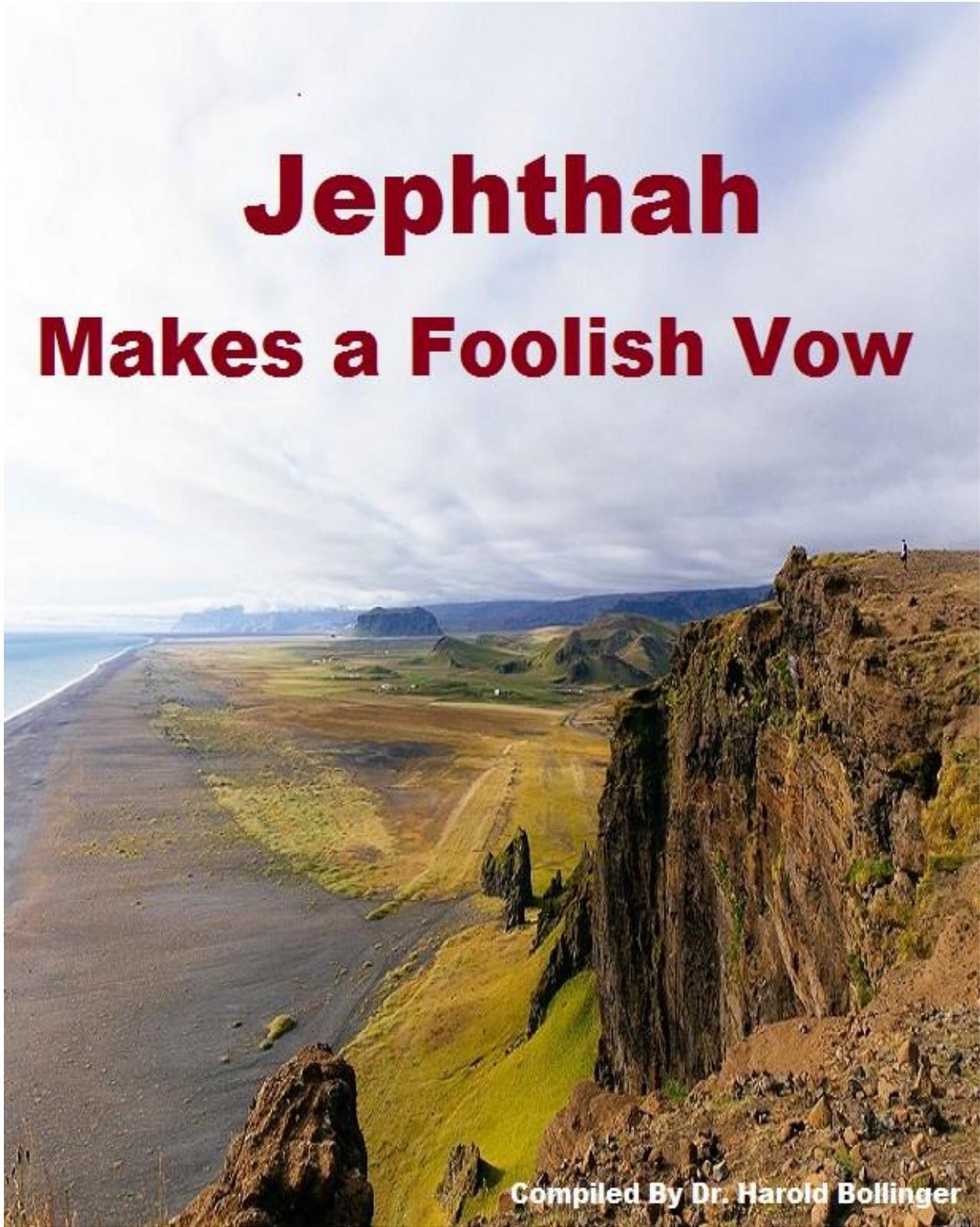


Jephthah

Makes a Foolish Vow



Compiled By Dr. Harold Bollinger

Overview

JEPHTHAH MAKES A FOOLISH VOW

His story is told in Judges 11:1-12:7. He is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32.

It's hard not to admire people whose word can be depended on completely and whose actions are consistent with their words. For such people, talking is not avoiding action; it is the beginning of action.

People like this can make excellent negotiators. They approach a conflict with the full intention of settling issues verbally, but they do not hesitate to use other means if verbal attempts fail. Jephthah was this kind of person.

In most of his conflicts, Jephthah's first move was to talk. In the war with the Ammonites, his strategy was negotiation. He clarified the issues so that everyone knew the cause of the conflict. His opponent's response determined his next action.

The fate of Jephthah's daughter is difficult to understand.

We are not sure what Jephthah meant by his vow recorded in Judges 11:31.

In any case, his vow was unnecessary. We do not know what actually happened to his daughter—whether she was burned as an offering or set apart as a virgin, thus denying Jephthah any hope of descendants since she was his only child.

What we do know is that Jephthah was a person of his word, even when it was a word spoken in haste, and even when keeping his word cost him great pain.

A judge (leader, hero) of Israel)

Illegitimate, and therefore not entitled to inherit his father's property

Judges 11:1-2

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of a harlot: and Gilead begat Jephthah. And Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman.

Jephthah, an illegitimate son of Gilead, was chased out of the country by his half-brothers. He suffered as a result of another's decision and not for any wrong he had done. Yet in spite of his brothers' rejection,

God used him. If you are suffering from unfair rejection, don't blame others and become discouraged. Remember how God used Jephthah despite his unjust circumstances, and realize that he is able to use you even if you feel rejected by some.

Escapes the violence of his half-brothers; lives in the land of Tob

Judges 11:3

Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him.

Circumstances beyond his control forced Jephthah away from his people and into life as an outcast.

Today, both believers and nonbelievers may drive away those who do not fit the norms dictated by our society, neighborhoods, or churches.

Often, as in Jephthah's case, great potential is wasted because of prejudice—a refusal to look beyond ill-conceived stereotypes. Look around you to see if there are potential Jephthah's being kept out due to factors beyond their control.

As a Christian you know that everyone can have a place in God's family. Can you do anything to help these people gain acceptance for their character and abilities?

Recalled from the land of Tob by the elders of Gilead

Judges 11:5

And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob:

Made captain of the army

Judges 11:6-11

"Come and be our commander! Help us fight the Ammonites!"

But Jephthah said to them, "Aren't you the ones who hated me and drove me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now when you're in trouble?"

"Because we need you," they replied. "If you will lead us in battle against the Ammonites, we will make you ruler over all the people of Gilead."

Jephthah said, "If I come with you and if the Lord gives me victory over the Ammonites, will you really make me ruler over all the people?"

"The Lord is our witness," the leaders replied. "We promise to do whatever you say."

So Jephthah went with the leaders of Gilead, and he became their ruler and commander of the army. At Mizpah, in the presence of the Lord, Jephthah repeated what he had said to the leaders.

What does it mean that Jephthah repeated all his words before the Lord? Those making covenants in ancient times often made them at shrines so that they would

be witnessed by deities. Often a written copy was also deposited at the shrine. This was much like a coronation ceremony for Jephthah.

Scripture review

Men ought not to be blamed for their parentage, so long as they by their personal merits roll away any reproach.

God had forgiven Israel, therefore Jephthah will forgive. He speaks not with confidence of his success, knowing how justly God might suffer the Ammonites to prevail for the further punishment of Israel.

Nor does he speak with any confidence at all in himself. If he succeed, it is the Lord delivers them into his hand; he thereby reminds his countrymen to look up to God as the Giver of victory. Christ, in fact, puts the same question as here, to those who desire salvation.

If he save you, will ye be willing that he shall rule you? On no other terms will he save you. If he makes you happy, shall he make you holy?

His message to the king of the Ammonites

Judges 11:12-28

Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of Ammon, demanding to know why Israel was being attacked. The king of Ammon answered Jephthah's messengers, "When the Israelites came out of Egypt, and they stole my land from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River and all the way to the Jordan. Now then, give back the land peaceably."

Jephthah sent this message back to the Ammonite king:

"This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not steal any land from Moab or Ammon. When the people of Israel arrived at Kadesh on their journey from Egypt after crossing the Red Sea, they sent messengers to the king of Edom asking for permission to pass through his land. But their request was denied.

Then they asked the king of Moab for similar permission, but he wouldn't let them pass through either. So the people of Israel stayed in Kadesh.

"Finally, they went around Edom and Moab through the wilderness. They traveled along Moab's eastern border and camped on the other side of the Arnon River. But they never once crossed the Arnon River into Moab.

"Then Israel sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, who ruled from Heshbon, asking for permission to cross through his land to get to their destination.

But King Sihon didn't trust Israel to pass through his land. Instead, he mobilized his army at Jahaz and attacked them.

But the Lord, the God of Israel, gave his people victory over King Sihon. So Israel took control of all the land of the Amorites, who lived in that region, From the Arnon River to the Jabbok River, and from the wilderness to the Jordan.

"So you see, it was the Lord, the God of Israel, who took away the land from the Amorites and gave it to Israel. Why, then, should we give it to you?

You keep whatever your god Chemosh gives you, and we will keep whatever the Lord our God gives us.

Are you any better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he try to make a case against Israel for disputed land? Did he go to war? No, of course not.

But now after three hundred years you make an issue of this! Israel has been living here all this time, spread across the land from Heshbon to Aroer and in all the towns along the Arnon River.

Why have you made no effort to recover it before now? I have not sinned against you. Rather, you have wronged me by attacking me. Let the Lord, who is judge, decide today which of us is right—Israel or Ammon."

But the king of Ammon paid no attention to Jephthah's message.

He Attempts to Make Peace

One instance of the honour and respect we owe to God, as our God, is, rightly to employ what he gives us to possess. Receive it from him, use it for him, and part with it when he calls for it.

The whole of this message shows that Jephthah was well acquainted with the books of Moses. His argument was clear, and his demand reasonable.

Those who possess the most courageous faith, will be the most disposed for peace, and the readiest to make advances to obtain; but rapacity and ambition often cloak their designs under a plea of equity, and render peaceful endeavours of no avail.

Leads the army of Israel against the Ammonites

Judges 11:29-33

At that time the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he went throughout the land of Gilead and Manasseh, including Mizpah in Gilead, and led an army against the Ammonites.

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, I will give to the Lord the first thing coming out of my house to greet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

So Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave him victory. He thoroughly defeated the Ammonites from Aroer to an area near Minnith—twenty towns—and as far away as Abel-keramim. Thus Israel subdued the Ammonites.

His rash vow concerning his daughter

Judges 11:31-40

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When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter—his only child—ran out to meet him, playing on a tambourine and dancing for joy. When he saw her, he tore his clothes in anguish. "My daughter!" he cried out. "My heart is breaking! What a tragedy that you came out to greet me. For I have made a vow to the Lord and cannot take it back."

And she said, "Father, you have made a promise to the Lord. You must do to me what you have promised, for the Lord has given you a great victory over your enemies, the Ammonites.

But first let me go up and roam in the hills and weep with my friends for two months because I will die a virgin."

"You may go," Jephthah said. And he let her go away for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never have children.

When she returned home, her father kept his vow, and she died a virgin. So it has become a custom in Israel for young Israelite women to go away for four days each year to lament the fate of Jephthah's daughter.

Several important lessons are to be learned from Jephthah's vow.

1. There may be remainders of distrust and doubting, even in the hearts of true and great believers.
2. Our vows to God should not be as a purchase of the favour we desire, but to express gratitude to him.

3. We need to be very well-advised in making vows, lest we entangle ourselves.
4. What we have solemnly vowed to God, we must perform, if it be possible and lawful, though it be difficult and grievous to us.
5. It well becomes children, obediently and cheerfully to submit to their parents in the Lord.

It is hard to say what Jephthah did in performance of his vow; but it is thought that he did not offer his daughter as a burnt-offering. Such a sacrifice would have been an abomination to the Lord; it is supposed she was obliged to remain unmarried, and apart from her family.

Concerning this and some other such passages in the sacred history, about which learned men are divided and in doubt, we need not perplex ourselves; what is necessary to our salvation, thanks be to God, is plain enough.

Falsely accused by the Ephraimites

Judges 12:1

Then the tribe of Ephraim mobilized its army and crossed over to Zaphon. They sent this message to Jephthah: "Why didn't you call for us to help you fight against Ammon? We are going to burn down your house with you in it!"

Israel had just won a great battle, but instead of joy, there was pettiness and quarreling. The tribe of Ephraim was angry and jealous that they were not invited to join in the fighting (although Jephthah said he had invited them).

The insults of the Ephraimites enraged Jephthah, who called out his troops and killed 42,000 men from Ephraim.

Jephthah usually spoke before he acted, but this time his revenge was swift. It cost Israel dearly, and it might have been avoided. Insulting others and being jealous are not right responses when we feel left out.

But seeking revenge for an insult is just as wrong, and very costly.

Leads the army of the Gileadites against the Ephraimites

Judges 12:4

The leaders of Ephraim responded, "The men of Gilead are nothing more than rejects from Ephraim and Manasseh." So Jephthah called out his army and attacked the men of Ephraim and defeated them.

The men of the tribe of Ephraim caused Jephthah trouble just as they had Gideon (Judges 8:1-3). Jephthah captured the fords of the Jordan, the boundary of Ephraim, and was able to defeat his countrymen as they crossed the river. He used a pronunciation test. *Shibboleth* is the word for stream. The Ephraimites pronounced "sh" as "s," so Jephthah's army could easily identify them.

Leads Israel for six years, dies, and is buried in Gilead

Judges 12:7

Jephthah was Israel's judge for six years. When he died, he was buried in one of the towns of Gilead.

Faith of Jephthah

Hebrews 11:32

Well, how much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets.

We, too, can experience victory through faith in Christ. Our victories over oppressors may be like those of the Old Testament saints, but more likely, our victories will be directly related to the role God wants us to play. Even though our bodies deteriorate and die, we will live forever because of Christ. In the promised resurrection, even death will be defeated and Christ's victory will be made complete.

Life Applications

How do you approach conflicts? There is a big difference between trying to settle a conflict through words and simply counterattacking someone verbally. How dependable are the statements you make? Do your children, friends, and fellow workers know you to be a person of your word? The measure of your trustworthiness is your willingness to take responsibility, even if you must pay a painful price because of something you said.

Lesson from his life:

A person's background does not prevent God from working powerfully in his or her life

Key verse:

“Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands” (Judges 11:32).

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

References:

Holy Bible: King James Translation

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Additional comments and charts are taken from: *Life Application Study Bible*. Illinois: Tyndale House 2007. Print

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