

June 18, 2017

Lesson 3: Judges 11: 4-11, 29-31

Jephthah Answers the Call

### **Context:**

Today's scripture lesson looks at the story of Jephthah, a story that is both redemptive and tragic at the same time. When read in its entirety, the story reveals that Jephthah's success comes at a great price. It is not one that we often hear used at Sunday School lessons or Vacation Bible Schools because the nature of it is so deep.

It is always important to look at the time and context that the scripture was written. The story of Jephthah is not just about Jephthah as it is about a people who are figuring out who God is and their relationship with God. In the case of Jephthah and the Book of Judges, we are looking at a time when there is a lot of confusion about who the Israelites are as a people. Most Old Testament scholars believe that the books about the leaders from the land of Israel were written after the rise and fall of the Babylonian Empire. As a people, there was an attempt to make sense of their history just as we do the same when we retell the story of the American Revolution and other major events. The writers wanted to convey how the Israelite people succeeded, failed, and got to the places where they found themselves.

As such, the Book of Judges helps to reveal the rise of the divine kingship and later on, the understanding that God is the one the people are to truly worship. In the time of the Judges, we hear the struggles when there are not established political and religious leaders. Of all the times in ancient Israel, this time period was probably one of the roughest. People do things like worship idols and partake in sacrificing family members. Tribes fight one another and there is discord as people wrangle for power over their lands and the resources that are there. There is a constant tension in the land because people are doing their own thing without any unified vision. With such breakdown in their climate, things like the story of Jephthah are bound to happen. The story of Jephthah is one that shows the breakdown in that time and the desire for there to be order in the midst of chaos.

### **Application:**

However gloomy the story of Jephthah may be read in its entirety, there is still hope and traces of God's redemption in his story. Jephthah is reconciled with the Gilead elders and God is with Jephthah through it all. There are pieces where we can hopefully find our own stories.

We are introduced to Jephthah in a time of conflict. As the Ammonites attack Israel, the elders need Jephthah to return and be their commander. He is an excellent warrior as stated in the beginning of Judges 11. However, it is not an invitation that excites Jephthah. Jephthah was the son of Gilead and a prostitute. As such, his bloodline was not "pure" and Gilead's other children drove him away to prevent him from receiving any of the lands or title. But Jephthah returned and became their leader.

I cannot help but think about how the conflict bonded Jephthah and the Gilead Elders in such a difficult time. They were very different and I am sure there was bad

blood that was between them. But in a crisis, differences fade away. When people are united behind a common goal, the things that separate them usually fade away. Sometimes it takes a little extra grace and a little more humility to see that maybe it is time to listen to others and to imagine possibilities than to talk and quote facts. I have seen many times where the leaders I respect the most do not dominate conversations or debates. Instead, they collectively listen and then step up when their voices are needed. Where are places you may need to see others not as enemies, but as people to dialogue and dream alongside?

The second thing we see is that God was with Jephthah. Even though Jephthah did not have the same pedigree as the rest of his kin, God used him to lead the people. When reading this passage, I cannot help but think of how Jephthah came in the midst of a long line of different leaders. So far we have heard of Deborah the prophetess warrior woman and the young inquisitive Gideon. All of them are not the “norms” for leaders. They aren’t the strong traditional male with the perfect lineage behind their name. But God called each one of them to step up to the plate in times of trouble. God does the same with us. We come from different places with different life experiences, but we have all been given gifts to serve the church and to serve in God’s Kingdom.

I think one of the things I love the most about ministry is about hearing peoples’ stories and how they can see God at work in the hard times and the good times. Stories of hurt, betrayal, and pain are usually somewhere mixed in everyone’s story. Stories where people were told they weren’t good enough or capable to be used by God. Those are the ones that are the hardest to hear. But then you hear about a mentor who encouraged them, a pastor who helped them in a hard time, a Sunday school teacher who believed in them, or someone who was present in the good and the bad. All they needed was a little love and a little hope to be reminded that they are indeed loved and called by God.

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