



“Jephthah: Blessed & Distressed”
Judges 10:17-11:40

Idea: The God of the Bible never goes back on His Word.

Intro: Read Proverbs 18:4, 6-7, 20-21.

I think we can all agree that our mouths have a tendency to get us into trouble. Have you ever felt like this?



I've never ceased to be amazed by the power of the tongue. It's incredible abilities enable you to get the job, seal the deal, win the heart, and lift the spirit. But the tongue also offends your brother, betrays confidence, deceives your neighbor, and tears down your friend. Death and life truly are in the power of the tongue. Therefore, we would do well to heed the wise words of Solomon.

Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. – Prov 21:23

Inquiry: This great truth is on display in the story of Jephthah. He is one of the great characters in Judges. He is also one of the most mysterious, and his story will perhaps be the most gripping, most moving, and most confusing of all the stories in Judges.

Let me remind you of the context of the story. Israel's abandonment of God and His Word coupled with their desire to do things their way brought destruction upon their lives. The Lord sold them into the hand of the Philistines to the west and the Ammonites to the east. They became the rod of His anger. The Philistines oppressed the people for 40 years. In chapter 13 we will see how Samson was raised up to fight against them. Jephthah becomes Israel's deliverer from Ammon. Prior to these judges though, Israel cried out to God and asked for deliverance. The extremity of their plight led to a recognition of their waywardness and an appeal to God. They began to ask themselves: "Have we brought this destruction upon ourselves?" Their appeal was met with a harsh response, for the cycle of deliverance followed by forgetfulness, ingratitude, and apostasy had occurred too often for a simple overlooking of their sin. God required, and requires still, the steadfast love, loyalty, and obedience of His subjects. He desires to work on our behalf in relationship rather than only being called upon in times of emergency.

Israel repented of their sin by putting away their foreign gods (10:16) and experienced deliverance. That deliverance came through Jephthah. He defeated Ammon and freed Israel from their tyranny. This great deliverer was not only a mighty warrior (11:1), he was also a skilled orator. Jephthah's tongue brought great blessings to his life, but it also brought death to him. Jephthah reminds us how important it is to properly understand both the power and use of our words. He also reminds us to keep our word because the God of the Bible never goes back on His Word.

1. The Man (11:1-3)

The Bible describes Jephthah as a mighty warrior. He was both a skilled fighter and a brilliant battle commander. Jephthah, however, was an illegitimate son. He was the son of a prostitute. Therefore, he was an outcast in Israel. His brothers drove him away from his father's inheritance. Worthless men and other outcasts gathered around him. They became his gang of bandits. He may have been a mighty warrior, but we have not met a more unlikely savior for Israel thus far Judges.

2. The Call (11:4-11)

The Ammonites assembled to war against Israel. Perhaps they had heard that Israel was preaching rebellion in their cities, had put away their idols, and had started seeking Yahweh. Ammon camped on the outskirts of Gilead, so the people of Gilead immediately began to search for the man who would lead them in battle. They decided that Jephthah, the man they had exiled, should lead them.

Jephthah was a mighty warrior, but as soon as he opens his mouth we see that he was just as skilled with words as he was with a sword. He knew how to negotiate. He knew how to make a good deal. And that skill brought many blessings to him. His words and charisma is one of the reasons the other outcasts gathered around and followed him. It was the reason the men of Gilead came to install him as their captain.

Jephthah demanded to be legally reinstated as a full citizen of Gilead and to be their head. The Gileadites agreed and Jephthah was sworn into office (vs. 11).

3. The Diplomacy (11:12-28)

Jephthah's first action as the new commander of Gilead was to dispatch messengers to the Ammonite king. He asked the king why he had assembled for battle against Gilead. The king's response was that Israel had taken Ammon's land from them when they came up from Egypt. Jephthah's response was brilliant as he laid out historical (vs. 16-22), theological (vs. 23-24), and personal (vs. 25) reasons Ammon had no claim to the land.

Jephthah's diplomatic words clearly articulated Israel's right to be in the land and set the stage for the ensuing victory. Israel was blessed to have such a leader who could engage the enemy in diplomacy and rally the troops (11:29).

4. The Vow (11:29-33)

The spirit of the Lord comes upon the mighty warrior, and he goes out, first on what seems to be a recruiting tour. Then he and his troops gather before the Ammonites. It is here that Jephthah's speech betrays him.

He had successfully negotiated his way back into Gileadite society as a citizen and as commander. He had also successfully rallied the troops by articulating to Ammon Israel's rightful claim to the land. Jephthah now continues to lean on his abilities as a dealmaker. He makes a vow to the Lord, and in doing so sought to secure victory from God with words. The problem was that he was still negotiating and manipulating. He was seeking to wrest concessions and favors from God like he had from the Gileadites and Ammonites.

He vows that if he is given victory over the Ammonites and survives then he would sacrifice and offer as a burnt offering the first thing that comes out of his house when he returns.

There are several problems with this vow. First, there was no reason for Jephthah to make a vow. The Spirit of the Lord was upon him. God had given him favor and was working on Israel's side (10:16). Second, the best thing Jephthah could hope to come out of his house when he returned was the family dog. The worst thing would be his wife or daughter. The vow was foolish and hasty. Third, the vow reveals that Jephthah didn't fully trust God's handling of the situation. He thought he had to manipulate the circumstances to his own advantage. Fourth, the vow reveals just how depraved Israelite society had become. The Law strictly forbade human sacrifice (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5). Basic morality had been eroded as Israel for decades had done what was right in their own eyes. Jephthah actually believed the Lord would accept his offering regardless if it was a human or a dog.

4. The Faith (11:34-40)

Can you imagine what was going through Jephthah's mind on his way home? He had to be sick to his stomach at thought of his wife or daughter coming out to meet him. If I had been him, I would have sent someone to warn my family. Jephthah didn't, and his daughter met him with a celebration over his victory. He is overwhelmed with grief and explains to her why he is grieved. Amazingly, Jephthah's daughter accepts her fate with an incredible expression of faith and obedience.

It is apparent that Jephthah either missed or dismissed the clear teaching of Scripture on the sanctity of human life. He was after all a product of the syncretistic Israelite culture in which he lived even though it didn't excuse his actions. He might have missed God's Word regarding life, but he didn't miss God's Word about keeping a promise. *"For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow"* (vs. 35).

Likewise, his daughter believed that if you make a promise, you keep it (vs. 36). Jephthah should never have made that promise. He should have realized that keeping it might mean the breaking of other rules. But amid the welter of contradictory voices he had heard the voice of God saying, “You keep your word,” and he heeded the voice. Jephthah was a man of faith, and he did heed at any rate the message of God concerning faithfulness, whatever confusions may have accompanied it. What he did (the sacrifice of his daughter) is a thing all Scripture condemns; why he did it (in order to keep his word) is a thing all Scripture commends.

What are the take-aways and lessons to be learned from Jephthah?

- Doubt is often present in the hearts of even great believers.
No matter how long you have walked with God, you must continue to eradicate doubt from your life. The default position of humanity is to doubt God. Therefore, you must hold firmly to God’s Word and by faith believe what He has said. This requires that you choose to believe His Word before the question is put forth.

The reality of doubt in your life reveals the areas where spiritual growth and maturity need to take place.

- Vows are not to be used as a bargaining chip with God. *Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.* – Matt 5:37

But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. – James 5:12

There's no need to bargain with God. He already has your best interest at heart. He knows His plans for you. They are plans to bless your future and give you hope (Jer 29:11).

- Vows are to be made with extreme caution. It is best to not make a vow with a determined set of conditions. But if you must, do so with extreme caution, taking into consideration how it will affect you and others.
- Vows made must be vows kept. The Bible describes God as faithful and true (Jer 42:5; Rev 3:14; 19:11). Therefore, as His redeemed image-bearers we too are to mimic faithfulness and truth. So your yes is to be yes, and your no is to be no. When you declare that you're going to do something, you had better do it.

Jephthah's keeping of his vow is the reason I believe God listed him in the hall of faith (Heb 11:32). He believed God on this point in his life.

Conclusion: This story is such a peculiar one. Why was it given to us? Like with the other judges, God is teaching us something about Himself. Through Othniel, having rebuked His people for their apostasy, God reveals Himself as the Deliverer. Through Ehud, He reveals that His way of deliverance is often unexpected and unorthodox. He shows through Deborah and Barak, that His requirement is straightforward obedience to His revealed will. He demonstrates through Gideon that His principle is to use the weak and the humble to confound the powerful and the arrogant. In Jephthah, then, we learn that God never goes back on His Word.

The human judge reflects the divine Judge. Othniel is a savior because God is the Savior. Ehud is left-handed because His God saves in left-handed ways. Barak obeys commands just as

his God always keeps His own rules. Gideon's strength is made perfect in weakness just as God will work through the frailty of human flesh in Jesus. And Jephthah is a promise keeper just as God is a promise keeper.

Your words will either bless or distress your life. Be blessed by speaking cautiously, prayerfully, and faithfully.