

Sermon 10: Judges 11:12-12:15: Jephthah's Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Gifts and graces are two very different things. Gifts are unconditional in that they are given by God at birth, they form part of our personality and we can take no credit for our natural propensities. Graces are unnatural and need to be nurtured and grown by depending upon the Spirit. As we look at Jephthah the mafia boss who was made king, we are looking at a man who has gifts in leadership and administration but no graces. We are reminded that not all good leaders are good people, but in God's kingdom they must be. Israel is desperate for someone to lead their armies, they scrape the bottom of the barrel and approach a criminal who is good with the sword and has leadership abilities to help them. This reminds us of the many times Churches have called leaders not for their faithfulness to the word and holiness but their apparent gifts, charm and ability to get results. We will observe the results of this with his encounter against the Ammonites. We will see Jephthah's gifts but not his graces, those things that he had at birth but not that which he should have cultivated in holiness. His politics, parenting and peacekeeping all reveal that men can be natural leaders with no grace equipping them to lead.

Politics

You will remember that the Ammonites have made an aggressive move which prompted Israel to scramble to get a leader and as a result chose Jephthah. Our narrative picks up with Jephthah addressing the matter he was chosen for, v12-13, 'Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?"' ¹³ And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." Jephthah a newly minted leader speaks disturbingly of 'me' and 'my land' as he seeks to enter into negotiations with the Ammonites over their invasion. The Ammonites say that they are there to claim what has wrongfully been taken from them when Israel came from Egypt 300 years earlier and demands a peaceful restoration. This interaction would be typical of the times with the usual political posturing. In fact there is a lie present because Israel never took the land from Ammon, this will be a central point in Jephthah's long speech.

Jephthah continuing to pursue a political solution rather than resorting to war responds. Now as we look at his response there are a number of arguments that he makes. These have been described as historical; theological; personal; and chronological arguments. Now Heb. 11:32 describes Jephthah as one of those who did great things by faith. If there is a section where the faith of Jephthah is put on display it will be this section here where he rehearses God's giving victory to Israel in the past and this being the basis for going to and gaining victory in battle. Heb. 11:34 talks about those who drove away foreign armies by faith, this is likely where Jephthah's faith should be credited, as opposed to the vow of

sacrificing his daughter which comes later. Let's look at these parts. Firstly the historical argument, Jephthah will highlight how Israel sought to use diplomacy as they made their way to the promised land; that they were not aggressors unlike the Ammonites. V14-17, 'Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites ¹⁵ and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, ¹⁶ but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. ¹⁷ 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 sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh.' He then points out that Moab was an aggressor against Israel and that they lost the land in war, and concludes that the land was not Ammonite but Amorite land, v18-22, "'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. ¹⁹ 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,' ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. ²² And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan.' So historically Ammon is lying.

Next we have the theological arguments in v23-24. Here we see that YHWH is the one who gave the land to Israel. 'So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? ²⁴ 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.' There is a little bit of mockery and jibing thrown in. technically Chemosh was the god of the Amorites not the Ammonites who worshipped Milcom, is this an attempt through the notion of territorial gods to show up Ammonites false claim because Chemosh was the god associated with that former territory? We are not sure. Here Jephthah's faith is clear as he credits YHWH with giving Israel the land through victory.

Next we have the personal argument where Jephthah asks whether Ammon is stupider or wiser than Balak who tried to hire Balaam to curse Israel who could not and so he eventually withdrew, v25, '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 final argument is the historical one, if this land was really yours why did you not claim it 300 years ago instead of now, v26, '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?' Jephthah draws it all to a conclusion stating that it is not Israel that has sinned but Ammon, and he calls upon God to be the judge in this situation, v27, '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.' Ammon of course do not listen, v28, 'But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.'

This leads to war. And Jephthah's terrible parenting.

Parenting

V29, 'Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites.' We see that the Spirit of the Lord was upon J. He goes through certain areas and gathers his forces. Now what would you expect from someone who has the Spirit upon him? We would expect the fruits of the Spirit, but this is not what we see, instead we have the infamous vow, v30-31, 'And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.'" There is much that is faulty about this vow. Firstly, the vow lacks an understanding of grace and seeks to buy a victory from God with an offering. The 'if...then I' language betrays that Jephthah does not have a proper understanding of grace or God and he includes a meriting act to secure blessing, in this way he treats God like an idol who needs coaxing and bribing. It may be that there was a lot riding on this octroy for J. that he made extra efforts to secure it. Secondly, we see a lack of faith. If the Spirit was upon him we would imagine that he would have been taught to believe that God can win the day, that He would grant him courage and boldness. Rather we see that Jephthah barter for victory instead of trusting. Thirdly, the nature of the vow is contrary to God's law. Human sacrifice is obviously forbidden, Deut. 12:31, 'You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.' Some have sought to defend Jephthah by saying that he was anticipating an animal greeting him. This is not the most likely understanding. If Jephthah had expected an animal he would have overlooked his daughter to see which animal came first. He betrays that he conceives of God in a Canaanite fashion, perhaps a misunderstanding of Abraham being requested to kill Isaac was feeding into this. There God was providing a redemptive analogy that points not to us sacrificing our children but Him sending His own Son to die for sin.

The victory in battle is given a mere two verses, v32-33, 'So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. ³³ And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.' More important is the fate of J. daughter. An emotional scene unfolds, v34-36, 'Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." ³⁶ And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the Lord; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites." He is of course wrong that he cannot take back his vow, the Levitical law did allow for vows to be retracted if they were wrong, Lev. 5:4-6, 'or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; 5 when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has

committed, 6 he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.’ This betrays more of Jephthah’s bad theology. He does not view God in terms of His holy nature but only in terms of a pagan and rhadamanthine justice. Forced consistency and not holiness is the principle he is living by. At the time of the Reformation many had to deal with the problems of wrong vows. Vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience would have to be repented of by priests and nuns including Luther and his wife. It is one thing to keep your promise to represent a God who does not go back on His word and fulfils His promises. But what sort of view of God is being betrayed by J. keeping his vow, this is not an act that is glorifying to God. This is worse than a rash vow, it is a paganized promise where who God is is not informing his actions, but rather the views of the pagans about him.

His daughter’s faith is not informed either. This nameless girl asks that she mourn her virginity first, this would have been a perfect moment for reflection and a study of the scriptures to get out of this foolish promise. But J goes through with it v39, and it is J daughter that is memorialised not him. V37-40, ‘So she said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions.” ³⁸ So he said, “Go.” Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.’

Peacekeeping

J 6 year reign does not end there. First there is the confrontation with Ephraim. 12:1, ‘The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire.” We have seen this side of Ephraim before with Gideon. But where Gideon was patient and downplayed his role in this diffusing the situation and establishing peace; J does the opposite. V2-3, ‘And Jephthah said to them, “I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand. ³ And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?” at least he gives the glory to God. But, v4-7, ‘Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, “You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh.” ⁵ And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me go over,” the men of Gilead said to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” When he said, “No,” ⁶ they said to him, “Then say Shibboleth,” and he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell. Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead.’ This is extremely brutal on J part, 42 000 of the Ephraimites was a massive number. They were not just defeated and sent on their way, but in their escape they were weeded out and executed.

When I think about why J and not the 2 before his reign or the three after is given the limelight. Remembering that the book is written as an apologetic for David is helpful. Think of King Saul. Like J he was chosen with wrong motives, not out of a trust in God and seeking to do God's will, but he is representative of those things we latch onto which appear to offer promise but cannot. King Saul also made rash vows, in 1 Sam 14:24-27 while chasing the Philistines he vowed at anyone who eats before his enemies were beaten should die. His son Jonathan ate honey. On top of this Saul tried to kill his own son Jonathan throwing his spear at him when Jonathan defended David in 1 Sam. 20:30. Godless leaders are harmful to the people of God. Here was the son of a prostitute who led Israel into spiritual prostitution; a fatherless man who failed in fatherhood himself. J causes Israel to cry out for a king like David. J causes us to see our need for a King who will rule His people in justice; who will fight their wars for them; who is righteous; who does not cause the people of God to turn on each other; and who will gladly die in our place instead of putting us to death. Who we need is Jesus Christ.