

JUDGES SESSION #15

As we continue with Jephthah's story we now come to:

B. JEPHTHAH'S VOW

Judg 11:30-31

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."

- this vow is what has made Jephthah famous – and controversial -- over the centuries!
- Bible scholars are divided in their views about this: some believe the vow was carried out literally and others believe it was carried out in a way that did not require the daughter's death – I lean toward the latter view
- Jephthah makes a vow about “*whatever/whoever*” (the Hebrew pronoun can be either) is the first to come “out of the doors of my house to meet me” when he returns in victory
 - animals were not kept in the house in those days, certainly not sacrificial animals, so he's not referring to an animal; besides, he specifically says “to meet me” which would not be true of an animal anyway
 - therefore he is most likely expecting a household **servant** to come out and meet him
- his vow was **not** to make a *literal* “**burnt sacrifice**”, for 4 reasons:
 - 1) the previous verse (29) states that **God's Spirit** “came upon” him – the Spirit would not move him to make a vow involving human sacrifice, something God abhorred
 - 2) like every Israelite, Jephthah knew very well that a **sinful human being** could never be a suitable sacrifice to Jehovah God
 - 3) Jephthah is named in Heb. 11 as a man of “**faith**” – one of the “heroes” of faith, in fact; how does he get included in that listing if he actually did such a horrible thing as making a human sacrifice?
 - 4) the **sequel** to the story does not specifically state that anyone died in carrying out the vow
- it is helpful to note that the Hebrew word for “burnt offering” also refers to the kind of sacrifice which shows the total surrender of the heart & life of the offerer to God
 - so Paul makes use of this idea in Rom. 12:1 – “I urge you... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (the word for ‘sacrifice’ here is specifically one associated with ‘burning with fire’ but that is obviously NOT what Paul intended literally)
- therefore Jephthah's plan seems to me to be to **dedicate to God's permanent service** the first *person* who comes out to meet him after his return from battle
 - in OT Israel people served God in this way at the Tabernacle; even women were sometimes dedicated for this kind of tabernacle service
- after the battle, as Jephthah returns to his home, his **daughter** is the first one out the door to greet him! ...his joy from the victory turns quickly to anguish

Judg 11:34-35

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."

...perhaps the reason for his anguish is *not* because he must *kill* her, but because he had hoped apparently to begin a **ruling dynasty** within his family, under God's blessing – remember his initial concern was about... what? – being “the head”! – the ruler, the chief over the Gilead tribes - as he sees his daughter coming out to meet him, he realizes that this hope of a ruling dynasty is no longer possible because she must be dedicated to God's permanent service and therefore never marry

- verse 34 makes it abundantly clear that the **main issue** has to do with children and the ongoing future of his family, by telling us twice: “she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.”

...to fulfill his vow, she must serve God at the Tabernacle and never marry

- it is the fact that she will never marry & have children that creates deep sorrow for the daughter, as well as the father – consequently, she asks for 2 months before having the vow fulfilled so that she can “weep with her friends” over the fact that she will be **unable to marry** (vss. 37 & 38 repeat this emphasis)

- and vs. 39 indicates the result of the vow: that she was burned up on an altar of sacrifice? – no, that “she remained a **virgin**”!

- this interpretation is *not* the most common one, and many commentators still take the view that Jephthah's daughter was killed in fulfillment of his vow

- and when you read the final verse in chap. 11 it looks like perhaps that would indeed be the best reason for Israelite girls to “**commemorate**” or “lament” Jephthah's daughter for 4 days every year

- but even here a closer look at the verb is valuable – this word “commemorate” or “lament” is only used in one other place in the whole Bible: Judges 5:11 – in Deborah's song she says that singers “**recite** the righteous acts of the Lord”

...that helps us to recognize what this annual commemoration was all about – it wasn't a sad time of lamenting the death of Jephthah's daughter; it was a time to ‘**recite**’ or ‘**rehearse**’ her deeds, to remember her **obedience** in helping her father fulfill his solemn vow to the Lord

- let's note **3 valuable lessons here:**

1) **keeping our promises, especially to God**, is very important

- maybe Jephthah should not have made this vow to God; that's certainly debatable

- but having made it, he treated it as absolutely unchangeable – “*I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it.*” (vs. 35)

- even when it hurts, as it did for both Jephthah and his daughter, they kept this vow

- Psalm 15:4 tells us that one of the qualities required for someone who wants to live with God is that he “*keeps his oath (or promise) even when it hurts*”

- Paul Little once told about a young lady he knew who signed a contract to teach at a certain school. The month before the school year was to start she received an offer from another school closer to where she wanted to live. So she broke the first contract and signed with the other school. The department chairman at the first school said her justification was, “I have a peace about it,” and he commented rather sardonically, “Isn't that lovely? She's got the **peace** and I've got the **pieces**.”

- as Christians who have a covenant relationship with the living God we must be people of integrity, whose word can be trusted, who keep their promises
- James Jordan suggests that the outcome of this strange story is that God frustrates Jephthah's dynastic desires, and instead of *God* building *Jephthah's* house, as this judge had hoped would be his 'reward' for the vow, Jephthah builds **God's house** by giving up his only child to serve at the Tabernacle -- maybe a reminder to Israel from God about *whose* house should be built!

2) Don't make **unnecessary promises**/vows in the hope that these will 'encourage' God to do something or give you something you want

- Jephthah simply didn't need to make this vow at all – *God* could “bear Israel's misery no longer”, *He* brought Jephthah to his leadership position, and *He* empowered him to fight the enemy of God's people
- God didn't require Jephthah to add any promises to what God was already doing; this was something Jephthah came up with himself, as a way of twisting God's arm: “*If you will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands...then it will be...*”
- we must beware of any attempts to manipulate God into acting for our benefit – that's exactly what characterized Israel's worship of false gods and idols
 - our walk of faith must be one of obedience to a God who is Sovereign

3) Jephthah's vow is also a reminder to us about **our priorities**

- Larry Crabb highlighted this issue in a blunt statement: “Whenever we place a higher priority on solving our problems than on pursuing God, we are immoral.”
- when we put our own selfish interests & personal dreams ahead of God we are indeed 'immoral', and just as He did with Jephthah God may frustrate our desires too, causing us to remember (perhaps too late) that the wise way to live is **putting God first** – a truth expressed by Jesus himself as the first & most important commandment: “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” (Mark 12:30)

C. JEPHTHAH & THE **EPHRAIMITES**

Judg 12:1-7

Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!"

² And Jephthah said to them, "My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands.

³ So when I saw that you would not deliver *me*, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the Lord delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"

⁴ Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You Gileadites *are* fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites *and* among the Manassites." ⁵ The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites *arrived*. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim who escaped said, "Let me cross

over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," ⁶ then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce *it* right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites.

⁷ And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried among the cities of Gilead.

...in this odd epilogue to Jephthah's story, 42,000 Ephraimites die because of a pronunciation problem! – but that of course was not the real reason

- evidently, the overall national situation (especially spiritually) has *deteriorated* further by this time

Have we seen this scenario of Ephraimites complaining before? (yes...in chapter 8 when Gideon was judge) – but the selfishness of this tribe has now gotten worse

- the Ephraimites really heat up the problem with their *insults* & anger

- Ephraim complained here to Jephthah in a very similar way as they had done with Gideon ...it seems they were always brave *after* the battle

- they are pictured as an arrogant, critical, envious little tribe

...according to fishermen, you never need a cover on a **basket of crabs**; if one starts to climb up the sides, the other crabs will all reach up & pull that one back to the bottom again – just like Ephraimites!

- Jephthah claimed he had asked them to help fight, but they did not come

- they were **unwilling to accept their responsibilities**

- they were much better at criticizing their *brothers* than fighting the enemy

- much later, this same tribe opposed **David** as king of Israel

- and then later they rebelled against **Solomon**, and broke away under Rehoboam

...*they were constantly proud & envious and their destruction is deserved*

- Jephthah **fought Ephraim**, then captured the fords of Jordan, identified Ephraimites trying to cross back over by giving them that pronunciation quiz, & killed 42,000 of them!

- Josh. 1:18 & Deut. 37:12 state that rebels against the judge must be put to death; so

Jephthah is carrying out this severe requirement according to God's law

- however, there is an element of **God's heavy humor** evident here: in **Gideon's** story, it was the Ephraimites who secured the **fords** of the river so the *Midianites* could be captured; now, **Jephthah** secures the river fords **against the Ephraimites** themselves

– whom God now called "fugitives" (vs. 5) after they themselves had accused the Gileadites of being "fugitives" (vs. 4)!

- this incident **decimated** the tribe of Ephraim, who had been the most powerful up til then; they were too strong to accept a king from any other tribe; but they never regained prominence, and it is significant that the first kings in Israel's monarchy did *not* come from this tribe

- their example here is a strong **caution** against developing any similar arrogant, critical attitude, especially in relation to fellow believers in the family of God

- in our next session we will encounter one of the most famous characters in the Bible: **Samson** – don't miss it!