

JUDGE JEPHTHAH



God has a way of allowing us to make our own mistakes and falter on our own. He will not force us to obey Him, He will not applaud our transgressions and He will not support an unhealthy lifestyle. He will, however, allow us to suffer the consequences of our actions to see if we will recognize who is really in control. He will raise up the unlikeliest of heroes in our lives to do His will (so be sure to be kind to all because you never know which person that might be). He will certainly hold us to our word when we say that we will do something. If we profess His name and seek His will, He will deliver us from evil. Enter the forgetful Israelites and a noble warrior judge named Jephthah.

After 45 years of peace, quiet and relative obedience the people of Israel once again did evil in the sight of the Lord. Sometimes our lives become too dull for us to live and we find this desire to venture into impractical and unsavory practices as a means of spicing it up a bit. It is possible that the Israelites became bored, that they grew weary of the humdrum life that they were living. It was at this point that they needed something to liven up their lives and offer some excitement. It is also a matter of life that we grow forgetful and lose track of things. At this point, 45 years of peace and obedience, the Israelites had forgotten who was responsible for their simple and prosperous way of life. They had forgotten who was responsible for all that they had, as well as who had judged them and who had led them out of captivity time and time again. They did not just fall into sin and start adding a few additional priorities here and there, they completely forgot about God and put everything made of man ahead of Him. This is when God shows His hand, the royal flush that trumps and humbles the other player every

time. God allowed the Philistines and the sons of Ammon to infiltrate the Jews, one from the southwest and one from the northeast, for 18 long years God allowed them to be in unbearable bondage. Their enemies whose gods they had felt the desire to worship had come from both sides and crushed them like a millstone.

This is when the Israelites (and lets face it, you and I as well), finally cried out to the Lord, when things finally became so unbearable that they realized that they could not survive on their own devices. But what really are our devices that we attempt to lean on? All that we have is a product of God so when we deny Him the responsibility of our blessings He is more often than not going to intervene because He is a jealous God (Exo. 20:5-6). When it comes to our pride and worship of things around us His intervention will likely be something we would rather not see. Such was the case for the Israelites, 18 long years of oppression in their own land before they finally cried out to the Lord. This is when God gets brutal. He reminds them of all the times that He has delivered them from their enemies and saved them, He is the one responsible for their blessings yet they continue to turn to false gods. "Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen, let them deliver you in the time of distress". Those are words that give me chills. When God finally says, "you want to worship false idols and things that your mind has concocted, then let those things deliver you, you only come to me when you need something". But God couldn't handle their misery. As they camped out waiting to face the sons of Ammon in battle, prepared to face their adversaries on their own, God raised up a valiant warrior to lead them to freedom.

Enter Jephthah, son of Gilead. While his father was apparently wealthy to some degree, his mother was a harlot. So, when it came time to collect the inheritance of the father he was banished by his brothers. Off he goes to the land of Tob, becoming a valiant warrior and apparently a bit of a Robin Hood of sorts. I get the impression that along with a group of indigent men lacking property or income, he would protect communities from marauders much like David will do later in 1 Samuel, raiding only the homes of the invaders such as the sons of Ammon while taking payment for protection. During this time, spiritually, he remains committed to the Lord (so much so that he is listed amongst the rock stars of faith in Hebrews 11) and the Lord will show him favor. It is at this time that the elders of Israel seek out Jephthah to deliver Israel from the sons of Ammon who have overrun the nation. He is apparently well known for his exploits and skill, although this would be a tall task to tackle. He would have to go from running off handfuls of villains to defeating nations. There is also a bit of animosity between Jephthah and the elders and he makes this clear as they approach him. For his brothers to expel him from their estate and exempt him from their fathers inheritance they would need the approval of the elders. Apparently, the elders sided with his brothers and were comfortable casting him out into the distance. Now, he is being asked to lead an army to protect and liberate the very people who turned on him and cast him aside. That takes a bit of audacity to request such a thing and he lets them know as much. Of course, they ensure him

that this will be his time for redemption and payback as he will now lead the nation and the elders and his brothers will be required to be submissive to his decision making.

With the hour of battle upon him, Jephthah looks out and witnesses his enemy first hand and is a bit shook. It is at this time that his faith actually begins to falter and in exchange for victory makes a foolish vow to the Lord that will prove to be costly. Although the Spirit of the Lord was upon him he panicked and felt compelled to make a pagans bargain with God. He pledges that if the Lord delivers the enemy into his hands, whatever greets him when he returns home will be a sacrifice to the Lord. This was strictly out of panic as the law of Moses strictly prohibited such practice (Deut. 12:29-31). Nonetheless, Jephthah takes his vow and goes into battle wiping out the Ammonites in such brutal fashion that he destroyed 20 Ammonite towns along the way. The Lord gave them into his hands and he was to return home victorious.

I imagine the return of someone like Sir Lancelot or Richard the Lionheart parading into their land victorious with throngs of people screaming their name and giving shouts of praises at their feats of courage. As he passed through his hometown he entered the confines of his property to be greeted by none other than his only daughter running out to him playing the tambourine. She is proud of her father and can't wait to hug him and tell him how wonderful he is but at the sight of his daughter devastation sets in. His vow to the Lord is at the forefront of his mind and I can imagine that the wind was sucked from his body and the joy of victory was lost as he saw her face. At this point he has to sit her down and tell her what he has done. The vow to the Lord is no small matter and she is the victim of his vow. She weeps uncontrollably but understands what must be done and is willing to do whatever is necessary to stay righteous in the eyes of the Lord. She requests time to soak in the situation and retreat to the mountains with her friends to mourn her death as a virgin. As I understand it, for the Jews at that time it was considered a disgrace and a curse to die childless because you had not contributed to the coming Messiah. It is my contention that she must have been 12-14 years old as Hebrew ladies married quite young at that time, usually around the first signs of menstruation. We are told that once her time of mourning had expired she came down from the mountains and the vow to the Lord was carried out and "she never knew a man".

This is quite difficult to imagine, slaying your only child in order to fulfill a vow to God. Deuteronomy 12 and 18 as well as Leviticus 18 strictly prohibit such a practice, even comparing it to what the pagans did to please Molech. Did Jephthah think back to Abraham and Isaac, expecting a ram to run from the thickets to take the place of his daughter? Was the vow merely symbolic in nature and simply resulted in her life being devoted to the Lord, hence the multiple references to her virginity and never knowing a man? How do we tie in such a hideous act with the reference to Jephthah with the great men of faith in the book of Hebrews? I say that even the great men of faith committed notorious sins. Moses disobeyed God and struck the rock and even committed murder, David committed adultery and slayed his own soldier leading to public humiliation and the loss of a child, Rahab was a harlot, Samson

had illicit affairs with numerous women. They did not lead perfect lives but their focus was consistently on the Lord. When it comes to Jephthah, I suppose God did not require or imply that he make a vow. The Spirit of the Lord had already come upon him so a vow was completely unnecessary to complete his mission.

I like to think that she was not laid up as an offering, that it was purely symbolic and that our nameless heroine lived the remainder of her life quietly devoted to the Lord with the pain of never knowing a man or having the opportunity to contribute to the coming Messiah. I like to think that she lived to have a loving relationship with her father and that she forgave him for his foolish vow that cost her so much.

We could end it here but there is still a matter of the men of Ephraim that had been prepared to fight but were left twiddling their thumbs while Jephthah went straight ahead and slayed the sons of Ammon. They were willing to help defeat the enemy with Jephthah but merely for their own glory. This was not what our judge was in it for. His purpose was to be pleasing to God. They even went so far as to threaten to burn down his house in retaliation. This did not sit well with our protagonist as he gathered his men and took out the people of Ephraim handily showing that they were much better barkers than biters. As salt on a wound he told them that they had to get permission to pass the Jordan by using the password. Shibboleth, which means flowing river (I believe) in the Hebrew had an unusual pronunciation to it as far as those from Ephraim were concerned. Their dialect struggled with the letter h so they had trouble saying the word making them easy to identify upon entry. Through it all, Jephthah was devoted to the Lord and His land. He struggled, lived a difficult life and judged for a relatively short six years but he was certainly a man of faith. Let us learn from his example that the Spirit of God is with us, is more than enough to conquer our adversaries and that His house is always worth defending.