

Jephthah's Tragic Vow

A mighty warrior makes a rash vow to God, and when he returns victorious, he faces the devastating consequences of his hasty words.

Judges 11:1-40

CHARACTERS: Jephthah, Jephthah's Daughter, The Elders of Gilead, The Ammonites

THEMES: Rash Vows, Consequences, Faith, Tragic Choices

JEPHTHAH THE GILEADITE was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. His half-brothers drove him away, saying, 'You are not going to get any inheritance in our family, because you are the son of another woman.' So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him.

When the Ammonites made war on Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah back. 'Come, be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites.' Jephthah said, 'Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why come to me now when you're in trouble?' The elders promised he would be their head if he fought for them, and Jephthah went with them.

Jephthah first tried diplomacy, sending messengers to the king of the Ammonites. When that failed, the Spirit of the Lord came on Jephthah. He advanced against the Ammonites, and then he made a vow to the Lord: 'If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.'

Jephthah crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands. He devastated twenty towns. Thus Israel subdued the Ammonites.

When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was his only child. Except for her, he had neither son nor daughter.

When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, 'Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.'

'My father,' she replied, 'you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies.' But she asked for two months to roam the hills and weep with her friends, because she would never marry.

After two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She died a virgin. From this came the Israelite tradition that four days each year the young women of Israel would go out to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah.

Jephthah judged Israel six years. His story serves as a sobering warning about making rash vows and the weight our words carry before God.