

## Week 14 - Manipulation-Misery-Massacre - Judges 11:29-12:7

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 1:1-8

#### Introduction

This morning we are going to take up the remainder of the Jephthah narrative

As I told you last week, this is a difficult passage, and if you have read through the passage as I recommended, I'm sure it left you with several questions and more than a bit of unease

At least, I hope it did because any sane and rational person would be disturbed by the main focus of our passage - Jephthah's vow and its subsequent fulfillment

But we don't want to get ahead of ourselves, so let's set the scene as we pick up the account

In Judges 10, we saw God grow weary of Israel's continual waywardness, crying out in pain, repentance, and re-offense after God had delivered them from the pain of the oppressors that God had sent to drive them back to him

And in **Judges 10:11-14** we read God's reply to their latest cry for deliverance:

*And the Lord said to the people of Israel, "Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress."*

Then last week, we saw the Ammonites stage their army to go to war with Gilead, causing the leaders of Gilead to seek someone, literally anyone, to lead them into battle with the offer of headship over the region as payment

God was absent from the selection of Jephthah and the subsequent negotiations between him and the elders of Gilead - it was a purely human concept and contract - and God was relegated to the role of being a silent witness between them

But, in the end, we saw how the elders ultimately struck a deal with the outcast and mighty warrior, Jephthah, who then tried the diplomatic approach to settle the dispute with the king of Ammon to avoid an armed conflict

However, the king of Ammon was intractable in his desire to go to war, and we were left with a battle looming and the question of how God would respond to this threat - Would God *really* refuse to intervene?

Some of you complained about me ending last week's sermon with a cliffhanger and protested that you wanted to hear the rest of the story

Well, as the late Paul Harvey used to say, "Now, for the rest of the story."

As we pick up the account in verse 29 [**Judges 11:29a**], we get the answer to our question as to whether God will truly remain on the sidelines or whether he will intervene on Israel's behalf as we read:

*Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah*

The way that phrase is written, it seems that at the moment Jephthah's diplomacy failed, he received the same kind of divine empowerment experienced by the earlier judges

So, for the first time in this narrative, God becomes active in the whole affair as he reaches out in mercy and graciously empowers the leader who was chosen without his involvement or endorsement and made Jephthah into his deliverer

We can't know whether Jephthah was aware of the Holy Spirit's empowerment in any way, but the way the subsequent details are related, it appears that he was motivated by the Spirit to tour the region

We aren't told what the purpose of Jephthah's travels was, but it seems safe to assume that he was doing as Gideon had done previously and was blowing the trumpet throughout the land to summon all able-bodied men to take up arms

That seems to be a reasonable assumption, as we will see when we get to the opening verses of chapter 12 in a little while, but we aren't told here *why* Jephthah did what he did, as our author only seems concerned with his movements

And after making his circuit through the region, Jephthah returned to face the Ammonites at Mizpah of Gilead

However, just when we expect to read that the battle was enjoined, we see Jephthah do something that many people also do when facing a crisis, he made a vow to God

## **I. Jephthah's manipulative vow**

Look with me at verses 30-31 [Judges 11:30-31]

*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 I will offer it up for a burnt offering."*

This is the first and only time that Jephthah is recorded as speaking directly to God, and when he does, he tries to manipulate God for personal gain

First, we saw him negotiate successfully with the elders of Gilead when he had the upper hand

Then we saw him fail to avoid confrontation with the Ammonites through diplomatic negotiation

And now he tries to secure victory from God by making a promise that will prove to be rash and ill-considered

But I want you to notice the downward trend of his effectiveness in these negotiations

With the elders, Jephthah got everything he wanted; with the Ammonites, he received a verbal refusal, but with God, his bargaining was met with silence

Our author doesn't even record that God graced Jephthah's attempted manipulation with a refusal suggesting that God held whole idea in contempt

Let's take a few minutes to look at Jephthah's vow to see if we can discern why God viewed it with such scorn

Structurally, the vow is the same as four other vows we find in the Old Testament:

Jacob's vow in Genesis 28:20-22; Israel's vow in Numbers 21:2; Hannah's vow in 1Samuel 1:11; and Absalom's vow in 2Samuel 15:7-8 so, on the surface, it seems okay

But Jephthah's vow reveals some fundamental flaws in his character

**First**, his vow was completely self-serving

Jephthah knew that everything he had negotiated for hung on whether or not he was victorious in battle

If he failed to defeat the Ammonites, the elders would abandon him in a heartbeat - so he was desperate to ensure that God didn't abandon him

**Second**, we see that, in spite of his earlier bold pronouncement of reliance on God's righteous judgment in Judges 10:27, Jephthah still harbored doubts and he decided to try to sweeten the deal with God to ensure his victory

For all of Jephthah's outward bravado, we see that he isn't really all that certain about God and God's justice

However, an even larger issue concerns what it was that Jephthah vowed to God

Admittedly, there is some ambiguity in the original Hebrew of this verse and the word translated as "whatever" can also mean "whoever" and the word "it" can mean "they"

So it's understandable why most of our English language versions chose the more generous term that allows for Jephthah to have had an animal in mind when he made the vow - that certainly is the more palatable option for us

You'll notice that our ESV Bible has footnotes attached to this verse that allow for the human interpretation and the NET Bible goes all the way and renders the verse:

*Then whoever is the first to come through the doors of my house to meet me when I return safely from fighting the Ammonites - he will belong to the Lord and I will offer him up as a burnt sacrifice.*

It's rather distasteful but I believe that is the correct way to interpret the text - Jephthah intended to render a human sacrifice on his successful return

While it's true that people did keep some domestic animals in a room in their homes in those days, logic and custom tell us that it wouldn't be an animal that would run forth to greet a returning hero

I believe this is evidence of just how paganized Jephthah had become - he was for all practical purposes a Canaanite Remember that in Judges 10:6 our author has already stated how the people of Israel were worshipping a whole list of pagan gods and the worshippers of those gods are known to have been practitioners of human sacrifice

**2Kings 3:27** records how the king of Moab offered his son as a burnt offering in an attempt to sway the course of a battle back to his favor

I believe Jephthah was so thoroughly Canaanized and so determined to gain victory that he vowed to offer up a human sacrifice in the hope of securing a divine guarantee

And, while he will express shock and dismay when he sees his daughter rush forth to greet him, the wording of his vow envisages children rushing forth exuberantly to greet a father who has returned from being away

We'll look at the details of his return in just a little bit

For now, we need to see that resorting to vows in an attempt to get God to do what one wants is pure manipulation And resorting to manipulation reveals a fundamental lack of understanding about who God is and our relationship to him

As Christ-followers we must never fall into the error that we can bargain with God and buy him off

And isn't that what making vows is when we get right down to it? - offering to trade our future performance for God's performance on our behalf right now

God acts on the basis of his character and we cannot obligate God to act on our behalf and, while we should always feel free to make our requests known to God, our prayers must end as Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane ended:

[**Matthew 26:39**] *"Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."*

Secure in the knowledge that our loving, gracious, merciful, and just God will do what is ultimately the best for us

If someone were to have asked Jephthah whether his mistaken ideas about God were the product of ignorance or apathy he might well have responded, "I don't know and I don't care."

But his lack of understanding would prove to result in misery for him and others

## **II. The fruit of misunderstanding is misery**

When our author finally gets around to relating the battle, he does so very succinctly

Almost as if he's in a hurry to get to the remainder of the account, he simply states that Jephthah engaged the Ammonites in battle and the scope of the victory - just as we have seen in the past

But he is also very careful to give credit where credit is due lest we attribute the success to Jephthah's prowess as a mighty warrior saying "The Lord gave [the Ammonites] into his hand" and the Ammonites were subdued

Of course, the obvious meaning is that God had subdued the Ammonites before Israel through Jephthah

Now, with that record-keeping detail out of the way, our author returns, in verse 34, to the narrative surrounding Jephthah's vow

He begins by creating tension as he portrays Jephthah as the conquering hero returning home from battle

Then he suddenly turns the camera to focus on Jephthah's daughter as she emerges from the house, dancing with her tambourines in hand

As a dad who often came home from work to have his two daughters run to greet him, I can easily picture the scene  
 To the Israelites of Gilead, Jephthah may have been celebrated solely for his victory, but to this young girl being her  
 daddy made him hero enough in her eyes

And then, as if that image isn't devastating enough to the reader, our author adds the detail that she was an only child  
 and he makes certain we can't miss the point by saying it again in another way

Allow that image to linger in your mind for a bit and then put yourself in Jephthah's place as the reality of what he has  
 done smashes its way into his consciousness

Jephthah's name means "he opens"

Throughout the account, the thing it seems Jephthah has opened the most has been his mouth as he has negotiated and  
 bargained with everyone he encountered

And now he is portrayed as the victim of his own rash promise to God

And for just a moment we are made to feel sorry for him as the horror sinks in and he tears his clothing and cries out  
 "Oh no! Not my daughter!"

But it's only for a moment because Jephthah quickly reveals just what kind of man he is

His concern wasn't for his daughter but for himself

And he actually blames his young, innocent daughter as he tells her *"You have brought me very low, and you have  
 become the cause of great trouble to me."*

Despicable seems like too mild a word to describe Jephthah

He had tried to manipulate the Lord into giving him victory in battle in order to preserve his status by promising a human  
 sacrifice in return - and he was willing to sacrifice someone who wasn't involved in the affair - an innocent

And now he blames the one who only wanted to honor her father with an exuberant greeting!

And in the last phrase of verse 35 we see him shrug his shoulders in resignation as he tells her he made a vow to God  
 that he cannot break

I can only imagine the feelings that her father's accusation and the recognition of what he was saying had on her

But here's the thing - without him elaborating, she instinctively knew what her father had promised

That's another clue that tells me that Jephthah intended to promise a human sacrifice in return for victory - it was simply  
 a part of the culture they had acclimated to

In her response we see a stark contrast between her and her father as she courageously and dutifully tells her father to  
 do what he had vowed asking only for time to weep with her friends in order to soften the blow

Jephthah granted her request and, at the end of the allotted two months, she returned and Jephthah fulfilled his vow

And with the words, [her father] "did with her according to the vow that he had made," our author records the absolute  
 horror that an Israelite actually sacrificed his child to God as a whole burnt offering

And so, Jephthah, a man concerned solely with his present status, made certain that his family line would end with him

No memorials were erected for Jephthah in Israel but we're told that the memory of his daughter was memorialized for  
 four days each year as the women in the region lamented her

What makes this whole matter so incredibly sad is that it all came about because Jephthah didn't know God

In his diplomatic argument that he presented to the king of Ammon, Jephthah showed a remarkable knowledge about  
 Israel's history

How much better off he would have been if he had only spent at least as much time with his Bible as he did his history book

If he had, he would have known that God doesn't desire or even permit human sacrifice

There are several passages we could look at to see this but **Deuteronomy 12:31** is very clear saying this of the way the Canaanites worshipped their gods:

*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 daughters in the fire to their gods.*

And had Jephthah had more familiarity with God's Word he would have known he had a way out of his vow

To be sure, a vow is a serious matter and to not fulfill a vow is sin

Looking to Deuteronomy again we read in **Deuteronomy 23:21** -

*If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay in fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.*

So Jephthah was correct in taking his vow to God seriously but he once again demonstrates his ignorance of God's Word

See, in Leviticus 27 God gave all manner of regulations concerning vows

And because God knows of our propensity to make rash vows we later regret, he made provision whereby a person could redeem the person or thing committed by a vow

And in **Leviticus 27:1-8** we read the following:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, If anyone makes a special vow to the Lord involving the valuation of persons, then the valuation of a male from twenty years old up to sixty years old shall be fifty shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary. If the person is a female, the valuation shall be thirty shekels. If the person is from five years old up to twenty years old, the valuation shall be for a male twenty shekels, and for a female ten shekels. If the person is from a month old up to five years old, the valuation shall be for a male five shekels of silver, and for a female the valuation shall be three shekels of silver. And if the person is sixty years old or over, then the valuation for a male shall be fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels. And if someone is too poor to pay the valuation, then he shall be made to stand before the priest, and the priest shall value him; the priest shall value him according to what the vower can afford.*

Jephthah could have purchased back the life of his daughter for the price of either 10 shekels of silver or maybe 30 if she was older - and perhaps even less if he couldn't afford that - she didn't need to die upon a sacrificial pyre

While I can't say with certainty that Jephthah didn't know that God forbid human sacrifice and wouldn't be pleased by it

Or that he didn't know about the provision for redeeming a person from a rash vow

I prefer to think that his actions were born of ignorance simply because the thought that they were born of apathy is far more difficult to contemplate

Because, if he knew God's Word and God's Law and disregarded it to do otherwise, that's a whole other thing

Whatever the cause, Jephthah has navigated the personal crisis he created for himself but as chapter 12 begins we see that his problems weren't over just yet and that he must face a national crisis brought on by his victory over Ammon

As in Judges 12:1, we see the men of Ephraim show up armed and spoiling for a fight

### **III. Jephthah's massacre of Ephraim**

We've seen this exact same behavior from Ephraim before when they angrily confronted Gideon back in Judges 8

There's a pattern here of Ephraim showing up after a successful military campaign has been waged to complain about not being invited to the fight

However, this time they seem even more hostile and, instead of congratulating Jephthah and thanking him for successfully eliminating the Ammonite threat, they threaten to burn his house down with him inside

All because they felt slighted and their pride had been wounded

So we see Jephthah, a man of words, try to talk his way out of another crisis

We lose a great deal of the flavor of Jephthah's speech in most English translations as they frame his opening remark as a great dispute between his people and the Ammonites

What Jephthah actually said in the Hebrew was, "I have been a man of great strife" or a "man of contention"

And Jephthah's life has been marked by contention

First, he contended with his own family, then he contended with his tribe, then he contended with Ammon, and now he is in the midst of a contention with Ephraim

And, although Ephraim doesn't know it yet, they have met their match when it comes to being contentious

Jephthah then claims, most likely falsely, that he had summoned Ephraim to join the fight but they failed to respond

He congratulates himself for his own initiative and courage in seizing the moment and taking the fight to Ammon

And, of course, he slipped in the formulaic acknowledgement of God's part in the victory before rebuking the Ephraimites for threatening him

In response, the Ephraimites hurled an insult at the Gileadites, and Jephthah in particular; basically calling them "outsiders" or "refugees" and the fight was on

Now we come to the best known part of this scene - the verbal test of saying "Shibboleth"

Asking a person from Ephraim to say Shibboleth would be akin to us asking a person from Boston to say "lobster"

Their pronunciation of the word as "lobstah" would reveal their origins quite quickly

Likewise, any fleeing Ephraimite would pronounce Shibboleth as "sibboleth" and be discovered as they tried to sneak over the border hidden amongst a crowd of travelers

It's somewhat ironic to recall that we have seen Ephraim twice use the same fjords to trap and eliminate their enemies and now they fall victim to the same tactic

And, in the end, our author records that the troops of Gilead killed 42,000 of their kinsmen

So we see that Israel not only continues to become more like Canaan; their national unity has also begun to seriously unravel and, as we continue our study, we will see the bonds of kinship come completely undone

This has been a regional dispute and victory where Gilead acted alone and in their interest alone and now it has turned into inter-tribal warfare within Israel

So it should come as no surprise that the close of the Jephthah narrative mentions no peace coming to Israel as a result of his deliverance

We read only that Jephthah judged or ruled Israel for six years before he died and was buried in his city in Gilead

But we also want to note that our author is careful to remind us that Jephthah was a Gileadite to emphasize that his impact was most likely limited to his region

The account of Jephthah is a tragic one on so many levels and we might well wonder what lessons we can take from it

## Conclusion

Once we recognize that Jephthah serves as an example of just how far Israel has fallen into apostasy, we can see some cautions

One that comes immediately to mind is the necessity of knowing who God is through familiarity with his Word. God has revealed to us who he is and what pleases and displeases him in the pages of the Bible and, as we saw in our Scripture reading this morning, the person who delights in God's Word and meditates on it day and night will prosper. Sadly, Jephthah shows us the converse of that corollary as his ignorance or perhaps his indifference resulted in great tragedy for him and those around him.

A second lesson from this passage has to do with the folly of trying to manipulate God.

Jephthah's vow was a blatant attempt to bribe God into assuring his victory and securing his headship over Gilead. Again, God will not be manipulated, God will not be bought, and we can't "strong arm" God or coerce him into acting. God acts according to his character and his sovereign will and we can't presume that he must meet our needs as we see them or expect him to comply with our self-centered plans and agendas.

As Christ-followers, we need to be aware of when we are tempted to pressure God to act in a certain way or in a certain timeframe because that exasperates God.

Instead, we must simply ask for what we want - even to the point of passionately and intensely asking - to the point we sweat blood if necessary - while accepting his will in all matters.

A third lesson we can take from the Jephthah narrative concerns the need to manage our mouths.

In his letter, James talks a great deal about the power of the tongue and the need to have mastery over it. Jephthah is a poster boy for the warning about the power of one's words and how they reveal what a person is inside. Those are three lessons we can personally apply to our lives - but we also learn some things about God too.

God is silent throughout this entire narrative indicating his displeasure with Israel.

Still, it's interesting that he leaves them to their own devices internally while continuing to protect them from external threats.

God stood silently by as Jephthah was chosen and elevated, he only watched as Jephthah negotiated, he didn't intervene when Jephthah committed pedicide or when he slaughtered the Ephraimites.

But he did deliver the Ammonites into Jephthah's hands and we can't help but see that he did so purely out of love and grace and mercy and not because Israel was deserving in any way.

It's appropriate that we have come to this passage on a Sunday when we are observing the ordinance of the Lord's Table because there are parallels here that we dare not miss.

God sent his Son to die for us not because we deserve it but because of that same love, grace, and mercy that he showed to Israel in Jephthah's day.

And, like Jephthah's daughter, Jesus was an innocent who was sacrificed for others.

However, there is a huge difference in that Jesus was a willing sacrifice who gave himself for us.

Both were human sacrifices of a sort.

But, whereas the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter was the epitome of selfishness on Jephthah's part, the self-sacrifice of Jesus is the greatest expression of selfless love this world has ever known -

Consider that as you prepare to partake of the elements of Communion.

Let's pray.

**Psalm 1:1-8 (page 448)**

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.