

Mass Chaos

A Study of the Book of Judges

Session 7: Jephthah

Introduction

Picture a divided congregation. One group of people wants to follow the pastor in trying new things and reaching out to more people. Another group of people digs their heels in and fights to shut things down. Meetings get contentious. Open forums turn into airing grievances. Some people think their pastor is the savior of the church who is turning things around; other people think their pastor is a demon who is causing a bunch of problems. Simply put, it's a chaotic mess. What are all the ramifications and results that will happen?

Jephthah's Rise as Judge

10:6–11:11

Case Study: For you parents, imagine repeated tension with teenage children. For years, you've raised them to not drink at parties and hang around friends who will be bad influences on them. On Friday night at 2 am, you get a call. "Mom and Dad, please come pick me up. I've been drinking at a party with my friends." "Ok, I will." Next month, it happens again. The month after, it happens again. Apply the Lord's response to your life. When do you say, "I will no longer save you" (v. 13), and when do you say, "I can bear your misery no longer" (v. 16)?

List clues in the text that make Jephthah an unlikely choice to be judge:

-
-
-

Jephthah's Daughter

11:29–40

Learning Activity: Time for a Debate!

One of the most debated issues in the book of Judges is this account about Jephthah and his daughter. Did he really sacrifice her as a burnt offering or not? In small groups, read the arguments on both sides, and argue for one position or the other.

Position #1: A Physical Sacrifice

- The most natural reading of the text (v. 30–31 compared to v. 39) is that Jephthah offered up his daughter as a burnt offering. He fulfilled the vow he made.
- The language of the vow (“whatever comes out of the door of my house”) seems inappropriate for animals. It would be more naturally associated with a person.
- Jephthah made this vow fully aware of the Israelite custom of young women coming out to greet a victor after battle (1 Sa 18:6–7).
- Context shows that Jephthah intended to vow something special.
- Jephthah expressed grief when his daughter met him; the text suggests he was about to lose his only child.
- The normal usage of the Hebrew term, “burnt offering,” includes something that was completely burned with fire on the altar (Lev 1:9). At times, this included child sacrifice (2 Ki 3:27)
- Nothing in the Old Testament mentions celibacy and cloister-like withdrawal from the world in consequence of a vow. She has two months to lament, not a lifetime of celibacy.
- It is not inconceivable that a God-fearing man such as Jephthah would ever perform such an act. “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson all performed self-inflicted tragedies.
- This was the unanimous view of the early commentators, Jewish and Christian, including Luther.
- The second position seems motivated by emotion, not the text.

Position #2: A Spiritual Sacrifice

- The “burnt offering” required a male victim (Lev 1:3).
- The Mosaic Law strongly forbids human sacrifice (Lev 18:21, 20:2–5; Deut 12:31, 18:10).
- The language of the vow (“whatever comes out of the door of my house”) is broad enough to include anything from Jephthah’s possessions, including animals.
- The “burnt offering” involves the idea of complete surrender, a “whole offering” (Lev 1:9), in distinction to offerings where only a part is given to the Lord, and this can be interpreted in a spiritual sense of surrendering to a life of virginity in dedication to the Lord. The text and context support the idea of a spiritual offering, i.e., dedication to the Lord in a life of virginity.

- The text mentions that his daughter and her friends mourned the fact that she would never marry, and it follows up Jephthah's vow with, "And she was a virgin." Both would be strange, irrelevant additions if it were a physical sacrifice.
- In those days, women did dedicate their service to the Lord at the tabernacle (Exod 38:8, 1 Sa 2:22).
- The Lord had accepted a substitute for a sacrifice before (cf. Gen 22:13).
- Leviticus 27 allows the Israelites to make a vow to the Lord and then redeem the person or thing with a sum of money.
- Jephthah's grief over the loss of his daughter can be interpreted either way.
- Jephthah was a godly man led by the Spirit, and he is included among the heroes of faith (Heb 11:32).
- This is the view of many (not all) recent commentators.

Jephthah's Battle against Ephraim

12:1-7

This internal battle in which 42,000 Israelites died at the hands of other Israelites shows just how divided and fragmented they were. Analyze why this conflict escalated so quickly. What were the faults on the Ephraimites' side? on the Gileadites' side?

Conclusion

Respond: "I could never be a part of the church today. Churches just fight with each other all the time. They're so cliquy and factional. Maybe if their leaders were more noble and their people more united I'd think about it."