

Week 13 - The Outcast and the Opportunists - Judges 10:17-11:28

Scripture Reading: Psalm 125:1-5

Introduction

As we begin this morning, we want to recall how we saw God become exasperated with Israel's repeated unfaithfulness to the degree that he vowed to save them no more [Judges 10:13] and sarcastically told them to go to the gods they had chosen and appeal to them for deliverance [Judges 10:14]

The people of Israel were in pain, so they cried out and checked all the "right" boxes but God knows their heart

They repented, but their repentance was superficial, and they "served God," but it was only token service to appease God until he got them out of the jam they found themselves in

And God had finally had enough of that same old song and dance that Israel had been performing for hundreds of years

Without a doubt, God is longsuffering with his people, but even God has a limit to his patience

And when his people insist on going their own way, he can leave them to their own devices for a time

While God is never truly absent and never abdicates his sovereignty, there are times when he steps back and ceases to actively work in the lives of his people as he allows them to try out their schemes and strategies on their own

God will only put up with just so much manipulation from his people, and when he reaches his limit, he will prove to them that he isn't a cosmic vending machine where they can insert a token and know they will receive his favor

And the last word we saw two Sundays ago was that God had become impatient with Israel and her cycles of misery [Judges 10:16]

As we pick up our passage today, we will see the results of God's impatience as God follows through on his pronouncement that he would no longer help Israel

In verse 17 [Judges 10:17], we see the need for a deliverer arise once more as the Ammonite army was summoned to battle and set up its position in Gilead and, in a counter move, the Israelite troops set up their camp in Mizpah of Gilead

So we have the picture of two opposing armies encamped against each other, preparing to do battle

It's at that point the leaders, that is to say, the elders of Gilead, look at one another and ask a question that reminds us of the question from way back in the very first verse of the book of Judges [Judges 10:18a]

"Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites?"

Things were quite different back in Judges 1:1 though

Back then, Israel was united in inquiring of the Lord, showing that they were in submission to God and desirous of knowing his will

But this time, there is no indication of unity as Gilead acts alone and their question isn't directed to God

There is no real strategy or plan involved, and the decision appears to be made by the leaders of Gilead with absolutely no consideration given to God or God's will

They simply look for a volunteer with the enticing promise that whoever steps forward will be given leadership over the entire region - they aren't picky; literally anyone will do

We've already seen what comes from leadership that's based on personal ambition when we looked at the account of Abimelech

There we saw how being power-hungry rather than service-minded led to sad results

But it appears the leaders of Gilead didn't heed that lesson as they ignored God and made the thoroughly secular decision to rely on their own wits and resources to try to solve their problem - and so the scene is set

At this point, the author interrupts the narrative to introduce us to Jephthah, who will be the main focus of the account

I. Jephthah, the outcast

Let's look at **Judges 11:1-3** together:

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, "You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.

First, we see that Jephthah was a true Gileadite

Technically, Gilead is a geographic designation, but the name was also used to designate the people who came from the region

We see also that Jephthah's father bore the same name as the region or clan, which indicates that he was a person of nobility, but we also learn that his mother was a prostitute who is left unnamed

So, once again, we have to confront the extent to which Israel has fallen into Canaanite practices

Since we don't know the name of Jephthah's mother, we can't ascertain whether she was an Israelite or a Canaanite - but either is equally possible given the circumstances, and either option presents real problems

If she was an Israelite, we see the violation of the law against Jewish women becoming prostitutes from Leviticus 19:29

If she was a Canaanite, we see the violation of God's prohibition of having sexual relations with Canaanites from Exodus 34:15-16 and Deuteronomy 7:1-5

And if she were a prostitute who plied her trade as a part of the worship at one of the Canaanite cult centers, things would be even worse because Gilead would then have been a patron of the Canaanite religious establishment

And we haven't even faced the core question of why Jephthah's father would be visiting prostitutes at all

All we can say for sure is that visiting prostitutes was a regular practice among the Canaanite people - it was part of their religion - and Israel was becoming more like Canaan with each passing day

We can say something positive about Jephthah's father, though; Gilead adopted Jephthah and brought him into his household as a son

We can deduce that because of what we read about how Jephthah's half-brothers treated him after they grew up

Motivated by greed, they expelled him from the family and drove him away to live in another place

They told him that he would not have an inheritance in "their" father's house because he was the son of another woman

But that was a violation not only of God's commands to love the outsider and to love one another but also of Israelite inheritance law, which depended not on the mother but on the father

And the question of inheritance would have only been an issue if Gilead had legally adopted Jephthah

That means that Jephthah's half-brothers would have needed to go to the leaders and get a legally binding decision from them that Jephthah wasn't entitled to his portion of the inheritance

His being the son of a prostitute gave them a reason for kicking him out, but the leaders provided them with the ability to carry out their plan

And that gives us some insight as to why things play out as they do when we see those same leaders go to Jephthah to enlist his help in just a little while

But for now, we see that Jephthah was expelled from his father's household, and he fled to a place called Tob, where he surrounded himself with "worthless fellows"

That's the exact verbiage that was used to describe Abimelech's band of followers

Jephthah was a man born of a prostitute, once accepted but now rejected and expelled by his family, a man without a home or a future

So Jephthah became what we might call a gang leader today

Suffice it to say, Jephthah was no Robin Hood stealing from the rich to give to the poor - far from it

He was a bandit, a brigand, a warlord of sorts who fearlessly led raiding parties throughout the region, and he became known for his prowess as a mighty warrior

And a mighty warrior would prove to be just what the leaders of Gilead needed when the Ammonites showed up to pick a fight with them

After the three-verse segue to introduce us to Jephthah, our author gets back to narrating the events surrounding the imminent battle with the Ammonites, and we will see the level of opportunism we are dealing with here

II. Opportunists all around

If you've ever had to eat a big ol' slice of humble pie;

If you've ever rejected someone's advice or offer of help, or maybe you mistreated or talked badly about someone only to have to turn to them for help

If that has ever happened to you, you might identify, at least in part, with the leaders of Gilead here

Remember, they had ruled against Jephthah and given his half-brothers the legal cover they needed to kick him out and deny him his rightful portion of his father's inheritance - I doubt they relished having to ask him for his help

Verse 4 begins with the phrase "After a time" which is rather ambiguous

But I suspect it was enough time for the leaders of Gilead to have put out the call for someone - literally anyone - to come and lead the fight against the Ammonites

Remember in **Judges 10:18** they didn't have a plan and they basically said "whoever" steps forward to lead we will make head over the region

But no one volunteered

And the Ammonites were in their faces snorting and pawing the ground, so they had to do something

And in verse 5 [**Judges 11:5**] we read, "*the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob*"

Oh, how it had to hurt to go to the one they had rejected to ask for help!

But go they did and, while they were empowered to offer rule over the region of Gilead, they started by offering considerably less

There is a subtlety in the verbiage here that we could easily read right past so we want to take the time to notice it

In Judges 10:18 we see the English word "head" which translates the Hebrew word meaning headship or full leadership

But now, in **Judges 11:6**, we see the leaders of Gilead ask Jephthah to come be their "leader" meaning our *military* leader - our leader *in battle* - in modern terms, they offered to make him a general rather than president

They offered Jephthah less than they had made available to those they considered more worthy citizens of Gilead - they cunningly tried to hire him at a discount

You can kind of understand their logic

I mean, it was bad enough to be forced to go hat in hand to the one you had wrongly rejected to ask for help and to offer him leadership of the army for the battle - but being subjected to his broader and more permanent headship was a thing best avoided, if possible

But the leaders of Gilead weren't the only opportunists involved

Jephthah was no dummy and he readily recognized that he had the upper hand in these negotiations

After all, the leaders needed him a whole lot more than he needed them

So he made them squirm a bit as he played hard to get

Notice also how closely his response parallels God's response to Israel when they came to him in chapter 10

Jephthah began his response to their offer in verse 7 by reminding them how they had shown hatred toward him and had driven him out of his father's house

And he asks why he should allow them to use him like a tool now that they are in trouble

When the leaders answer in verse 8, they seem to realize they are going to have to go all-in if they are going to have a hope of convincing Jephthah to go along with their request so they offer him the deal they had previously withheld

And they switch back to the original deal and offer Jephthah the headship over Gilead

To which Jephthah, much like Abimelech did, sought reassurance that the leaders would truly do as they had said

And when he invokes the name of the Lord it sounds like a proper, pious thing to do but it merely masks his self-interest

Jephthah could see just how desperate the leaders of Gilead were so he determined to wring as much as he could out of the contract demanding not only full reinstatement to Gilead society and command status but headship

Jephthah had them at his mercy

And so, left with no other options, the leaders of Gilead appealed to God as a witness to their promise

With that, Jephthah was finally satisfied so he travelled with the leaders to Mizpah in Gilead to ratify their agreement "before the Lord" and, presumably, before the Israelite military that was garrisoned there

And swearing to the oath of office, Jephthah officially became the commander and head over Gilead

As readers, we are left with several questions the chief of which concerns God's part in the selection of Jephthah

Our author doesn't include the typical verbiage about God raising Jephthah and God is relegated to the role of being a silent witness to what is nothing more than a human contract between desperate leaders and an ambitious warrior

We can't help but wonder what part God will play as the drama unfolds since he had just declared that he wouldn't allow himself to be used by Israel and would not help them

And the fact that the leaders and Jephthah didn't hesitate to use the name of God to seal their agreement has a definite manipulative aura about it -

Remember, there was no inquiry to determine God's will in the matter of a deliverer and the leaders were content to solve the issue on their own and were willing to give headship to "whomever" responded to their call for a leader

And there is absolutely no indication of devotion to God or submission to God on the part of Jephthah - he's portrayed as only being self-serving and opportunistic - hardly the marks of a servant of God

So the invoking of God's name here seems more like cynical lip-service than genuine devotion and a desire to do God's will by either party

We can only conclude that, so far, this has been a purely human endeavor

And our author seems determined to underscore the human element as he turns next to detail Jephthah's immediate actions after he ascends to power

In the remainder of our passage this morning we see Jephthah the mighty warrior do everything he can to settle things with the Ammonites in a peaceful manner as he shows himself to be a skilled negotiator also

III. Jephthah the negotiator

Unlike Abimelech who rushed to settle matters by meting out violence against his own people, Jephthah first tries his hand at diplomacy with the foreigners who were threatening Israel

In verse 12 we see Jephthah behave very much like a king as he sent representatives to negotiate directly with the king of the Ammonites

And he framed the matters as if they were personal issues between him and the Ammonite king - he even referred to the disputed region as "my land"

He opened the negotiations with a rhetorical question that was intended to cause uncertainty and confusion in the mind of the Ammonite king and leave him with the sense that he is responsible for any ensuing consequences

The way he frames the opening question shows how he sees himself as he frames the issue as a personal matter between two equals [Judges 11:12] *"What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?"*

Jephthah obviously saw himself as the one in charge as he had no trouble taking on the mantle of leadership and confronting the Ammonite ruler

The Ammonite king's response is a classic example of revisionist history as he makes the false claim that the Israelites had stolen land from him and he was only reclaiming what was rightfully his

And he tells Jephthah that if he will surrender the disputed territory there will be no need for an armed conflict

Jephthah received the king's message and resent his envoys with his reply - a reply that shows that Jephthah knows his history and is not about to be fooled by the Ammonite king's desire for more land

His reply begins with the statement that Israel had not taken land belonging to either Moab or Ammon before making successive arguments from four different perspectives

Jephthah's reply is actually quite remarkable for its length, detail, and sophistication and it shows that he was far more than a mighty warrior

First he argued from an **historical** perspective as he recounted the actual events of Israel's journey from Egypt and how they came to possess the territory by taking it as spoils of war when the Amorites came out to fight against them

The two names are close but the disputed territory never belonged to the Ammonites - it belonged to the Amorites and Israel had won it fairly in battle

Then he turned to argue from a **theological** perspective as he claimed that God had given them the victory and the land that came with it so of course they possessed it

And he made that seem only reasonable by asking if the Ammonite king wouldn't possess land that his god, Chemosh, gave to him

Then Jephthah got **personal** with the king asking him, basically, who he thought he was

After all, the king of Moab had never disputed with Israel because he knew that Israel had only taken land they had won fairly from the Amorites - and he asked whether he thought he knew better than the Moabite king

And he finished with a **chronological** argument as he basically said that, even if what the Ammonite king claimed was true, the statute of limitations had run out long ago

Jephthah concluded with the statement that Israel had not sinned against Ammon and the Ammonites were doing wrong by declaring war on Israel - of course, he framed all that in personal and not nationalistic terms but that was his message

And he called upon God to judge the rightness of his claims

But the Ammonite king wasn't persuaded - he was stubborn and eager to flex his muscles

His desire was to expand his territory and he wasn't about to be dissuaded from his established course - war was inevitable

We'll look at the battle that follows when we conclude our study of Jephthah next week

Conclusion

Our passage this morning is filled with unsavory characters

The elders of Gilead are shown to be unscrupulous, irreligious power brokers

At no point are we told that they inquired of the Lord or that they truly considered the Lord at all as they sought someone to lead their forces into battle

They were willing to elevate "whomever" answered their call with seemingly no regard for who or what they were

We saw how they dealt with Jephthah unjustly in siding with his half-brothers in their quest to disinherit Jephthah and how they sat silently by as he was banished to another place

Then we saw how they quickly reneged on that decision, turned on the brothers, and reinstated Jephthah when they needed him to bail them out and how they tried to hire Jephthah at a bargain rate

We still see people like those leaders today

Only they tend to be held up as a standard of excellence - as single-minded individuals who focus on what they want and will get it at any cost

While I have to admit that those kinds of people tend to take great strides for society, it saddens me when I read about people who have sacrificed everything and everyone on the altar of their success

But it's even more tragic when we have to acknowledge that raw opportunists also exist in the church

Peter warned us about them in 2Peter 2 when he wrote about modern-day Balaams who will do whatever they must to gain and maintain power

We know that self-serving attitudes are a direct violation of Scripture as Paul wrote to the Philippians [**Phi 2:3**] that Christ-followers are to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit" but to be humble and elevate others

We can suffice it to say that there is nothing admirable or praiseworthy about the elders of Gilead

Jephthah doesn't seem any better

At first, we might well feel a little sorry for him - he was treated unjustly for something he had no control over

It's hard to see someone who is wronged by family and the authorities

But he proves to be just as opportunistic and self-serving as the elders

Actually, the elders get the kind of leader they deserve and vice versa as they are really like peas in a pod

Jephthah does seem to show a hint of spiritual sensitivity as he invokes the name of God in his dealings with the elders but, in the end, it seems to be more a case of anointing one's own plans with some "God talk" to try to sanctify them

And we are prone to do the same today

I'm amazed how often people can attribute God's leading to the plans they have made without considering or consulting God

We too like to assume God's will must be present in our decision simply because God lets us have our way

But God's silence and passivity in letting us take the bit in our teeth is not an endorsement - it can actually be a sign that things are terribly amiss

And that God, in allowing us to have our way and reap the consequences, is drawing us back to him

Jephthah also utters an orthodox statement at the end of his argument to the Ammonite king when he says that God will judge between Israel and Ammon

But it seems that he does so more formulaically and incidentally than with any sense of true acknowledgement of who God is

God is the ultimate Judge and God's will will most certainly be done so Jephthah is correct in describing God's role and, if he is sincere, in committing the entire affair to God

But, in that same argument, he makes a grievous error showing that he doesn't have an orthodox theology at all

At best, he's theologically inaccurate and, at worst, he's theologically ignorant because he equates God with the false god Chemosh and attributes the same powers to each

We might well be tempted to chalk this "error" up to simply speaking conversationally in a way that the king of Ammon would understand except for the fact that what we will see next week shows us Jephthah doesn't really understand God

Today, many people have their eyes glaze over as they tune out whenever theology is mentioned

But theological ignorance and error has taken a devastating toll on our churches as we see individual believers, churches, and denominations embrace unorthodox views and movements

The kinds of errors we're seeing embraced today used to be reserved for the cults but they are steadily becoming mainstream as knowledge of God's Word declines in favor of human philosophy and social acceptance

Just like Israel did while in the midst of the Canaanites

Wrong orthodoxy always leads to wrong orthopraxy - or, in plain English, wrong beliefs lead to wrong behaviors

Every time

Jephthah's equating of the worship of God to the worship of Chemosh is going to bear tragic fruit for him and the same is true in any generation

Let's end by bringing the focus back to God and what we can learn about him from this passage

There are times in the lives of God's people when he finds it necessary to withdraw and become passive

But, while there are times when God isn't actively working, choosing instead to allow his people to attempt to handle things as they see fit, that doesn't mean that he isn't present and in control

The Lord has promised to never leave nor forsake his people - and that promise is still in force today

But God refuses to be treated as a vending machine into which we can slip a token and receive a blessing

He won't be manipulated into dancing to our tune every time we turn on the music

And God often allows his children to go their own way, to try things on their own, and to reap the consequences

Nevertheless, God is still on his throne and will accomplish his sovereign will in spite of our wrong motives and intents

We should rejoice in that knowledge and redouble our allegiance and devotion to God

The Jephthah narrative is a challenging one to be sure and it's only going to get worse next week as we are going to be looking at an occurrence that is difficult to contemplate and order our thoughts around

I encourage you to read through the remainder of chapter 11 up to chapter 12:7 to familiarize yourself with the rest of Jephthah's story

Let's pray