

I will not ask for an actual show of hands... because I think I already know what the answer would be... but have you ever yearned so much for God's intervention on your behalf... that you made a promise to Him... that if He met your need... you would do something for Him... or stop doing something that you knew was wrong... or give to Him in a sacrificial way...? Have you ever made a vow to God... as an effort to persuade Him to act on your behalf...?

Is it ever right for us to do this...?

This morning we are going to be discussing making vows to the Lord. Our passage this morning concerns itself with a famous Old Testament vow. We are in a passage that deals with Jephthah... a judge of Israel... who won a great victory over the Ammonites... and brought peace to the nation. But that is not what he is most known for. His greatest claim to fame is a particular vow that he made to the Lord... as he tried to elicit God's intervention... so that he would defeat the Ammonites. ... We will easily recognize that Jephthah's vow was foolish... and completely unnecessary... But should we regard all vow-making with God to be foolish...?

Jephthah's vow raises a lot of questions for us. In fact the passage that we come to this morning... is the passage that I was most asked about... when I announced that I would be doing a sermon series through the Book of Judges. I had several of you ask me about it... or make such comments as... "Wow! I can't wait to see what you are going to do with Judges chapter 11..." ... Well, your wait is almost over! This morning... I will give my best attempt to explain what my understanding is... of this confusing situation... But first we need to study the build-up of Jephthah's felt-need to

make his foolish vow. Here are the circumstances... by which Jephthah considered that he had to make a vow to God. ... We start this morning with verse 12 of Judges chapter 11... after the Ammonites had come forth to battle Israel.

### **Judges 11:12**

Now... you may recall from last week... as we studied the first section of chapter 11... that the elders of Gilead went after Jephthah... after previously rejecting him... but now they wanted Jephthah... because of his military skills. ... Jephthah negotiated with them... that if he helped them... they would need to make him ruler over them. ... They agreed to his conditions.

But... I would like for you to notice just how personal this fight with the Ammonites has become to Jephthah. ... Jephthah asks the Ammonite King... “What do you have against... ME... that you have come to... ME... to fight against... MY... land...?” ... He doesn’t ask... “What do you have against us?” ... Jephthah does not call it... “OUR land.”

In last week’s passage... Jephthah seemed a little reluctant. ... But now... this entire conflict is on his shoulders. The conflict is personal between the Ammonite king and himself. His entire being is now vested in this enterprise.

### **Judges 11:13**

The king's historical sense is both remarkable and skewed. ... On the one hand... the pagan king was aware of Israel's origins in Egypt... and their earlier migration to the land of Canaan. ... On the other hand... he accused them of injustice against him... blaming them of robbing him of the territory

between the Arnon and Jabbok tributaries of the Jordan. ... But this is patently false. The Ammonites had never occupied this land.

After Jephthah heard from the king of Ammon... he knew the king was misinformed... or lying... or both. ... So Jephthah endeavored to set the record straight. ... Jephthah flatly denied the charges. The charges were false. ... Jephthah gives the Ammonite king a history lesson... which shows the unjustified animosity that is leading them to war.

### **Judges 11:14-18**

When Israel first came up from the land of Egypt... they showed the utmost respect for the territorial integrity of the nations they encountered - Moab and Edom. They asked permission to simply pass through their recognized boundaries. When they said “no”... Israel accepted their “no” answer. ... AND... They were just as respectful of the Amorite’s territory.

### **Judges 11:19-20**

It was not Israel’s intent to take anyone’s land. ... But Sihon initiated the attack on them... and Israel was forced to fight.

### **Judges 11:21-22**

The two nations sound similar... But the Ammonites did not possess the land... it was possessed by the Amorites. ... So the complaint of the Ammonites that Israel took the land from them... simply was not valid.

Ammon has no historical claim to this land... The land between the Arnon and the Jabbok, the desert and the Jordan... had previously belonged to

the Amorites... not Ammon. ... When the battle was over... this territory passed directly into the hands of the Israelites. ... And what Jephthah is pointing out here... is that Israel has never claimed any land belonging Edom... Moab... (even though they insulted them)... or Ammon. The ONLY land that they took was the land they acquired when they were forced into a fight. ... The Ammonites have no historical claim to this land.

We can see that re-visional history for self-serving purposes is not something modern history textbook publishers have invented. ... After masterfully informing the Ammonite king of the actual history... the unrevised version... Jephthah then interrogates the king in various ways about the dispute... and in so doing... Jephthah employs a lot of sarcasm.

### **Judges 11:23**

A sarcastic question is implied. It is, who is the king of the Ammonites to differ with Jehovah God about the ownership of the land?

### **Judges 11:24**

Several of the commentaries I studied from... were careful to point out that Chemosh was not the god of the Ammonites. It was the god of the Moabites. The Ammonites worshipped Molech. These commentators point out that Jephthah knew his Jewish history... but he was mistaken about Ammonite culture. ... But I don't think that is at all the case.

Basic to the understanding of what is going on here... is the recognition that the Ammonites had... that the local gods would decide who gets each piece of land. ... Every nation had their own god who gave rights and possession to the land... and appeal is made to the gods to judge the case through the

outcome of war. Years before Israel came up from Egypt... the Ammonites had been pushed out of their territory by the Moabites. ... Chemosh (the god of the Moabites) had apparently made the decision for the Ammonites what their land boundaries would be... by pushing them out. "Chemosh decided for you... and the LORD our God has decided for us.

### **Judges 11:25**

Balak a powerful and highly respected king of the past did not war against Israel. Who is this king of Ammon who thinks he can do what Balak would never have the gall to do.

Then Jephthah offers one more question to mock the king's claim...

### **Judges 11:26-27**

Israel had dwelt in the Transjordan area for three centuries... and that was reason enough to claim title to the land as their own. ... Why was the King of Ammon making his claims now? ... During those three centuries... the people of Ammon didn't try to reclaim their territory. ... In fact... back in the days of Moses... even the King of Moab hadn't tried to get his land back! If the Ammonites had a legitimate claim to the territory... they should have said something centuries ago!

So... Jephthah gave three arguments against the king's claim: (1) Gilead was never the king's land in the first place because Israel took it from the Amorites, not the Ammonites... (2) Israel should possess land given by Israel's God... and Ammon should possess land given by Ammon's god...

(3) no one had contested Israel's ownership of the land since its conquest 300 years earlier.

Here is what we need to recognize from these verses. ... Jephthah did all that he could to avoid going to war with the Ammonites. ... Before engaging in war... he tried peaceful negotiations... and our verses so far today tell us three things about Jephthah: (1) Jephthah was deeply invested in this conflict... it was personal to him (2) He knew the Scriptures and the history of his people, and (3) he was not a hothead who was looking for a fight. Being an experienced military man... Jephthah personally knew the horrors of war... by experience... and he wanted to avoid that if at all possible. (This may have also played a role in Jephthah's sense that he needed to make a vow with God... to ensure a good outcome.)

### **Judges 11:28-29**

The presence of the Holy Spirit with Old Testament leaders was primarily for the purpose of accomplishing services for God, not specifically for holy living. ... In this case the Spirit of the Lord is again associated with the raising of an army. Though Jephthah has been given authority to command in Gilead, he has no such formal role in other areas of Manasseh, including the area of Bashan (north of Gilead) as well as considerable territory west of the Jordan.

Jephthah did not wait for the Ammonites to initiate the war, but when the king of Ammon did not receive well Jephthah's last message, Jephthah realized Israel's army must get moving if it was to have any advantage in

the conflict. ... But when he passes through the land and gets a look at the enemy... he becomes a little fearful.

### **Judges 11:30-31**

In his message to the king of Ammon, Jephthah gave every appearance of believing that the Lord would grant the Israelites victory. Back then, he left everything in the hands of the Lord. In verse 27 we read that he told the king: *“Let the Lord, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites”*. Indeed, as the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him, Jephthah seems poised to lead his troops to victory.

Nevertheless, he attempts to secure the Lord’s empowerment for victory by means of a vow. ... *“If you grant me victory over the Ammonites”*, Jephthah tells the Lord, *“then I’ll give you a burnt offering”*, which symbolizes total devotion. ... Why not offer the burnt offering before the battle? - Because Jephthah isn’t totally devoted to the Lord. ... Jephthah will only give the Lord his devotion if the Lord comes through for him - on his terms. ... He seeks not to worship the Lord but to manipulate Him. In this regard, Jephthah treats the Lord as if He were simply another pagan god.

Jephthah does with the Lord what he did with the Israelite leaders and the Ammonite king - he negotiates. ... He’s good with words, and he uses them. ... But the effectiveness of Jephthah’s words is trending downward. Although he won over the Israelites, the king of Ammon disregarded him, and now the Lord meets his vow with silence.

Taken as a whole... the Scriptures don't prohibit the making of condition-based vows to God... (Although the author of Judges does seem to condemn the kind of vow that Jephthah made... by the way he writes this narrative.) ... The Hebrew Scriptures allowed for such vows... and in fact a portion of the Mosaic Law regulated how such vows are to be fulfilled... (Lev. 27:2-8) ...The New Testament seems to say they are not necessary. Jesus said, let your yes be yes... and your no be no... (in Mark 7:9-13).

I have heard many contemporary stories of men and women who, prior to coming to faith or at the outset of their journey of faith, promise to do something for God if he did something for them. In many cases, by all appearances, God answered their prayers, and those who had made the vows have followed through with devotion to him.

God has a penchant for meeting us where we are. ... However... in light of what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of his Son... the path of spiritual growth for followers of Jesus should take them beyond the place where they pledge devotion to God... on the condition that He come through for them on their terms. ... Let's be honest... the making of a condition-based vow is not really worship. ... It is manipulation... an effort to control the future... instead of trusting God for it.

God had given Jephthah every assurance that he would be victorious. He did not need to make a rash vow like this. ... God had not put victory on that kind of a basis. ... He should have recognized that, since God had brought him that far, He would see him through. In verse 29 of this chapter we were told that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. He did not need to add



anything to that. ... His vow was a bargain with God. We do not bargain with God. We obey God.

### **Judges 11:32-33**

The success and victory by Jephthah was very convincing... and it stopped the Ammonites' oppression of Israel. ... The Ammonite king... if he survived the battle... would be extremely humbled for his arrogant defiance of true history.

So... now... what will Jephthah do with the vow that he made to the Lord...?

A vow made in the name of Jehovah was unbreakable... unless you wanted to experience a curse upon yourself for profaning God's name. ... Do you remember when we were studying through the Book of Joshua... that the Gibeonites came to Joshua and lied to him... they said that they came from a far away land... and asked Joshua to make a treaty with them. Joshua did... and when he found out that they lied... Joshua and the Israelites knew that they could not break their vow. They believed it was unbreakable because:

#### **Joshua 9:19 (ESV)**

*"We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them.*

Using God's name in a vow or agreement meant it was unbreakable.

### **Judges 11:35**

Ironically, Jephthah's daughter heralded him with music and dancing to celebrate his triumph, but her emergence from the house signals not his triumph but his folly, magnified by the fact that she is his only child. When Jephthah breaks the news to his daughter, he refuses to take responsibility for his vow and plays the victim, focusing on his feelings, not hers: "You have brought me down and I am devastated."

Jephthah is very upset with his daughter. He speaks ill of his daughter as though she was the one to be blamed for his humbling and for his troubling. Jephthah caused those things to be upon himself. On the other hand, his daughter never spoke so despairingly of Jephthah, though he was the one that caused her death.

Jephthah has made a commitment that he cannot break. He should have thought of this problem when he made the rash vow. People today make all sorts of agreements then want to break them. Before you make a committal, think it through.

So... what did Jephthah do...? Did he burn his daughter as a sacrifice...? ... What if I told you that I don't think that he did...? ... "Doesn't Scripture seem to indicate that he did...?" ... Yes... I would agree that it has some appearance of that. ... But I believe there are stronger clues that indicate he didn't burn his daughter as a sacrifice. The first clue is in the vow itself... back in verse 31... and the second strong evidence is the response of the daughter. ... First let's look at the daughter's response... and then we will go back and examine a little more closely what his vow said.

### **Judges 11:36-37**

She did not understand his promise to be a burnt offering or sacrifice, but that she is not going to marry. Those are her intentions, and she is to bewail the fact of her virginity. She will not be presented as a bride to some man. Her life is to be dedicated to the Lord.

The great sorrow that is expressed is not over the loss of life. It is that the daughter would never become a mother... and Jephthah's inheritance would not be passed on. This was a shameful thing in Hebrew culture.

Nowhere in Scripture are we told that Jephthah actually killed his own daughter... nor do we find anyone bewailing her impending death. The focus of their concern is on her virginity.

We should consider two facts: that up to that period Jephthah had both acted and spoken as a true worshipper of Jehovah... and... perhaps even more importantly... that his name stands emblazoned in that roll of the heroes of the faith... Hebrews 11:32. ... It seems inconsistent to me to believe that a true worshipper of Jehovah (credited by the author of Hebrews as a man held up because of his faith)... could have either vowed or actually offered a human sacrifice — not to speak of the sacrifice being that of his own and only child. ... Such sacrifices were the most abhorrent and opposed to the whole spirit and letter of the Law of God (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10). ... We do not find any mention of human sacrifice until the reigns of the wicked Ahaz and Manasseh. (Not even Jezebel had ventured into such a despicable practice.

But these arguments lie outside of what our passage of Scripture says... itself. ... Is there anything from the text... that would indicate Jephthah did not kill his own daughter...? Yes. It is the vow that he made.

**Judges 11:30-31 (ESV)**

*“And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, “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...” (Hebrew word is “waw”) “I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”*

Most often the Hebrew word “waw” is translated into the English word “and.” ... But there are frequent times... that “waw” is also translated NOT by the word “and”... but by the word “or.”

Whenever there are two possibilities for a word to be translated into English... we must rely on the context to determine which English word to use. ... We have just seen that the context... the resulting sorrow from the vow... was because of the daughter not being able to have children. ... So which way do you think this word should be translated...? I think the context calls for us to translate “waw” in this verse as “or.” ... So now look at what his vow actually was... *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... **OR**... I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”*

Even though Jephthah’s vow did not mean he would kill his daughter... but only that she would be dedicated to the Lord... and most likely be given to some sort of Temple service... it was never-the-less a foolish vow. It was unnecessary... it did not have good character to it... there was nothing good about the vow. ... But the daughter showed incredible character. ... She

submitted herself to her father's unnecessary vow: "*You have opened your mouth to the Lord...*" (in other words... 'you gave Him your word...' "Do to me just as you have promised."

### **Judges 11:38-40**

They could have been celebrating a victory, but instead they mourned over the loss of Jephthah's daughter all because of Jephthah's unwise vow.

We might like to think that God is impressed with what we're willing to part with... for His sake. ... Maybe... we think... in light of our level of commitment... He will give us what we want. ... We tend to think like this... whenever we see God as... "the Great Withholder": He certainly has the ability to give... but instead... He chooses to withhold what is obviously a good thing from us. ... That is what leads to... our feeling compelled to prove ourselves to God... in order to pry from Him what we want.

(But let me tell you something...) Our Jephthah-like devotion doesn't impress God! ... On the contrary... it tends to harm those who are closest to us. ... Some... for example... in supposed devotion to the Lord... sacrifice their marriage or their families. ... They transfer their obligations... as spouses or as parents... to the supposedly greater obligation to serve God in the world. ... How many children of a church leader... grow up to resent the church... because one or both of their parents gave everything to the church... and so little to them? ... Was that ministry leader devoting himself / herself to the Lord... or to their own ambitions?

For some... in Christian service... apparent victories for the Lord represent not a triumph... but a folly. ... I am grateful for all the work that is done by the ministry leaders in our church... but I am even more grateful... when their service is done without a costly sacrifice on their families.

Another significant take-away from our passage this morning is this... Jephthah and his daughter kept the unwise vow. ... They did not trifle with it. ... It was a rash behavior... to be sure... but it was not an idle promise made to a God Who doesn't care whether or not we keep our word.

The Word of God has some severe and sharp things to say relative to making a vow.

**Ecclesiastes 5:2, 4-5 (ESV)**

*<sup>2</sup> Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. <sup>4</sup> When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. <sup>5</sup> It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.*

Many Churches will offer their worshippers to go through a little ceremony. Perhaps they will ask if anyone is ready to go down to an altar after a sermon... where they will pray with spiritual leaders... and dedicate themselves to God. ... (We sometimes do that here... but not that often.) ... You see... I believe that we can coerce folks into dedicating and dedicating themselves... until it actually smells to high heaven! ... God says, "Don't be rash..." ... He says that you are a fool if you make a vow to Him carelessly. Please think that over... at the next dedication service we might offer. ... Don't rush down to the altar and offer God anything... if you don't mean what you are saying. ... Jephthah had a sweet... lovely daughter... and he

wanted her to marry and have children. ... He unwittingly dedicated her to the Lord... but he kept his vow.

Have you made a vow to God? If you have, He wants you to keep it. Jephthah should be a lesson to us today.

How dependable are the statements you make? ... Do your children... friends... and fellow workers know you to be a person of your word? ... The measure of your trustworthiness... is your willingness to take responsibility... even if you must pay a painful price because of something you said.

Let me ask... "How dependable are your statements?" ... If you say you are going to do something... do you do it? ... If you can't keep your promises... don't make them! ... Parents... if you tell your children they will be punished if they disobey your commands... then keep your word or else they will be nothing but idle threats. ... (For all of us...) If you tell someone you will be somewhere at a certain time... then be there by that time. ... If you are going to be late then notify them if possible. ... Keep your word! ... AND Keep your word especially to the Lord. ... Have you made a commitment to serve the body of Christ (in your church) ... but you face challenges and difficulties that you didn't expect when you signed up for it...? ... Keep your word. ... God doesn't want promises for the future... He wants our obedience TODAY!

I'll close with this quote from author, speaker, and seminary professor, Lewis Smeads...

*Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God.*

*What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.*

*When a person makes a promise, she stakes a claim on her personal freedom and power.*

*When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future.*