



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 11:29-40

To understand the practical benefits of knowing Scripture, and ill-effects of neglecting Scripture.

That Came Out of Nowhere

Judges 11:29-40 presents one of the most unique and difficult passages in all of the Old Testament. Known colloquially as, “Jephthah’s Vow,” it is a one of a kind vow; there are no other recorded vows like it in the Old Testament. It was not uncommon to make vows before the LORD, and they were acceptable as long as the person making the vow did what they said they would do. Numbers 30:2 says, “If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” Pledges are voluntary in nature, but once made, require performance. They are not to be entered into flippantly, which is precisely why Jesus warned against vows (Matt. 5:33-37).

It is not the making of vows that makes Jephthah unique, but the *content* of his vow. To pledge to burn someone as an offering to God is more *Canaanite* than Israelite, and in fact is clearly prohibited in the Torah (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 12:31). The problem with Jephthah is that he marks the beginning of the Canaanization of Israel. The very people that the Israelites were to defeat and do away with became the greatest influence on them because of their lack of obedience to God’s commandments. And even more tragically, if Jephthah had actually learned the Torah, it would have saved the life of his daughter and certainly impacted his legacy in a much more positive manner.

The Spirit of the LORD

Judges 11:29 reads, “Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah.” After his negotiations with the Ammonite king failed, the LORD makes His first active move in Jephthah’s narrative, and it is similar to how He acted on behalf of both Othniel (Jg. 3:10) and Gideon (Jg. 6:34). It is unclear as to whether or not Jephthah was even aware of the LORD’s Spirit upon him. Nevertheless, “he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites” (Jg. 11:29). It is also unclear as to what Jephthah did while on tour, but his trip was likely similar to Gideon’s which involved blowing a trumpet throughout the land to call the people of God to war (Jg. 6:34-35). The goal of this tour was to bolster numbers in an effort to successfully fight the Ammonites.

THE VOW IS MADE

It is in this context that Jephthah makes his vow: “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 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” (Jg. 11:30b-31). The vow establishes an action clause on both the part of Jephthah and the LORD. If God will deliver the Ammonites that Jephthah (and by extension, Israel) had been contending with, then Jephthah would in turn make an offering to the LORD. The terms of the offering, however, are very strange. He will offer, “whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return” (Jg. 11:31). What would possess him to make such an offering? What, other than human, could possibly come from the doors of his home to greet him? Did Jephthah have poor confidence in God and presume he would actually die in battle? There are more questions than answers with regard to why he made this vow, but whatever the motivation, it reveals how far removed even a judge of Israel was from the Scriptures.

Jephthah had to have been aware that his daughter could have potentially walked out from the house to greet him, and if so, it would mean sacrificing his own child which is clearly forbidden in the Torah. Leviticus 18:21 reads, “You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.” Molech is the Canaanite god that was often the recipient of child sacrifices. Deuteronomy 12:31 goes on to say, “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.” These Canaanite tendencies were condemned by God, and those who practiced them were not looked upon fondly (see Ahaz in 2 Kings 16:3 and Manasseh in 2 Kings 21:6). That Jephthah enters his name into this discussion does not bode well for him.

THE LORD DELIVERS

The LORD’s part in this vow is to deliver the Ammonites into the hand of Jephthah, and that is exactly what He does: “So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. 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” (Jg. 11:32-33). This sets the stage for Jephthah’s part of the vow. How will he respond?

The Real Issue

Upon Jephthah’s return home, the vow he made becomes a nightmare: “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.” These details only highlight even further the stupidity of Jephthah. Not only does he have a daughter living at home, it’s his only child! He is, of course, distraught by

these events (Jg. 11:35), but does not recant his vow. His daughter even voices her support of him keeping his oath before God (Jg. 11:36), but only asks for a couple of months alone to, “weep for my virginity” (Jg. 11:37). That she would never know a man intimately nor bear a child grieved her. After returning, she was burned alive per the vow. The latter part of verse 39 into verse 40 even indicates that her sacrifice secured a sort of legacy for her: “She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.”

The real tragedy of Jephthah’s narrative is that the Torah provided a mitigation process for this vow. Jephthah’s daughter did not have to die! Leviticus 27:1-8 lays out a payment plan in the event that someone makes a vow involving the valuation of another person. According to this law, Jephthah could have paid 10 shekels to mitigate the judgment he would face for not holding up his end of the vow (10 shekels is required for a female between the ages of 5 and 20). Beyond that, the Torah clearly states that child sacrifice is not acceptable to God. That Jephthah sacrifices his daughter and that she is willing to endure it and that no one intervened suggests that Israel did not know the Torah at all. They had truly become more Canaanite than Israelite.

What About Now?

One obvious takeaway is the value of knowing God’s word. Jephthah could have saved the life of his daughter had he only been familiar with God’s law as revealed in Leviticus 27. And, assuming he didn’t have the 10 shekels that the law required, Leviticus 27 even lays out a method whereby the priest could value the person and have them pay what they could afford. There was no excuse for the death of Jephthah’s daughter at all. Another takeaway is the danger of being in the world *and* of the world. Jephthah and Israel had become more like the world, and less like the set apart people they were intended to be. This happens when the people of God fail to understand and obey the word of God.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 11:29. What happened to Jephthah? Where did he pass through?

2. Read Judges 11:30-31. What vow did Jephthah make to God? What was God to do according to this vow? Why was this vow troublesome? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read Judges 11:32-33. What was the result of Jephthah’s fight with the Ammonites?

2. Read Judges 11:34. What happened when Jephthah arrived home in Mizpah? Who greeted him?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 11:35. What was Jephthah's response?

2. Read Judges 11:36-37. How did Jephthah's daughter respond to this vow that her father made? What did she ask of Jephthah?

Day Four

1. Read Judges 11:38. How did Jephthah respond to her request?

2. Read Judges 11:39-40. What did Jephthah do when she returned? How did the women of Israel pay tribute to her after this?

Week 9 Discussion: Know the Scripture

Jephthah's story is painful for many reasons. For one, it reveals how far Israel had drifted from the practices of God. Two, it revealed how painfully lacking they were in their knowledge of God's word. If Jephthah had known the Law, he could have easily mitigated the judgment that was due to him for making a false vow. It was the lack of understanding of God's word that led him to do the unthinkable: sacrifice his child, a clearly Canaanite practice. Talk as a group about the importance of knowing Scripture. While no one is likely at risk of sacrificing their own children to fire, we are perhaps just as at risk of sacrificing our family, values, morals, and convictions because of a lack of understanding of what God desires from His people.

1. Icebreaker: How well do you believe you know the Scripture? Don't be overly modest nor overly confident. Give as accurate of an answer as you can.
2. How has knowing Scripture helped you avoid calamity in your life?
3. How has not knowing Scripture allowed for calamity in your life?
4. How important is learning the Scripture to you? What practices do you engage in that demonstrate the importance of learning Scripture?
5. What could you change in your life that would help you better learn the Scripture?
6. How has the church equipped you to better know Scripture?

Takeaways:

1. Jephthah made a vow that is unlike any other recorded vow in the Old Testament.
2. Jephthah's lack of knowing Scripture is what ultimately led to the sacrifice of his daughter.

PRAYER REQUESTS: