

Thoughts From Other Minds:

First, did Jephthah expect a human to be first to meet him when he returned? Probably. Strictly speaking, Jephthah's words in verse 31 can be rendered, 'Whatever' comes forth ... to meet me' rather than 'whoever,' in which case one could say Jephthah had in mind an animal sacrifice. But 'coming forth to meet' someone is a purposeful action more naturally associated with a human agent.

Secondly, would Jephthah – could Jephthah – have intended to offer a human sacrifice? I think there are two errors we need to avoid here. One is to think that Jephthah was such a primitive bumpkin that he did not realize human sacrifice was wrong according to Israel's law (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10). ...

At the same time we must beware of being so cocksure that Jephthah would never have offered a human sacrifice. ... Certainly Jephthah was a Yahweh-worshiper But how do we know that Jephthah was consistently consistent? Is it not just as conceivable that, in spite of what knowledge he had, he convinced himself that such a sacrifice, given the emergency, might be not only entirely proper but also deeply pious?

A third question is: Wasn't it assumed that if such a vow involved a human life it was to be fulfilled by some sort of lifelong dedication to Yahweh? Some ... note that Jephthah's daughter and her companions weep over her virginity (vv. 37,38) rather than her impending death. Moreover, after Jephthah carries out his vow verse 39 states that she had never had sexual relations with a man. That, so it is held, is a strange thing to say if her father sacrificed her but makes perfect sense if she was locked in to a celibate life of devotion to Yahweh, perhaps at the worship sanctuary.

Some scholars have pointed out that women evidently did serve at Israel's worship centre (Exod. 38:8; 1 Sam.2:22).¹⁶ They have also noted that according to Leviticus 27:1-9 a man might vow a person to Yahweh. Hence they infer that Jephthah vowed his daughter to Yahweh and that he fulfilled that vow through her lifelong celibate service at the sanctuary.

[But] ... the vowing of persons in Leviticus 27:1-9 has nothing to do with serving at the sanctuary ... Moreover, the idea of virginity or celibacy fits nowhere. There are no grounds for assuming that the women of Exodus 38:8 and 1 Samuel 2:22 were virgins. If Jephthah's daughter had to serve the rest of her life at the sanctuary, why would she have to remain unmarried? ... So I agree with Matthew Henry: 'Besides, had she only been confined to a single life, she needed not to have desired these two months to bewail it in: she had her whole life before her to do that if she saw cause. Nor needed she to take such a sad leave of her companions....'

Someone will say that the view I advocate makes the episode very sad indeed. It does. I think that is what the writer wants us to see. The Ammonites have been whipped; but the sky in Gilead is very, very, grey.

Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges, Such a Great Salvation*, pp. 145-147.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

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Sermon: "Jephthah – kingdom blessings for God's people " (text: Judges 10:6-12:7)

Scripture: Judges 10:6-11:11, 11:12-11:33, 11:34-12:15

Sermon Notes

Introduction: The first thing that guides us in understanding Jephthah's story is that he is among those who triumphed 'through faith' (Heb 11:33). So Jephthah is a believer, a man commended to us for his faith in God, a good man who was a blessing.

He was a man who knew God's word; he didn't have as much Bible as we do, but he read and remembered what he did have, so that when the king of the Ammonites claimed land held by Israel he was able to answer him with the truth.

He also believed God's word; believing the Bible shows that we have been born of God's Spirit, for it is his book; saving faith believes the Bible as God's word, (WCF 14.2). Jephthah had this faith, for he went to war on its promises (11:24).

The second thing that guides us in understanding the story of Jephthah is the context of kingship in Judges; the root cause of the disorder of God's people was that there was no king in Israel; a curse came upon Abimelech, a self-made king. While Jephthah is not called 'king' other like words are (11:6, 8, 11).

1. The blessings of the kingdom—through repentance

The kingdom of God and its blessings are for those who make God their king; that means repentance, like that of God's people before they asked Jephthah to be their leader. Repentance is not penance, but it is more than being sorry for our sins.

Repentance is a change of mind that leads to changed behaviour (WSC Q. 87). Israel had responded to seven-fold salvation (v.11) with sevenfold idolatry (v. 6) - and so the Lord sold them into the hand of the Ammonites and the Philistines.

After eighteen years, they cried out to the Lord, acknowledging that they had sinned (v. 10) but it was only words; the Lord mocked them by telling them to go and cry out to the gods they had chosen (v. 14); they then put away the foreign gods and served the Lord (real repentance) who then had compassion upon them.

Repentance is the beginning of mercy, the ending of our rebellion against God and the dawning of true freedom in his service. The gospel begins with a call to repentance (Matt 4:17) and there is no salvation without it.

The kingdom begins with judgment; to escape the wrath to come we must repent, and keep on repenting. Failure to repent particularly of our particular sins robs us of joy and peace; we must make a clean break with our pet sins.

2. The blessings of the kingdom—through the Leader of God's choice

Repentance unto life is always accompanied by saving faith in the leader of God's choice. Repentance opened the way for the Lord to bless his people with sal-

vation, and he did this by causing them to remember and seek after Jephthah. They had no one to lead them against the Ammonites, so they begged him to lead them.

They offered him leadership in war (v. 8); he wanted more: 'I will be your leader' (v. 9); they agreed (v. 11). In this Jephthah was a type of Jesus; He is the mighty warrior and leader of God's choice; we enter God's kingdom by receiving him as our king, and the kingdom increases in us as we surrender more and more to his rule.

Israel ad rejected Jephthah; perhaps you have rejected Jesus; you heard of his love, but you would not have him as your king, you would not repent. Now you fear it is too late—but while life lasts it is never too late to come to Jesus in repentance and faith; if you will have him as your king, he will not turn you away (Jn 6:37).

3. The blessings of the kingdom—through redemption

The good news is that God's kingdom is built not only on power, but also on payment—his payment of the ransom price of our sins, redemption. God had saved his people seven times, yet they served the seven gods of other nations. Or perhaps it was the weight of his own sins.

Knowing the seriousness of sin and his need of God's help, Jephthah vowed to offer a sacrifice to the Lord; not of an animal, but of a human being (vs. 30-31, not 'whatever', but 'whoever', not 'it', but 'him'); 'to meet me' implies person, not animal, and what happened shows that human sacrifice was in Jephthah's mind.

Human sacrifice is a pagan concept, as if God could be bribed by the value of the offering (Malachi 6:7b-8). But it shows insight; an animal is not enough; how can it die for me? Jephthah saw imperfectly what Isaiah saw more clearly—there would be a Saviour who offer himself as a sacrifice that would take away sins (Isa 53:5-6).

Jesus is this Saviour; he put away sins by the sacrifice of himself (Heb 9:26); one of us, he could die for us; without sin, he could die for us sinners; a man, he died freely, not to persuade God to love us, but because he loved us; we see something of the Father in Jephthah (cf. Rom 8:32) and of Jesus in his daughter (cf. Lk 22:42).

Jesus' sacrifice opens the way for God to establish his kingdom in us through the forgiveness of our sins (Eph 1:7), by grace through faith (Eph 2:8); saved by his sacrifice we are reconciled to God, with no need to fear that he will not be with us in our strife, or to continue or repeat his sacrifice, for it was 'once for all' (Heb 7:27).

4. The blessings of the kingdom—through judgment

The blessings of God's kingdom also come through the destruction of all who stand against it and its king. As Jephthah struck the Ammonites with a great blow, so our Lord Jesus has struck the devil with a great blow, breaking his power. As Jephthah punished the Ephraimites, so he will punish us, unless we are true Christians. Do we love the Lord Jesus? Does the faith we profess bear the fruit of love for him so that we hate sin? If we do not, then we are accursed (1 Cor 16:22) and will perish.

My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. Read and reflect on Westminster Confession of Faith Ch. 1 para. 7; how does this help us to interpret difficult passages of scripture like the story of Jephthah?
2. How does the prologue to the story of Jephthah (esp. 10:6-16) illustrate the place of repentance in our being saved?
3. What is the difference between repentance and penance, and how does this difference affect whether we are saved or lost?
4. What are the two types of repentance (cf. SC Q. 87 for help with this); what always accompanies repentance unto life, and how is this illustrated in the story of Jephthah?
5. Why was the Old Testament sacrificial system obviously inadequate? How do Old Testament passages like Isaiah 53 point to a better sacrifice, a sacrifice more suited to our need, and how does this relate to Jephthah's vow?
6. How do Jephthah's defeat of the Ammonites encourage us in its fulfilment in Jesus, and his victory over the Ephraimites warn us as professing Christians?