

## God Loves the Longshot

Portions adapted from: "Jephthah: Rebel With A Clause." By Clark Tanner @ SermonCentral.Com

Have you ever met someone who has to have everything in writing? Not necessarily in a literal sense, just someone who is so afraid of being cheated, that they want assurances and promises from others before they will take any requested action; as the saying goes, *once burned, twice cautious*.

Today's hero, whom we meet in Judges chapters 10-11, is just such a person, but with good cause. Jephthah was born the embarrassing result of a youthful indiscretion by one of the prominent young men in town. While our Bible describes his mother as a "prostitute," the actual description of her was just "another woman." But, as his father, Gilead owned up to his actions and raised Jephthah as his own son. However when Gilead later married and had other sons, Jephthah's half-brothers had no intention of sharing the family inheritance with their half-breed older brother and thus literally chased him out of town. Funny how it took all those years, only when it came to inheritance time, for them to decide he wasn't family. I'll bet they were glad to call him 'big brother' when there was hard work to be done.

Anyway, perhaps you can see that this would leave Jephthah with a bad taste in his mouth and a little less than trusting of his fellow man. Especially if they really did treat him as a second class citizen in the years before they finally drove him away.

Next time we hear of Jephthah, he has made a home for himself in the badlands of north-eastern Palestine. As David would later do when he was on the run, with his obvious leadership abilities, Jephthah gathered to himself all the outlaws, the runaways, and the misfits of society. And as David would also do – like Robin Hood and his merry men – Jephthah's outlaw army earned quite a reputation as fierce warriors bringing some semblance of safety to the badlands while raiding foreign villages for their living. Chapter 11, calls Jephthah a "*mighty warrior*," a reputation that he earned and which came all the way back home from his adventures in the badlands.

So, when the Ammonites decide to attack Israel, the pious, God-fearing, clean-cut leaders of Gilead go looking not only for a fierce but perhaps even expendable person to lead their troops into battle. The person they seek out is not their disinherited half-brother, but Jephthah the mighty warrior. It's amazing how forgiving legalists can be when they need something you have.

Let's visualize this scene like a modern day movie? Jephthah and his unshaven, misfit buddies are sitting in the shade of a big rock near their favorite hideout cave in the desert, watching the approach of these nervous town fathers huddling so close they're almost stepping on each other's feet. As the elders state their reason for coming, Jephthah and his friends all stand around them forming a very intimidating mass of muscles, square jaws and scowling eyebrows. Then the elders offer Jephthah everything; if he will lead them in battle; when he returns victorious he will be the leader of all Gilleadites

Jephthah reminds those are asking for his help that they were the same people who had earlier driven him from his father's home. I love the way our Bible phrases their response,

*'Nevertheless, we have now turned back to you, so that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and become head over us, over all the inhabitants of Gilead.'* (11:8)

But even though they have already made the offer, Jephthah repeats their promise back to them as a question, if the Lord God gives him the victory, will they really make him the leader of all Gilead? This they confirm with both an oath, and a formal ceremony where the Israeli troops had gathered at Mizpah.

Think about this. When you find yourself in a position to do something in the name of the Lord, and you are ready to acknowledge that the task you are about to undertake can only be accomplished in His strength, are you right in next asking *'what's in it for me?'* Are you ever justified in listing all the sacrifices you've made in order to be in God's service?

Peter apparently thought Jesus would be impressed with his declaration that he and the other disciples had even left their own homes to follow the Lord. Jesus then assured them that any sacrifice they had made in God's behalf would be amply rewarded, but being gracious, He probably never thought of replying, *"Well, I left My own home to die for you!"* Luke 18:28

By His grace alone God was vindicating Jephthah before the very people who had spurned him. If he had been able to see that God was already blessing him should he not now respond to these leaders in Godly humility?

Nevertheless, we will discover, that even though he struggled with faith both in his fellow men and God, as the Book of Hebrews assures us, Jephthah was not only a man of great faith, the badlands had also shaped him into a wise and courageous leader.

*And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.* Hebrews 11:32-34

The next characteristic we see displayed in Jephthah is both wisdom and patience. Rather than just jumping on his horse and riding off with an army to go after the Ammonites, he first tries to reason with them; carefully explaining the history of Israel and crediting the Lord God with helping them win the now contested lands from the Amorites in battle over three hundred years earlier. But of course the king of Ammon disregarded the message and the fight was on.

And the rest is history, verse 29 tells us that *"the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah,"* and he led his Israeli army to utterly defeat the Ammonites so they were no longer a threat to Israel. When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon a yielded vessel God's will is done and God is glorified. Just as in the case of all the other Judges of Israel, Jephthah went forward in the Lord's might and great victories were won.

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Have you even noticed that when celebrating the Old Testament saints, the New Testament does not also dredge up their faults; only their faith is on display. But the Old Testament holds nothing back. **Thus, reading of the failures of Moses and Abraham and Jacob and**

**David and all the others, we can be encouraged that God uses real people with real faults and problems.** Then we can go to the New Testament to find that by His grace God only remembers and only records their faith, and be encouraged that He views us through that same lens of grace.

So it is here with Jephthah. His faith in the Lord and the subsequent victories he has won by the Lord's anointing are not diminished by his folly. In fact, the Lord's mercy and grace and His determination to have His will done through such vessels of clay are only more clearly demonstrated that even in the shadow of this foolish vow next made by Jephthah, He still uses the man for His purpose and His victory.

What we are talking about is that although leading and conquering with the "*Spirit of the Lord*" upon him, at the start of the battle, Jephthah makes a foolish vow – actually a bargain with God – that should he return victorious from this war, the first thing that walks out his front door would be given to God. You need to see this verse in two different translations to understand the point I am about to make. Here is the way our Bible translates Jephthah's vow to God.

... **whoever** comes out of the doors of my house to meet me ... shall be the Lord's, **to be offered up by me as a burnt-offering.** Judges 11:30-31

If we took this translation at face value, we would conclude that Jephthah was offering God the abomination of a human sacrifice to guarantee his victory in battle. And some commentators, accusing Jephthah of being half pagan are convinced that he did just that. But theologian Warren Wiersbe points out over a dozen reasons from the Biblical context why Jephthah was not offering God a human sacrifice. I will share just two of those reasons with you now and you will have to come to our Something More Bible study next Tuesday to learn the rest.

The first reason is that Jephthah was not a half-pagan. Israel was in a time of spiritual revival, they had put away their idols and pledged to worship only God (Judges 10:15). Jephthah in his bargaining Ammonites also demonstrated his detailed knowledge of Israel's history, so you would think he also knew God's commands – especially against human sacrifice. Why would he expect God to give him the victory if immediately thereafter he was going to do what was abominable to God?

The second reason is in the way Biblical translation is done. The more literal New American Standard Bible translates the verse this way....

**whatever** comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return... shall be the Lord's, **and/or** I will offer it up as a burnt offering." (Judges 11:31 NASB)

First notice that Jephthah did not say "**whoever**" but "**whatever**" which lines up better with the two part bargain he was offering God. Because the Hebrew word usually translated "**and**"

can also be translated "or." Thus if an animal – and it had better be a clean animal – came out of the house it would be sacrificed; if a human came out of the house, they would be dedicated to serve the priests at the Tabernacle Shiloh; the same was Samuel's mother who "gave him" to God.

This also lines up with his only daughter's response. Now being dedicated to essentially become a nun for the rest of her life at the Tabernacle, she asked for some time to bewail not the loss of her life but rather her perpetual virginity; never to be married, never to raise children, no way thus to carry on Jephthah's family name.

So while Jephthah's foolish vow, deprived his daughter of her freedom to love and marry it also cost him the perpetuation of his family name in Israel; which if you know anything of Israeli history, the loss of a family name is itself considered a great tragedy.

This is enough for now on what Jephthah did or did not do. So let us turn our attention to why his making of such a vow was both unnecessary as well as foolish.

We can glance back at verse 9 and remind ourselves that Jephthah has already given the Lord advanced credit for any victory he might win. It is assumed before he goes that he will be going in the name of the Lord God of Israel.

Now granted, the bravest, noblest, most seasoned warrior is going to be a little on edge just before battle, and especially when going up against a formidable foe.

But remember that Jephthah had just given the king of the Ammonites an Israeli history lesson, so he obviously knew about the exodus from Egypt and also a great deal about Israel's victories in taking and keeping the land.

He knows that the odds don't shake God up. After all hadn't Gideon defeated the hoards of Midian with only 300 men just about 95 years earlier? And it had been obvious to all that this was the hand of the Lord.

Nevertheless, in his faltering faith, Jephthah offers God a bargain. Friends, it is an insult to the God who has provided our eternal salvation and assured us Heaven, to presume to cut a deal with Him about some petty endeavor in this life.

This reminds me of the story of the woman rushing home from a doctor's appointment. She was running behind schedule and she still had to pick up her prescription, get the kids from the baby-sitter, get home and make supper, all in time to make it to her seven-year-old's recital. As she began to circle the busy Wal-Mart parking lot, looking for a space, it started pouring rain.

Wearied from her day, she sighed and prayed, "*Oh God, you know what kind of a day I've had. I just can't take anymore. If you would please grant me a parking space close to the building so I don't get soaked, I promise my family and I will start going to church again this Sunday.*"

She hadn't even finished her prayer when she saw the taillights of a car about to back out of the best space in the whole parking lot, right next to the handicap spots. She

made straight for it and as she pulled in, she said, "*Never mind God, something just opened up!*"

It is also an arrogant presumption to offer for His help something that we ought to have been giving God anyway. "*Oh, Lord, I'm going in for this job interview, and if you help me get it I will tithe and give offerings for missions and to help the poor.*" "*Oh, Lord, if you help me (or my loved one) win this battle with this disease or this malady I will strive to serve you better in the church and in my life.*"

The Lord would ask, how might you be serving me in the church and in your life, even in the midst of the trial? Nowhere in the Bible is there an admonition to give your life to the Lord and the church in service, only when everything is going right and only when the Lord has delivered you from all your trials.

Jephthah shouldn't have offered God any frivolous vows in exchange for His help. If you're going to offer worship and sacrifice to the Lord, just do it from a worshiping heart and it will be accepted by Him. And do it, even if His help does not seem forthcoming. He is God. As Job said, "*Though He slay me, I will hope in Him,*" Job 13:15a

On the other hand, Biblical instruction is that no vow is ever required of you, but if you do make a vow, be sure to keep it. Deuteronomy 23:21-23

So it was Jephthah's folly to make this vow in the first place; especially one so specific. If he felt he had to secure God's blessing with a vow he could have said, "*Lord, when this is done and you have given us the victory I will go to the temple and make a sacrifice of thanksgiving to You.*"

That would have been acceptable as long as he kept his vow. But as we already learned, no vow was necessary and since "*the Spirit of the Lord*" was already upon him, such a vow was apparently made out of insecurity and a moment of doubt.

So as we certainly often learned from the life of Abraham, a man or woman could be a person of faith, wish to do God's will, yield themselves to God service and even be used by God, but still be in error as to the true nature and character of God and what would please Him and what would grieve Him.

### **So what can we take from this story that is valuable lesson for us today?**

First, we should clearly learn that bargaining – making a vow – with God is neither wise nor needed; we know God wants and is already working to bring about the best for our lives. But also we should remember that having made such a vow, we better not fail to honor it, for to do otherwise shows us to be fools. Ecclesiastes 5:4-5

Next we should learn from the Bible's absolute honesty that God doesn't cover up His people's sins, rather He exposes them so that **they might repent and so that those who see the sin and the consequences might exercise wisdom and avoid the same follies.**

He also exposes them to bring glory to His name, because where sin increases grace abounds. Not that our sin helps God's grace to abound, but that by contrast, the gloriousness of God's grace is made manifest in contrast to the utter ruin caused by sin. (Rom 5:20-21).

So in our story today we are given the picture of a man who is no different than any one of us. He is a man who believes in the one true God and has great faith, and yet is still capable of faithlessness, even when he should have known better. Are we, even as New Testament believers, prone to these faults? If you think not, you are self deceived.

While you and I are made of the same stuff as Jephthah, and equally capable of folly and error and insecurity and doubts, we serve the same God of Jephthah, who glorifies His name through the yielded vessel, helps in time of trouble, grants approval through faith – that is, justifies the sinner – and because He accepts us through the atoning work of His Son and grants to us His righteousness, never again mentions our sin or dredges up our past.

For we have no past in Christ, except that "...

*we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."* Rom 6:4