

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Jephthah & his Ill-fated Promise – (Judges Chapters 11-12) The story this week will remind us of the veracity of the statement made by Michael Wilcock in his commentary on the book of Judges, "...Judges describes not a circle, but a spiral."¹ If each preceding judge demonstrated God's grace working through fallen men to accomplish his kingdom purposes, Jephthah makes this point even clearer. The cycle mentioned before characteristic of this era in Israelite history in which God's people rebelled, suffered retribution, repented, and were rescued continues not in a state of consistency, but in a downward spiral that progressively worsens as we near the end of the book. The description of the times prior to the ascendancy of Jephthah is introduced with the familiar refrain, "*And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...*" (10:6). As we witnessed last week, there was a seven-fold curse that God brought on his people that correlates to the seven-fold deliverance he accomplished through the hands of the judges. Wilcock is again insightful when he summarizes the tenure of Jephthah's leadership by stating, "...the rot that has set in long ago has reached the core, and things central to the relationship between God and his people have now been affected."

This week we will explore together the life and times of Jephthah and continue in our journey through the book of Judges. We will encounter some very encouraging things as well as some very discouraging things. We will take both in stride as we look forward to the coming of the true Judge who sets all things right again.

Part One: *The Man with A Tough Beginning* – The author of the book of Judges begins the tale of Jephthah in a manner that causes the reader to immediately feel puzzled over why God should choose this specific individual to accomplish his will. He begins with the telling statement, "*Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute.*" (11:1). We are here given critical insight into a man who is admirable and controversial at the same time. This is not the first time that God had chosen such an individual to lead and save his people. However, this is the first time that he has chosen someone who seems to honor God so deeply, but is apparently ignorant of God's basic laws and character. This knowledge deficit will become apparent as we examine what is relayed to us from scripture more fully.

Our introduction to Jephthah is tainted by the disreputable vocation of his mother. He is described as the son of a man of Manasseh. Jephthah is a mighty warrior, but he is also an outcast. The exact circumstances of his birth and the variables that contributed to his vocational development are not mentioned in the text, but may have well been the same. Was he the mistaken spawn of a one-night stand, born from lust and conceived in the heat of the moment or was he the forbidden offspring of an idealistic man who fell passionately in love with the wrong lady? The answer we do not know. We simply

¹ Wilcock, Michael. *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Judges*. Pgs. 107
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know that he was the son of Gilead, a man who was a descendant and the namesake of Manasseh's early son called by the same name. He was also a mighty warrior. Passing reference is made to the other sons which Gilead's wife legitimately bore him (11:2a). These apparently disliked the son of the prostitute and drove him to lead a questionable lifestyle. They unashamedly informed young Jephthah, *"...you shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman"* (11:2b). So, he left and went to dwell in the land of Tob where he collected "worthless fellows" who followed him. The Hebrew word Tob means literally "good". The above verse in Hebrew would read, *"Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of good.... And bad (empty) men gathered to him"* (verse 3). The contrast between his giftedness, the land in which he was living, and the manner of people who surrounded him can be seen as a microcosm of the nation of Israel at the time. Israel had been delivered from Egypt, redeemed for the purpose of representing the rule of YHVH in the earth. They had been given the gift of God's law and his abiding presence to distinguish them from all other peoples of the earth. They had been brought into a *good* land flowing with milk and honey. Yet, they gathered empty men around them, worshipping the Canaanite deities instead of the one true God. Therefore, they were outcasts in the land of promise.

It was from the land of Tob (tov) that Jephthah developed a reputation as a mighty warrior. Here as overseer of a band of misfits he was eventually sought for and solicited to return by the very people who pushed him away. Verse 5 of the text states, *"And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah, 'Come and be our leader, that we may fight with the Ammonites'"* (11:5-6). It is interesting to note that God's call to Jephthah did not take the form of the call of any of the other judges. This should not surprise us since God is consistently inconsistent with the manner in which he calls men and women not only in the book of Judges, but throughout the whole of scripture. Idolatry says that gods can be manipulated if you learn their behavior or their likes and dislikes. The faith of scripture teaches that God is sovereign, and as such, does as he pleases. There are discernable principles throughout scripture, but God is not bound to operate within the confines of the past. Believers make a grave error if they expect the past to be indicative of the future in relation to how God moves and works in the lives of men and women to accomplish his sovereign will. When considering the call of the various judges, this truth becomes overwhelmingly apparent.

Part Two: The Outcast Returns – The reply of Jephthah to the elders of Gilead has been compared to the interaction between God and Israel when they sought him for deliverance having been oppressed by both the Ammonites as well as the Philistines as mentioned in 10:7-16. Jephthah responds by asking the elders, *"Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?"* (vs. 7b) Compare this inquiry to that of the Lord in 10:13-14, *"Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore, I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."* The elders responded as follows: *"That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead"* (11:8). In other words, they were now coming to the one whom they had asked to leave because he was the son of a prostitute and socially unacceptable, and were requesting that he lead them into battle, deliver them, and be their head. Again, compare this to the response of Israel when God told them to cry to their gods for deliverance, *"And the people of Israel said to the Lord, 'We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day'"* (10:15). The submissiveness of both the elders of Gilead as well as Israel is notable as is the parallel between the rest of their dialogue, and should not be overlooked.

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Then, Jephthah went with the elders fully embracing the chance to be their leader.

Part Three: Negotiating with the Enemy – Jephthah is the exception among military leaders during the period of the judges in that he is willing to attempt negotiations with the enemy king. Michael Wilcock is helpful to point out that the message of Jephthah to the king contains a four-fold argument as to why the people of Israel are justified to live in the land previously occupied by the Canaanites.² This four-fold argument is from 1) history; 2) theology; 3) precedent; 4) silence. The King of the Ammonites responds to Jephthah's inquiry as to why he had come to attack Gilead by stating, *"Because Israel upon coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok, and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably"* (vs. 13). Jephthah corrects the king by stating, *"Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let us pass through your land,' but the king of Edom would not listen. And they went also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. Then, they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab. Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, 'Please let us pass through your land to our country,' but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory, so Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country"* (11:15-21). In other words, Jephthah corrected the king of the Ammonites that they did not take the land of the Ammonites, but the land of the Ammorites, and this only because they were provoked in warfare when they sought a peaceful passage.

The second argument, is a theological one. Jephthah states, *"So then the Lord God of Israel dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us we will possess"* (11:23-24). This theological statement is not so much grounded in the revelation of the God of the Bible (YHVH) even though Israel could well lay claim on a divine right to the land, but rather to the consensual understanding among all peoples in the ancient near eastern culture. No one would expect land delivered into their hands by a god (let alone the one true God, the Creator of heaven and earth), to be renounced just because another nation feels they had a prior claim to it.

The third argument was based on precedent and referenced a historical figure: Balak, the king of Moab. In 11:25, Jephthah states, *"Now are you any better than Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever contend against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them?"* The answer, of course, is that Balak never outright confronted Israel militarily, nor did Israel seek to conquer Balak, because the land of Moab was not given for possession to the people of Israel. Instead, Balak, the king of Moab, hired Balaam the sorcerer to curse the people of God, a curse that was turned into a blessing. Balaam was eventually successful at cursing God's people but through enticing them into idolatry and causing them to become a curse to themselves instead of the requested means of divination. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 identifies a confederacy between the Ammonites and the people of Moab since they were both the descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew, but it was clearly the Ammorites (Sihon and Og) not the Ammonites that Israel conquered and dispossessed from their lands.

² Wilcock, Michael. *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Judges*. Pgs. 114 Baney, Lesson 13 Winter/Spring 2016

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Finally, Jephthah makes the argument from silence. He tells the king of Ammon, *“While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time?”* If the land of the Ammorites that God delivered into the hand of the Israelites did indeed belong to the people of Ammon (either prior to the Israelite conquest or during the conquest), why did the king of Ammon wait 300 years (the time from the conquest until the time of Jephthah) to reclaim it?

Collectively the four arguments mentioned above sought to affirm the claim made by Jephthah that, *“I therefore, have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The Lord, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon”* (11:27). Jephthah should be commended for being the first judge to correctly identify the true Judge of Israel.

Part Four: Jephthah’s Tragic Vow – The battle between the men of Gilead under the leadership of Jephthah and the Ammonites resulted in great victory on the part of Israel. God delivered the enemy oppressor into the hands of his people. However, Jephthah foolishly made a promise to the Lord that he would offer in burnt sacrifice the first person that came to greet him upon returning to his house from battle. The first person who came to his door to greet him was his only child, a daughter. Some commentaries believe that Jephthah would not have willingly made such a vow to the Lord since the law of God severely opposes human sacrifice. To these commentaries, Jephthah relegated his daughter to a life of perpetual virginity, requiring her to be a figurative sacrifice to the Lord. However, such an interpretation is really wishful thinking on the part of modern man. There are really no textual reasons to think that he did with her otherwise than was stated. In fact, 12:39 states, *“And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made.”*

Other theologians, in light of this verse, argue that Jephthah would not have intentionally vowed to offer a human sacrifice and assumed that an animal might be the first to greet him on his return. However, the original Hebrew is rather certain, Jephthah vowed that whatever first came out of his door (human or otherwise) to greet him would be offered as a burnt sacrifice to the Lord.

So, what are we to make of this horrendous act? We see here the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Jephthah suffered from a case of bad theology. Had he been more familiar with the written Torah, the law of God, he would have known that it was more important to God that he preserve a life than that he keep his vow and offer a human sacrifice. God actually gave a substitute to Israel on behalf of all first-born males (the sacramental means of Israel’s redemption from Egypt) to prevent them from being offered as human sacrifice. Contrary to the practice of surrounding cultures, the God of scripture clearly condemns human sacrifice. However, both Jephthah as well as his daughter were more familiar with the culturally acceptable practices of surrounding Canaanite religions than they were with the faith of Israel. They, therefore, saw it as being of greater importance to keep one’s commitment to God than to preserve another human life.

The question then becomes, if Jephthah was so mistaken in his act of sacrificing his daughter, why is he included in the hall of faith of Hebrews chapter 11? I believe Michael Wilcock has it right when he states, *“There was much that Jephthah needed to learn about the faith of the true God. But the dreadfulness of the deed for which he is most remembered points up by contrast the vital thing that he had grasped, and that he believed he must pursue, however misguided. He held true to such truth as he had attained, and that, as Paul tells us, is a firm stepping stone towards God’s showing us the truths we do not yet see clearly.”*

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Part Five: *Ibzan, Elon, & Abdon* – Following the life and leadership of Jephthah, there were three other judges whose names are recorded in scripture: Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon. Little is known of these three other than the fact that Ibzan had thirty sons to whom he gave in marriage outside his clan to thirty daughters. This shows an attempt on the part of Ibzan to unite the tribes, something that no other Judge was capable of doing, and apparently Ibzan was not able to do well. The only notable thing about Abdon is that he had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys. Again, reference to the donkeys is a sign of peace and prosperity, something that God's people were able to enjoy as a gracious gift for the twenty-five years that followed Jephthah's death.

Overall the period of these men reveals to us a new low in the life of God's people. However, God continued to be present among them, laboring to build his kingdom with broken vessels and worn out tools. It is the grace and faithfulness of God that shines brighter during this period than any exploits of man. It is his loving kindness that continues to offer reason to hope that one day things will be better. That day is not this one, and that time is not now for we have yet to examine the tenure of one of the book's most well-known judges: Samson. The next two lessons will unpack the details of his short, eventful life and witness once more how God uses fallen man to accomplish his holy will.

Conclusion: As we consider the lives of the judges in general and Jephthah in particular, be thinking of how you might identify with their strengths and weaknesses. If an editor was given the task of writing about modern-day Christian leaders who do you think would make the cut and why? Is your selection and the reasons thereof similar to those of the editor of Judges as can best be determined through the pages of holy writ? In what ways do they differ? If you were to use the same criteria as seemingly employed by the author of Judges who do you think should be written about and why?

More importantly, what can you learn about what God is doing at this time in history in the lives of his people to bring about his divine will? Does it seem that we are on an upward sloping trajectory? How does what is happening in Israel during the period of the Judges aid in your understanding of God's redemptive work throughout history?