

**A Faithful God for a Faithless People: A Study of Judges**  
**Session 4: “Jephthah” (Based on Judges 10:6-12:7)**  
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**Summary of the lesson from Father Jonathan:**

*Few stories in the Bible are more disturbing than that of Jephthah, the man who sacrificed his own daughter. Jephthah’s story is a tragedy, the story of an unlikely and tragic hero whose fatal flaw resulted in deadly consequences. Many of us are inclined to avoid Jephthah’s story, but there is much that we can learn from it. In this session, we examine the character of Jephthah more closely to understand what it was that led him to commit such an atrocious act. And what we discover is that his fatal flaw—his characteristic error—lay in how he viewed the world. Jephthah was a fighter and the world in which he lived was a world of power and of the struggle for power. It’s a way of life that many of us can relate to, but it stands in direct opposition to the way of Jesus and, in Jephthah’s story, we are reminded of just how terrible the consequences of living this way can be.*

What is the most tragic story you have come across? The Bible is filled with all kinds of stories of human tragedies. Life is often tragic, and the Bible is nothing if not honest about life.

No more tragic story than that of Jephthah in Judges 10 and 11. It begins like many other stories in Judges:

Judges 10:6-7

*The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines ... So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.*

Things are getting progressively worse. Now there are many, many gods that Israel is going after. The oppression is worse. That are made slaves and oppressed for 18 years. They cry out to the Lord.

Something is different. God does not raise up a judge. The people go and find one themselves – Jephthah.

Judges 11:1

*Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute.*

His father is Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute. He has therefore been rejected by his family and his tribe. He lives in the land of Tob, surrounded by “worthless fellows.” His life is one of a guerrilla warrior. He must have had a significant reputation.

The people come looking for him in a time of crisis. He responds:

Judges 11:7

*Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father’s house? Why do you come to me now when you are in distress?*

When asked to be a leader, he seems to change his mind:

Judges 11:9

*Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, ‘If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head.’*

This exchange is revealing. Every tragic hero has a fatal flaw.

Aristotle

*“A character between these two extremes ... a man who is not eminently good and just, whose misfortune is brought about now by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty (hamartia).*

“Hamartia” = sin. Jephthah’s fatal flaw is that he wants power. He doesn’t want to just be commander of the soldiers, **he wants to be the head of Gilead**. His life has been one of struggle. That has dictated how he sees the world. He will do anything to obtain power.

Jephthah tries diplomacy first with the Ammonites. That fails. War is coming. But Jephthah makes a **tragic vow**:

Judges 11:30-31

*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.*

Why does Jephthah make this vow? Rash and foolish behavior? Overly zealous without thinking it through?

Notice what proceeds the vow. Verse 29 – **God's spirit comes upon Jephthah**. He has been freely chosen. But Jephthah doesn't treat God as a God of free grace. He treats him as a God of power to be called upon. He treats God as a pagan god, one that can be manipulated by sacrifice.

Jephthah is trying to bribe Yahweh.

Phyllis Trible

*"The making of the vow is an act of unfaithfulness. Jephthah desires to bind God rather than embrace the gift of the Spirit. What comes to him freely, he seeks to manipulate. The meaning of his words is doubt, not faith; it is control, not courage."*

Jephthah has a fatal flaw. He views the world as a graceless one. He thinks to have power he has to seize control. This leads to terrible consequences:

Judges 11:34-35

*Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter.*

Jephthah immediately blames his daughter for his grief. He tells her there is nothing he can do about the vow. He must sacrifice her.

Neither of these statements are true: the daughter is innocent and she did nothing wrong. Jephthah does not have to fulfill this vow. If he read the scriptures and knew Yahweh, the God of Israel, he would know that this God detests human sacrifice.

Multiple times in the book of Deuteronomy, God makes it clear he will not abide the sacrifice of people. The book of Leviticus allows for payment of vows that were made by gifts to the temple. There are ways to redeem rash vows.

We don't know if Jephthah is ignorant of the law or he doesn't try. He has two months to come up with a solution while his daughter is grieving and he does nothing.

Arthur Jackson (17<sup>th</sup> century English Presbyterian)  
"It is indeed strange that having two months' liberty to deliberate about it, he was not all that time, either by the priests, or some other, told both how unlawful his vow was and how lawfully he might not break it."

But remember Jephthah's fatal flaw: he sees the world as a struggle for power. Power that is only available to those who sacrifice for it and seize it themselves. Jephthah fulfills his vow. But the narrator will not describe it:

Judges 11:39

*And at the end of the two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow that he had made.*

Such a tragic story. What are we to take from this? Jephthah is a tragic hero. After the death of his daughter, he starts a civil war with the tribe of Ephraim. It ends in the slaughter of 42,000 Israelites.

Jephthah gets six years of being chief, but the land is not at rest. His legacy is death and violence.

Jephthah refused to receive grace. He viewed the world as a struggle – survival of the fittest. He relied on bribery, manipulation, coercion, and violence to get his way.



Comparison to Johnny Cash song "A Boy Named Sue". The boy learns to be strong because his dad names him Sue to make him tough.

This is Jephthah's worldview: get tough or die; fight for yourself; nothing comes free.

Most of us are tempted to live this way, as if our success in life depends on us alone – our hard work and cunning. We treat God like he can be bribed through good behavior or religious activity. We treat God like he is a deity out there to call upon and use for our own ends.

To treat God like that is to wrong God. God is a god who "loves in freedom." That means life is not that way. The spoils of life (as Jesus teaches it) do not come to those who take destiny in their own hands.

Matthew 6:25-30

*Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on ... if God clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?*

Jesus also says ...

Matthew 18:3

*Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

**Jesus invites us to a way of living that is dictated not by struggle and self-reliance, but by grace.**

**We live not as scrappy fighters, but as little children. Jephthah's fatal flaw was that he was like that "Boy Named Sue." He thought it was up to him and in the end he paid a dear price.**

**May you and I learn from his example and choose the way of Jesus rather than the way of Jephthah.**

**Judges 10:6-12:7**

Jephthah's Tragic Vow

*29 Then the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. 30 And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 31 then whatever[a] 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[b] up for a burnt offering." 32 So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. 33 And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.*

*34 Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. 35 And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." 36 And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the Lord; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites." 37 So she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions." 38 So he said, "Go." Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. 39 And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel 40 that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.*

**For the next lesson, please read Judges 13-16.**