

Episode #532 Judges 11 Part 3 – Jephthah’s Foolish Vow

I. In the book of Judges, we have a brief record of the early history (the first centuries) of the history of the land of Israel. We see the leaders God chose, judges, who ruled under Jehovah, the King. Through the lives and work of these judges, we can learn about God’s works and ways.

II. Jephthah, the child of the chief of Gilead with the prostitute, had returned from exile at the request of Gilead’s elders to defend them against Ammon. He made his case plainly from the history of Israel as we have it from Numbers, but the king of Ammon paid no attention. Today we consider what followed and the troubling case of Jephthah’s foolish vow.

III. Jephthah’s victory and foolish vow.

- A. Judges 11:29. Jephthah is filled with the Spirit of Yahweh! He passes over Gilead, Manasseh, and Mizpeh (Watchtower) of Gilead. Assume this means collecting soldiers. Then goes to confront the sons of Ammon.
- B. Verse 30. Jephthah makes a vow to “pay the LORD back” for giving the sons of Ammon into his power. A foolish thing to do. The Spirit was already with him to deliver Israel. He didn’t have to bribe Him into doing it!
- C. Verse 31. “Whatever” is male, yet when the time came what first came out of his house was female! His “house” is not a single structure, but more like a large plantation. Many animals were there and would wander freely (in a warm climate doors may never be closed). He imagines one of them being the first to meet him. This had probably happened to him many times. But this leaves it in Jehovah’s hands to pick the thing in his house that could pay Him back for delivering Israel! Worse: Israel’s sins had to be forgiven for them to be delivered. What in his house could possibly be appropriate to do that?
- D. Verse 32. He crosses over to the battle and Yahweh gives him victory!
- E. Verse 33. He strikes them from Aroer (Ruin, a city on the north bank of Arnon in Israel) to Minnith (Distribution) in Ammon. He conquers twenty Ammonite cities unto ‘Abel Keramim, “Meadow of the Vineyards,” in Ammon. A great slaughter of Ammon’s army. Their sons are subdued before Israel’s sons.
- F. Verse 34. He returns to Mizpeh and his house, and it is his daughter who comes out first to meet him with tambourines and dances to celebrate his victory! Thus Jephthah’s foolish vow is revealed. The price to redeem Israel was the death of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. There was only one thing in Jephthah’s house that was sufficient to pay Yahweh back for that...his only child. He little realized what he had offered! But this is something that causes many to slander the Bible! What can we say about this?
 1. When Jephthah said, “Shall surely be the LORD’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering,” the word “and” is the Hebrew vav. This connective particle is translated many different ways. It is often used as the disjunctive “or” (or with a negative “nor”). Examples: Exodus 20:4. II Samuel 3:29. I Kings 18:10.
 2. Jephthah’s vow consisted of two parts:
 - a. He would dedicate what came out to Yahweh per Leviticus 27.
 - b. If suitable for it, he would offer it as a burnt offering.
 3. Would Jephthah have made a vow that might well have forced him to offer an unclean, unacceptable animal as an offering? This would have insulted Yahweh, not honored Him. Jephthah would have been aware that an unclean animal might come out of his house. His vow was crafted to account for this.

4. When Jephthah performed his vow, he would have well realized that his daughter was not suitable for a burnt offering. Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5 (Molech was the god of human sacrifice). Thus he would have dedicated her to Yahweh. How? We will see later in the passage.
- G. Verse 35. He grieves. Tearing the clothes was a sign of great grief. You have brought me very low = low, low, low. Not very fair to blame her! He realizes his foolishness.
 - H. Verse 36. She insists he keep his foolish vow to the LORD. She finds comfort in the victory the LORD had given him over their enemies the sons of Ammon.
 - I. Verse 37. She wants two months (Hebrew moon cycles) to walk through the hill country and bewail her virginity with her female attendants. Note: a silly thing to worry about if you were going to die! But she was not going to die, but to be dedicated to the LORD. This shows us what this dedication meant: she would belong to the LORD, and remain an unmarried virgin all her life.
 - J. Verse 38. He gives his permission, and she goes with her attendants.
 - K. Verse 39. He does according to his vow. When Samuel was dedicated to Jehovah, he served at the temple with the priests (I Samuel 1:11, 22). Yet a woman and not a Levite could not serve at the temple, so how is he to do it? This tells us how: she knew no man, is never married. In Israel it was crucial for every man to have a son to carry on his family line and his inheritance from Jehovah. If he only had a daughter, she needed to marry a close relative and then their first son would count as her father's heir. But now Jephthah will have no heir, a huge loss in their society.
 - L. Verse 40. A statute in Israel: that the daughters go year by year to...what? "Lament" means "rehearse," in other words to celebrate her dedication in praises. Her friends went to her to rehearse with her this great event in her life. She was still alive.
- VI. The idea that Jephthah offered his daughter as a human sacrifice causes much mockery of God's Word. Yet an honest consideration of this would cause us to realize that he could not have vowed this way. His vow was crafted to either dedicate what came out of his house OR offer it as an offering. When his daughter came out, he knew he could not offer her as a sacrifice, so instead he would have dedicated her. We are told how he did this: by dedicating her to Yahweh as a perpetual virgin. There is an important lesson in this: the price the LORD paid for Israel's redemption is the gift of His Son, so Jephthah's only child was the only thing in his house worthy of paying Him back for that. His Son was given for our redemption as well. Let us praise God for His incredible gift on our behalf