

9. From reject to royal

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We all love to see an 'underdog' wins, or a 'weakling' beats up a 'school bully', or Abraham Lincoln going "from log cabin to White House" or Joseph from the prison to the throne of Egypt, or 'Cinderella' story comes true. Maybe that is why the "Extreme Makeover-Home Edition" is the top rated series on TV. Rejected people, down and outcasters get discovered and elevated to places of honor and authority.

The account of Jephthah, the main character in these chapters, is that kind of a story, except that it doesn't end with the hero living "happily ever after." After Jephthah's great victory over the Ammonites and Philistines, his victory was rather quickly eclipsed by the consequence of his foolish vow.

A. THE VICIOUS CYCLE AGAIN

Judges 10:6-9 Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him. 7 So the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the people of Ammon. 8 From that year they harassed and oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years--all the children of Israel who were on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, in Gilead. 9 Moreover the people of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight against Judah also, against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

God can afford to remove His instrument when that instrument fails Him. A great many people think that God has to have the church, even a particular church like Calvary Chapel, and that God has to have America because it is sending out missionaries around the world. God does not have to have any of us. He is not dependent upon us at all. We are, however, dependent upon Him.

For the all those years while the Israelites were in peace because of God's protection and provision, they'd never thanked the Lord for what they had.

When God chastens us in love and we're suffering because of our sins, it's easy to cry out to Him for deliverance and make all kinds of promises. But when we're comfortable and enjoying His blessings, we tend to forget God and assume that we can sin and get away with it. Thanksgiving glorifies God and is a strong defense against selfishness and idolatry.

Judges 10:10-18 And the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, "We have sinned against You, because we have both forsaken our God and served the Baals!" 11 So the Lord said to the children of Israel, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites and from the people of Ammon and from the Philistines? 12 Also the Sidonians and Amalekites and Maonites oppressed you; and you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hand. 13 Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more. 14 Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress." 15 And the children of Israel said to the Lord, "We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray." 16 So they put away the foreign gods from among them

and served the Lord. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel. 17 Then the people of Ammon gathered together and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled together and encamped in Mizpah. 18 And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, "Who is the man who will begin the fight against the people of Ammon? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

The Lord had given Israel victory over seven different nations, but now Israel was worshiping seven different varieties of pagan gods. No wonder God's anger was hot against Israel. What foolishness to worship the gods of your defeated enemies.

It is one thing for the people to abandon God, but it is a complete different for God to abandon His people. The greatest judgment God can send to His people is to let them have their own way and not interfere.

Romans 1:24-28 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. 27 Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. 28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;

The Israel people's hope was not in their own repentance or prayer, but in the character of God. Because they knew that God is merciful. I have to wonder that if they really knew this, why did they wander away from God from the beginning? I don't believe one moment that we would be any different than them if we were in their shoes. Because we are utterly wicked above all things.

In spite of all the wrongs they'd done and we've done, the Lord our God is merciful and gracious and quick to forgive and slow to anger. What a God we serve!

B. YOU WANT ME NOW?

Judges 11:1-3 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah. 2 Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." 3 Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.

Jephthah is an outstanding leader, but he has this black mark against him. He is illegitimate, the son of a prostitute. An ancient Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Gilead's wife was a Gentile. Other Jewish writings have called her an Ishmaelite. So Jephthah was the son of a common heathen prostitute. His illegitimate birth made his life terrible in the sight of the self-righteous around him.

Judges 11:4-11 It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel. 5 And so it was, when the people of Ammon made war against Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. 6 Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we

may fight against the people of Ammon.” 7 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father’s house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?” 8 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the people of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.” 9 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the Lord delivers them to me, shall I be your head?” 10 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “The Lord will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words.” 11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord in Mizpah.

The nation of Ammon, the Ammonites, lived to the south of Israel. They were a semi-nomadic group of people who descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot.

These elders who previously participated in expelling from Gilead Jephthah had to swallow their pride and came to ask him to be their commander.

You can’t help but appreciate the way Jephthah emphasized the Lord in all his negotiations with the leaders of Israel. It was the Lord who would give the victory, not Jephthah. Jephthah didn’t see the challenge as a political opportunity for himself but as an occasion for trusting the Lord and serving Him.

According to the infamous “the Hall of Faith” chapter 11 of the Book of Hebrews, the writer makes it clear that Jephthah was a man of faith, not simply an opportunist.

C. THE ANCIENT ISRAEL AND ARAB CONFLICTS

Judges 11:12-13 Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon, saying, “What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land?” 13 And the king of the people of Ammon answered the messengers of Jephthah, “Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now therefore, restore those lands peaceably.”

The Ammonites were, of course, attempting not only to drive the Israelites off the land, but were also trying to exterminate them. The same thing is happening in the land of Israel today. Especially since 1948 when Israel once again became a nation, the Israel’s enemy has been trying to remove them from the land, exterminate them, actually drive them into the sea.

Jephthah outlined a very sensible basis for Israel’s occupation of the land. They had a legitimate claim to it.

Judges 11:23-28 And now the Lord God of Israel has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; should you then possess it? 24 Will you not possess whatever Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the Lord our God takes possession of before us, we will possess. 25 And now, are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel? Did he ever fight against them? 26 While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its villages, in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities along the banks of the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time? 27 Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you wronged me by fighting against me. May the Lord, the Judge, render judg-

ment this day between the children of Israel and the people of Ammon.” 28 However, the king of the people of Ammon did not heed the words which Jephthah sent him.

Before declaring war, Jephthah tried peaceful negotiations with the Ammonites, but the negotiations failed. Nevertheless, this section does tell us two things about Jephthah:

1) He knew the Scriptures and the history of Israel.

2) He was not a hothead and trigger-happy who was looking for a fight.

Being a military man himself, Jephthah knew that a war could result in thousands of Jewish men being killed and he wanted to avoid that if at all possible. I agree with what General William Sherman said, “War is hell.”

The Ammonite god Chemosh must show himself worthy to conquer the land of Israel. Since Israel held this land for three hundred years, it demonstrates that Chemosh was not greater than the God of Israel. This is an inherent challenge: “If your god is mighty enough to give you the land, then let him do it. Let us see who is stronger – Yahweh or Chemosh.”

Jephthah did not see this battle as primarily between two armies, but between the God of Israel and the false god of Ammon. He showed true wisdom in seeing this as a spiritual battle first. Obviously, Jephthah is a man of faith. The circumstances of birth or of family are not a handicap to the person who will live by faith.

D. AN UNNECESSARY FOOLISH VOW

Judges 11:29-32 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon. 30 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.” 32 So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands.

While going out to battle, Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. It was certainly acceptable to God for the Jews to make vows. Vows were completely voluntary, but the Lord expected the people to fulfill them.

Although he had a good intention, this was a foolish vow. Because God already gave him a victory over the Ammonites. Such vows can be attempts to get God “on our side.” It is far more important to be on God’s side than to try and persuade Him to be on your side.

Before we are too quick to call Jephthah was lacking in faith and he was stupid for his foolish vow, we must wonder how many times we have promised to the Lord that we wouldn’t do the same old sin because it displeases Him.

Judges 11:33-40 And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith--twenty cities--and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel. 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." 36 So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon." 37 Then she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I." 38 So he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. 39 And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel 40 that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

A long ago when I read this portion of the Scripture, I thought Jephthah actually have the priests to sacrifice her for his foolish vow. Now that I made an in-depth study of this, I realized that she was not killed.

Nowhere in the text are we told that Jephthah actually killed his daughter, nor do we find anybody bewailing the girl's death. The emphasis in Judges 11:37-40 is the fact that she remained a virgin. In other words, when other young girls were getting married, Jephthah's daughter remained in a single to devote her life to the service of the Lord in the Tabernacle.

It's difficult to believe that "the daughters of Israel" would establish a custom to commemorate – not "lament" as in NKJV – the awful sacrifice of a human being, but we can well understand that they would commemorate the devotion and obedience of Jephthah's daughter in helping her father fulfill his vow. She deserves to stand with Isaac as a faithful child, who was willing to obey both father and God, no matter what the cost.

E. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Thanksgiving glorifies God and is a strong defense against selfishness and idolatry.
- 2) We must remember that the greatest judgment God can send to His people is to let them have their own way and not interfere.
- 3) The circumstances of birth or of family are not a handicap to the person who will live by faith.
- 4) It is far more important to be on God's side than to try and persuade Him to be on your side.