

Jephthah: Rejected By Men- Used By God

Judges 11

James Braddock was down on his luck. Once he had been a successful amateur-turned-professional boxer. But a broken hand and the stock market crash of 1926 left Braddock destitute—struggling just to keep food on the table for his young family. Then, all of a sudden, Braddock’s luck began to change. Thanks to a last minute cancellation by another boxer, Braddock got a second chance. Out of shape and past his prime, Braddock was pitted against the number two contender in the world by promoters who saw Braddock as nothing more than a punching bag. Then, in one the greatest upsets in boxing history, Braddock stunned both experts and fans with a third round knockout of his formidable opponent. Fighting with permanent injuries to his hands, Braddock continued to win and before long he came to represent the hopes and aspirations of the American public coping with the Great Depression.

On June 13, 1935, in Long Island City, New York, Braddock, as a 10 to 1 underdog, won the heavyweight championship of the world from the seemingly invincible Max Baer. His fairytale-like rise from a poor local fighter to the heavyweight boxing champion of the world earned James J. Braddock the nickname “Cinderella Man.”

Both life and literature are overflowing with these “Cinderella Stories,” timeless tales about downtrodden, discarded outcasts who achieve greatness. Such is the story of a man named Jephthah.

The New Testament writer of the book of Hebrews writes a whole chapter on faith. He goes back to the Old Testament for illustrations of faith: great men like Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Moses. And summing it up in verse 32 he says, “**And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets.**” — Hebrews 11:32

In our study of the book of Judges we have already looked at some of these heroes of the faith: Barak and Gideon. Most of us know something about the stories of Samson and David, but what about this “Cinderella man” of faith called Jephthah?

I. Rejection by His Family

Look at what Judges says about Jephthah.

1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah.

2 Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman."

3 Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.

The first revelation we have concerning Jephthah is that he is “**a mighty man of valor**”, the same thing God said about Gideon. But mighty men of valor rarely come from a life of ease. And Jephthah certainly had a rough beginning. Jephthah’s father was named Gilead and the name Gilead means “rough”. That may explain the circumstance of Jephthah’s birth. His mother was a prostitute. Jephthah was the unplanned, illegitimate son of his parents.

Jephthah was not to blame for his birth, he had no say over who his mother was. But he sure suffered for the sins of his parents. Unfortunately, there are a far too many people in this world who know how Jephthah must have felt. One thing we all need to understand is that Jephthah, though unanticipated by his parents, was not an accident—and neither are you! Your birth was no mistake or mishap, and your life is no fluke of nature. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. He was not at all surprised by your birth. In fact, he expected it.

God never makes mistakes and he never does anything accidentally. The Bible says, **“Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them. How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them!”** (Psalm 139:16-17).

Someone has said, “there are no illegitimate children, just irresponsible parents.” Gilead may have been an adulterer, but at least he was a responsible father. At least Gilead acknowledged the boy and took him into his home. The other members of Gilead’s household, however, weren’t quite as open and accepting. His very presence in the home was a constant reminder of his father’s sin. I wonder what Gilead’s wife must have felt with that child in the home. Understandably, Jephthah didn’t win the approval of his half brothers and sisters. When these half brothers grew up, they chased Jephthah out of the country. They said, **“You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.”**

So Jephthah fled to Tob farther northeast from Gilead. It was probably here that Jephthah developed his reputation as a great warrior. Verse 3 says, **“Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.”**

Like David when he was later rejected by Saul, Jephthah led his band of misfits on raids of enemy territory. Jephthah is the Robin Hood of the Bible, taking what they needed and living like outlaws. As his following grew and word spread of their daring adventures.

II. Recruited to Save His People

Verse 4 takes us back to the crisis we saw develop in chapter 10.

4 It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel.

God’s people found themselves under the oppression of the Ammonites because they had abandoned the Lord and served other gods. We saw their repentance in chapter 10 and how they began looking for someone to deliver them from their enemies. So in this time of trouble Jephthah caught the attention of the elders of his old hometown.

5 And so it was, when the people of Ammon made war against Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob.

6 Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon."

Jephthah was understandably hesitant and perhaps a bit sarcastic in his reply.

7 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?"

The elders of Gilead who once rejected Jephthah, and ejected him out of the town, are now requesting that he returns as savior. I just wondered as I was studying this, whether or not Jephthah felt used. Then it made me wonder how God feels when we seem to drive Him out of our lives when things are going well, only to come running to Him when we are in trouble. Maybe that's why God will use a reject to deliver them, so we might see how we have rejected the Lord, but also how desperately we need Him to save us.

8 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the people of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

Look at Jephthah's reponse:

9 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the Lord delivers them to me, shall I be your head?"

Jephthah is not interested in just being their deliverer, he expects to be their ruler as well. Jephthah knew that if this was going to work he would have to have charge of them. Did you know that it's the same way with our savior, Jesus? Jesus did not come and die and be raised up just so that you could have your sins forgiven and get a free ticket to heaven. He came to be your Lord and Master. He must reign supreme in your life.

They respond to Jephthah in verse 10.

10 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The Lord will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words."

11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord in Mizpah.

So after getting their word that he will be given total discretion, Jephthah accepts the position of commander-in-chief. It's Jephthah's leadership style, though, that really sets him apart from any of Israel's previous commanding officers. Upon taking control of Israel's army, Jephthah attempt to avoid war by diplomacy. Jephthah sends a message to the king of the Ammonites:

III. Requested a Peaceful Solution

12 Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon, saying, "What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land?"

The Ammonite king was probably caught off guard by this and replied in verse 13:

13 And the king of the people of Ammon answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now therefore, restore those lands peaceably."

Jephthah then crafted a well thought out and through rejoinder to the king's demands.

14 So Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon,

- 15** and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: 'Israel did not take away the land of Moab, nor the land of the people of Ammon;
- 16** for when Israel came up from Egypt, they walked through the wilderness as far as the Red Sea and came to Kadesh.
- 17** Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, "Please let me pass through your land." But the king of Edom would not heed. And in like manner they sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained in Kadesh.
- 18** And they went along through the wilderness and bypassed the land of Edom and the land of Moab, came to the east side of the land of Moab, and encamped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the border of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab.
- 19** Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, "Please let us pass through your land into our place."
- 20** But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. So Sihon gathered all his people together, encamped in Jahaz, and fought against Israel.
- 21** And the Lord God of Israel delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. Thus Israel gained possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country.
- 22** They took possession of all the territory of the Amorites, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan.
- 23** And now the Lord God of Israel has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; should you then possess it?
- 24** Will you not possess whatever Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the Lord our God takes possession of before us, we will possess.
- 25** And now, are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel? Did he ever fight against them?
- 26** While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its villages, in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities along the banks of the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time?
- 27** Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you wronged me by fighting against me. May the Lord, the Judge, render judgment this day between the children of Israel and the people of Ammon.' "

His answer contained three primary responses. First, he says that when Israel first came to the borders of the Ammonite king, they requested permission to cross his land. The king at the time, however, refused their request and mounted his troupes for battle. In other words, the Ammonites were the ones who started the fight, not the Israelites. Secondly, he says they Israelites did not take the land from the Ammonites, but from Sihon, king of the Amorites. Furthermore, Jephthah says that God gave Israel the victory and the land. Finally, Jephthah points out that the Israelites have inhabited the

land now for over three hundred years, yet none of the previous Ammonite kings have made any claim on the land until now.

Unfortunately, Jephthah's arguments fell on deaf ears.

28 However, the king of the people of Ammon did not heed the words which Jephthah sent him.

But the point is—Jephthah wasn't looking to pick a fight. He was very diplomatic and peaceful in his approach. He would have much rather settled their differences without war if at all possible. Although Jephthah was a mighty warrior, he was peacemaker at heart.

God desires peacemakers in his church, in the workplace and in the world. Jesus said, **"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God"** (Matthew 5:9 NKJV). The apostle Paul encouraged, **"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"** (Romans 12:18 NIV).

Regrettably, in Jephthah's case, it didn't depend solely on him and it wasn't possible. So he and his soldiers suited up and prepared for war.

IV. Rash Vow and Victory

29 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon.

The Bible says **"the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah"** as he marched his troops through the dry dusty land of Gilead and Manasseh toward the Ammonite border. Jephthah was depending on the Spirit of the Lord for victory, not on himself or his army.

But before sounding the charge, Jephthah made a solemn promise to God.

30 And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands,

31 then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

Jephthah obviously had faith in God, but he needed to know that God was in this with him—which, of course, he was. God heard Jephthah's prayer and promise and he gave Jephthah a devastating victory over the Ammonites.

32 So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands.

33 And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith--twenty cities--and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

Now, after the battle was won and Jephthah had returned home, he remembered his promise to the Lord.

34 When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter.

35 And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot go back on it."

Jephthah's heart sank into his stomach when who should come bouncing out to greet him but his own daughter. When he saw her his heart broke, yet his daughter, with a sweet and tender tone, encouraged him,

36 So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon."

37 Then she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my

Jephthah did as she requested and then he kept his vow to God.

38 So he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains.

39 And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel

40 that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

A vow in the Old Testament was a purely voluntary act, but once the vow was made you were committed before God, and for that very reason God warns against taking vows in a rash or thoughtless way. Dueteronmy 23 says, **"When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth."**

This little incident has stirred more than a little controversy. Scholars have argued for centuries about whether or not Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter. Some believe that he did. Others don't. The passage may be intentionally vague to show that he kept his promise without saying how.

Jephthah has already proven himself to be an intelligent, educated man, well versed in Hebrew history and God's law. He undoubtedly knew that God had already declared human sacrifices an abomination detestable in his sight (Leviticus 18:21). And Jephthah's daughter requests time to mourn the fact that she will never marry, not the fact that she was about to die. In fact, the Bible is quick to point out, **"he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man."** (vs. 39).

Now, the little Hebrew word translated **and** (vs. 31) is also very important. That particular word can also be translated **or**, making this a two fold promise—"whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me...shall be the Lord's, or I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

Had an acceptable sacrifice greeted him, he would have offered it as a burnt offering; alternatively, if a person greeted him he would have given that person to God—that is, he would have dedicated them to a life of temple service and celibacy, which was a

common practice in ancient Israel (Samuel's mother, as we'll see in a couple chapters, makes a similar promise). Jephthah's only daughter would never marry, never know the joys of motherhood and never bear a child to carry on their family name. What's important here is that even though it broke his heart, Jephthah was a man of his word. **"For I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot go back on it"** (vs. 35).

Jephthah's Cinderella-like journey from zero to hero was only possible through faith. Faith means realizing that God made each one of us special and unique and that he has a plan for our lives. It means learning to live in peace with other people as much as we possibly can. And it means being willing to make the big sacrifices when God calls on us to do so. In reality, each one of us has our own "Cinderella" story. We were all once poor, pitiful and pathetic apart from God. But then, by grace through faith, God reached out and transformed each one of us into heirs of an eternal kingdom—from filthy rags to eternal riches.

In an even greater way than Jephthah, God the Father gave his only begotten Son. And Jesus willingly offered Himself for us so that we would no longer be rejected for our sin, but accepted into God's forever family. He took our rejection on Himself... and died so we could live.