only highlights the sad spiritual state that Israel had fallen. It does not excuse Jephthah's offering his daughter as a burnt offering. To say that they would not do it is wrong for when idolatry sets in, the kings and Israel would freely offer their sons and daughters to the gods of Baalim and Ashtaroth (see 2Kings 17:17). Therefore the only conclusion is that the first view is correct. The second view tries to gloss over what Jephthah did. Having said that, it does not excuse what Jephthah did. He should not have kept his foolish vow. It does not mean that God accepted his offering of his daughter as he was not commanded by God to do so. But the period of Judges was such that man did what was right in his own eyes and not in the eyes of the LORD. This episode proves the point.

The Enemy Within – 12:1-7

The victory and deliverance from the oppression of the Ammonites should have brought great celebration, thanksgiving and joy to the children of Israel. But it did not. The men of Ephraim gathered 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 him and his house (12:1). What 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) The Ephraimites considered themselves to be the leading tribe of Israel and to be sidelined 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 charges against Jephthah. They accused the Gileadites of being fugitives (refugees) of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

Jephthah's response was swift and decisive, unlike Gideon's. Jephthah justified his actions with an accusation against the Ephraimites for not offering him and his people help when they were oppressed by the Ammonites. Jephthah had called them but they did not come to their rescue. (12:2) As they had not helped, Jephthah had 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 (12:3). Without delay, Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and attacked the Ephraimites. The Ephraimites, who tried to escape by crossing the Jordan River, which was being 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 pronounced it wrongly, they would kill them (12:6). The

Ephraimites lost 42,000 men. This sad incident was unnecessary. But the sin of idolatry bears painful and heinous fruit. A person's greatest enemy sometimes can be his own people or relatives, and the result can be unnecessary disaster. Jephthah judged Israel for only a short period of 6 years. When he died, he was buried in one of the cities of the land.

Other Judges – 12:8-15

After the judgeship of Jephthah, three judges followed. They were Ibzan, Elon and Abdon, all of whom very little is known. Ibzan judged Israel for 7 years. He had 30 sons and 30 daughters. For his daughters, he took in 30 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 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 were probably 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.

Elon was the next judge of Israel. He was from the tribe of Zebulun, which was in the region of Galilee where he served. He judged for 10 years, the longest period of the

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

3 judges in Chapter 12. When he died, he was buried in Aijalon in Zebulun. Nothing further is recorded about him.

Following Elon was Abdon, 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 — 40 sons, and 30 grandsons ("nephews", Hebrew literally, 'sons of sons'). The fact that they rode on "ass colts" indicates that their father was wealthy, powerful and influential. When he died, he was buried in the land of Ephraim after serving for 8 years.

PRACTICAL VALUE

It is encouraging to learn that God does not discriminate against a person just because he is born out of wedlock. Such circumstance in which the child is born is beyond their 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. 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 fulfill His purpose. We should not behave like Jephthah's half-brothers who were selfish, greedy, who unjustly

mistreated him. We should evaluate a person fairly on grounds of his character and conduct rather than his birth.

It is interesting to note that the half-brothers had to eat humble pie when they were forced to seek Jephthah's help. Such instances are not uncommon in life. Let us learn not to adopt prejudices towards others. On the other hand we could say that Jephthah was definitely not flawless. He capitalized on the situation and bargained not just to be a military commander, but to be the ruler of Israel. The fact that God used him to fulfill His purpose to save Israel does not ensure his spirituality. It only reveals it. Nonetheless the Spirit of God coming upon him and victory was given to him over the enemy.

Subsequently, Jephthah did not show much wisdom and a sound knowledge of the Word. He made a vow to God, which revealed the sad state of affairs in those days. Please note that it was not a rash vow but a very deliberate vow where he intended to sacrifice a human. Idolatry is not a sin to be trifled with. It bears the heinous fruit of human sacrifice. Today when one worships idols one does the same. It is not in terms of human sacrifice like putting one's own children to death but it is a slow death nonetheless. They die slowly as they drink in the poison of the philosophies of this world. They become worldly and carnal in their minds and hearts.

In the encounter with the Ammonites, 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 relationship problems in our lives. Diplomacy is better than war. Both parties should be honest, fair, and transparent when they sit down at the negotiating table.

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 where there is no lack of strong words and threats. Such demeanour only builds more resentment and retaliation. Christians should not have such an attitude and resort to such tactics in our relationships 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 is a very sad day when two brothers go to war and destroy one another.
AMEN

**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS**

Daily Readings

MONDAY: Judges 11:1-11; 2 Peter 2:1-22.

TUESDAY: Judges 11:12-28; Job 42:7-9.

WEDNESDAY: Judges 11:29-40; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Leviticus 27:1-13.

THURSDAY: Judges 12:1-7; James 3:14-18.

FRIDAY: Judges 12:8-15; 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Jephthah come to lead Israel? Was Jephthah an opportunist who took advantage of the situation for self promotion?

2. What expectations did Jephthah and the people of Gilead bring to their reconciliation? (vv. 4-11) Are these healthy expectations? Why and why not?

3. What is the chief point of Jephthah's message to the King of Ammon?

4. Why did war with Ammon become inevitable? Was Jephthah a poor negotiator?

5. What is your view of Jephthah's vow? Why do you think he made it?

6. From Jephthah's example, what do you learn about making vows?

7. What caused the civil war with the Ephraimites? How was that tribe punished?

8. In what way can we today help destroy the work of God? What are the lessons we ought to learn from the passage?
