

Last Sunday evening I was talking about Gideon, the leader of God's people who God used and although he was **weak**, God made him **strong**. As I said last week, Gideon's included in a list of God's people in Hebrews 11:32 who're held up as examples of **faith**. **This** evening I want to talk about a man called Jephthah, who's **also** included in Hebrews 11:32. When I read it, I recognised the name, but wasn't certain of the story **behind** the name. And that was the beginning of this evening's talk. Some of **you** may also be thinking, 'What's Jephthah's story?'

Well, his story is a story of God using Jephthah to deliver his people, just like the **others** I've talked about in recent weeks - left-handed Ehud, woman judge Deborah and commander Barak, and weak Gideon, - but it's also a very **tragic** story, and in some ways not easy to talk about.

We find his story in chapters 10 – 12 of Judges, but I want us to focus on chapter 11. It's quite a long chapter, so I'm going to read it in 3 sections.

Bit of background first: God's people Israel are in **trouble** – nothing new **there!** Chapter 10:8,9 tell us that their enemies the Philistines and the Ammonites *'that year shattered and crushed them. For 18 years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead'* which was within the land God promised and **gave** to his people. They cried out to God for **help**. And chapter 10 ends with *'Whoever will launch the attack against the Ammonites will be the head of all those living in Gilead.'* [Read 1-11]

Along the way this evening, we'll learn lessons about God and our relationship with him, which are of course the reasons for studying God's word whenever we come to it. But in this first section we see that **Jephthah was a rejected man**, he was a **rejected** man.

He's described in verse 1 as a mighty **warrior**, but he was nevertheless **rejected**. It wasn't because he was a poor **soldier** that he was cast out. No, his **mother** was the problem. Verse 1 tells us she was a prostitute his father Gilead had had an **affair** with. Gilead and his wife had other **legitimate** sons, and as soon as they were old enough to understand that their inheritance would be **less** with **him** around, they decided to get **rid** of him. They kicked him out because he was the son of another woman.

So Jephthah flees to the land of Tob, we're told in verse 3, and gathers a band of adventurers, or **we'd** say guerrillas, who were glad to follow him.

Jephthah the **outcast**, the **despised**, the **rejected**. He was the **victim** – sinned **against**. It wasn't **his** fault that he was rejected. He was sinned against and kicked **out**, and in the eyes of his people he was a bad lot, a **loser**. But the Spirit of God came upon him in verse 29, and the Lord gave the Ammonites into their hands. **God** chose what the people of Gilead had originally **rejected**. Ring any **bells**? Remind you of anyone **else**?

Turn with me to Acts chapter 2, where we find Peter speaking to Jews in Jerusalem. Acts 2:22 says, '*Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited to you by **miracles, wonders and signs**, which God did **through** him, as you yourselves **know**. This man was handed over to you by God's set **purpose** and **foreknowledge**; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to **death** by nailing him to the cross.*'

The Jews had rejected and killed God's **chosen** one. But **God** raised him from the **dead**, and, verse 36, '*God has made this Jesus, whom you **crucified**, both Lord and **Christ**.*' So when the Jews ask Peter what they must do be saved, he says to them in verse 38, '*Repent and be baptised ... in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.*'

So the one the Jews **rejected** is God's **chosen** one, and only through **him** can sins be forgiven. Salvation only comes through faith in the one they **rejected**, Jesus. In his first letter, Peter refers to him as '*the living Stone – rejected by **men** but **chosen** by God and precious to him*' 1 Peter 2:4.

God chose to use **Jephthah** to deliver his people from their enemies – **rejected**, cast out, leader of a band of guerrillas, **another** unlikely deliverer. The Bible teaches us that we should never be surprised by who God chooses to use. However unlikely and ill-equipped you feel you are to serve God, make no mistake, God can choose to use even **you**, even **me**. Jephthah was rejected by his people but chosen by God.

Unlike the **other** judges we've looked at, we're told that the elders of Israel go and **get** Jephthah whereas we're told with the others that God **provided** a deliverer. However, chapter 11:29 tells us that '*the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah*'; chapter 12:7 tells us that Jephthah '*led (or judged) Israel for 6 years*'; and he is mentioned among the men of faith in Hebrews 11. 2

So we see that God **did** choose to use him, maybe **despite** the people's not actually **asking** God to provide a deliverer for them. And the Lord **does** this, doesn't he? in his grace and mercy towards his people. They thought **they** were in control, but really **God's** in control and **overrules** their decision.

Sometimes we don't seek his guidance as we **should**. **We** love to make the decisions, don't we? We love to be in **charge**, in control. But God is so **gracious** and long-suffering with his untrusting people: he can and **does** use even the decisions we make without **consulting** him to bring glory to himself. On these occasions we should learn to **trust** him more. Unfortunately for **Israel**, they **don't** learn that lesson during the book of Judges.

So the leaders of Gilead go and get Jephthah in verse 4, and after the interview in verses 7-10, they make him their leader.

Quickly look at verse 7, where Jephthah says, '*Didn't you **hate** me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me **now**, when you're in **trouble**?*' He answers his own question – it's precisely **because** they're in trouble that they come to him for **help**. And this was what they were doing with **God** too. When things are going **well** and they're **enjoying** themselves, going their **own** way, there's not a **thought** about God; but when **trouble** comes along, it's straight on the hot-line to God – 'Help'. And they expect God to be at their beck and call, whenever they get into **difficulty**.

**We** mustn't be guilty of this. If we're **disregarding** God, enjoying the ways of the **world**, we can't expect God to help us out when we get ourselves into **trouble**. At **those** times we need to ask God to **forgive** us, and **mean** it, and **turn** and go **his** way. And God will help us to **do** that.

Let's move onto our second point, which we find in verses 12-28: **Jephthah was a man concerned for the truth** regarding God's work. [Read 12-28]

Jephthah wasn't just a mighty **fighter**, he was very good with **words** too, and rather than have to **fight** the Ammonites, he'd prefer to settle this by **diplomacy**: we've heard that word a **lot** in recent days, haven't we? Attempts to resolve situations by talking, Syria, Israel, Palestine. Jephthah was the diplomat.

In verse 12 he asks the Ammonite king why he's **attacked** Gilead, Gilead being **representative** of God's people Israel. As quickly as the camels could gallop, we find the reply in verse 13: '*When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land ...*' and the Ammonites now want it **back**. But Jephthah says in effect, 'Hang on a minute – let's get the facts right here.' He tells the Ammonite king, 'Get it right – let's get at the **truth** here.'

Let's look at the gist of Jephthah's argument here. Verses 14-18 tell us what **happened** when Israel came from Egypt to the area of Moab: they asked permission to **cross** Moab, but permission was **refused**, so Israel went **round**. Verses 19-20 tell us what happened when the Israelites came to Amorite country: they **again** asked for permission to cross the area, again permission was refused, but **this** time the Amorites were **hostile** to Israel and attacked God's people – never a good idea! God gave Israel **victory** and they captured the land of the Amorites. Jephthah says, 'Let's get the facts right – it wasn't even your land, Ammonites! It was **Amorite** land. You've no **right** to demand it back.'

Jephthah's secondly puts the record straight in saying that God **gave** Israel the land: verse 23, '*Now since the **Lord**, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it **over**?*' 'Our God has given **us** this land, and we'll take everything that God gives us. **You'll** have to be happy with what **your** 'god' Chemosh gives to **you**!' He's **not** recognising their god as God, or an equal in any way. He's making **fun** – if the Ammonites say they follow their god, they must be satisfied with his good gifts – this land wasn't **one** of them! **Israel's** God is the Lord, the Judge, and will decide what is right.

The Ammonites are in the wrong. Jephthah says in verse 25, the king of **Moab** hadn't quarrelled with Israel or fought with them – why should the **Ammonites**? And anyway, The Ammonites hadn't kicked up a fuss for 300 years – why **now**? Why hadn't they tried before, if it **was** their land?

No, Jephthah wasn't in the wrong, the Ammonites were doing him wrong by making these false claims.

But the Ammonites don't accept the truth; verse 27 tells us that '*the king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.*' It's like a naughty teenager realising his argument's been beaten, and he just turns round and says 'Whatever!' and walks away. The Ammonites decide to fight. 4

Jephthah's tried. He's **told** them the truth of the matter. Israel's capture of this land – which wasn't theirs **anyway** – was all **God's** doing, verses 21, 23 & 24 all say the Lord **gave** them the land. And God, the Lord, the Judge would decide if they were to **keep** it. Right in the middle of this book of Judges, in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of 21, we read that the ultimate Judge of all is the **Lord**, the God of Israel.

Jephthah shows an attribute of **God** in his concern for **truth**. He **could** have gone straight in there with his army, knowing God was on his side, and **destroyed** the Ammonites. But he wants the Ammonites to recognise the truth that God – the almighty God, the one and only true God - had given his people the land. But the Ammonites didn't and wouldn't accept it. Now the Lord, the God of Israel would be **Judge** and **confirm** its truth.

Just because people don't and won't accept the truth, that doesn't make it less true. The truth will always **be** the truth. Jesus said, *'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,'* and some people **will** accept that truth, others **won't**. But Jesus is the Son of God. He came from God the Father in heaven to set us free from **sin**. He's the ultimate deliverer. Deliverer from **all** that would keep us from enjoying a relationship with God. He **is** the Truth. He'll always **remain** the Truth, no matter how **many** refuse to accept it. And those people who **obey** him and put his word into **practice** will **know** his truth, and the truth will set them free. **That's** the truth.

Watching the news reports about the Anglican Church's vote on women bishops, I was **appalled**. I was **shocked**, because in all the interviews I saw, I didn't hear **God** mentioned **once**. Not once! I heard a lot about what **we** want, what the **church** wants, what today's **society** wants; but not **once** did I hear anyone talk about seeking what **God** wants. Not once did I hear anyone say they were keen to uphold God's **truth** as found in God's word, the Bible. All the reporters were saying is that the church has to get **real** and keep in step with modern society. That's the **wrong way round**. **Society** needs to get real and keep in step with the **truth** of **God**!

How concerned are **we** that the **truth** of God's **salvation** is told? How concerned are **we** to make sure the people around us get the true message about the **purpose** of life? How concerned are **we** that the truth of God is known? Are **we** concerned, as **Jephthah** was, to tell our neighbours and 'enemies' the truth of the matter, that Jesus has made salvation possible, that God has done it all, that there's no other way of salvation?

Are **we** concerned enough to go out and spread God's truth – the good news of salvation?

Jephthah was a rejected man. He was concerned for the truth of what God had done for his people. Thirdly we come to the most controversial point – **Jephthah was a promise-keeping man** in verses 30-40.

We meet many men of faith in the Bible. One thing they all have in common, is that they're all imperfect. They all have their weaknesses. They're human like us and show that we **all** far short of the glory of God. **None** is perfect. The only man who's lived a perfect, sinless life is **Jesus**. **Jesus** is the only perfection you will find.

Jephthah is flawed – God uses him to deliver his people from their enemy, but he's by no means sinless. Far from it! God gives him victory in verses 32-3, he's used by God to deliver his people. But this is overshadowed by the **tragedy** in the rest of the chapter. We have to think about Jephthah's promise to God, and the dreadful consequences of it.

There's been a lot of deliberation about exactly what Jephthah did here to his daughter. It starts with a vow, a **promise** to God. Verse 30: *'And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the **Lord's**, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.'* What a promise.

Let's **approach** this by asking ourselves some **questions**: firstly, **why did he make the promise?**

Jephthah was a man who sought to do the right things in God's eyes: at the end of verse 11 we read, *'And he repeated all his words before the **Lord** in Mizpah.'* He clearly knows the history of the Lord's dealings with his people. He knows about the **law** and that God's people should make **offerings** to God. And verse 29 tells us that the Spirit of the law came **upon** Jephthah. So the **combination** of these things **convince** him that he should make this promise to offer whatever (or whoever, as the Hebrew could mean either) came out to meet him as a sacrifice.

But surely he knew that whatever/whoever came out to meet him would probably be **human**, or his pet dog – **didn't he think about the consequences of his promise?**

No, I don't think he **did**. He hadn't thought it **through**. Sacrificing to God was good, at the right times, but certainly not **human** sacrifice. God says in Deuteronomy 18:10, *'Let **no-one** be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire. ... Anyone who does these things is **detestable** to the Lord,'*

I think these events show Israel's confusion. The truth was blurred by different peoples, cultures, religions around them. Remember Jephthah had recently been a guerrilla leader; Israel kept running after the 'gods' of the peoples **around** them whenever they **felt** like it, and those peoples were said to sacrifice children to **their** gods. So confusion in Jephthah's mind when he made the promise. It just goes to show that when the foundations of society are **ignored**, morality is destroyed – **anything** could happen. Look at the atrocities in the Middle East.

But this was a very **rash** and **foolish** promise, despite Jephthah trying to please God. He should have put his **brain** into operation before he opened his **mouth**. Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, *'Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God.'* Jephthah was certainly guilty of being too quick to open his mouth.

Nick Clegg was **mocked** recently for his apology for his promise not to charge students to go to university. He wasn't apologising for not keeping his **promise**, he was apologising for **making** the promise, a promise he couldn't keep. And we'd do well to make sure that **we** think about the promises **we** make – especially to God – before we **make** them: **is** what we're promising really what God **wants**? What Jephthah promised to God was certainly **not** what he wanted.

**Did he mean to keep his promise?** Yes, I think he **did**. He must have **known** that what or whoever came out to meet him would be a loved one, yet he still made the vow. He knew what he'd promised, and we see that in his reaction in verse 35: *'When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh my daughter! You have made me miserable and **wretched**, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot **break**."'* He knew what he'd promised and he meant to **keep** that promise.

**Did he actually keep his promise?** Again, yes, I think he did. I think that's the most probable reading of verse 39, *'and he did to her as he had **vowed**.'* Some argue that he just gave her to lifelong service of the Lord, but that wouldn't be 'as he had **vowed**.'



And she'd hardly have gone off for 2 mnths to weep because she'd never marry – she could do that for the rest of her life. No, I think that God gave Jephthah **victory**, but it tragically cost him his **daughter**. No rejoicing in Israel.

We were thinking about Abraham recently and when God asked him to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Maybe there's a comparison but a contrast here. God **asked** Abraham to sacrifice his only son: God **didn't** ask Jephthah to sacrifice his only daughter, Jephthah made a **promise** to do so. God **stopped** Abraham sacrificing Isaac: he **didn't** intervene when Jephthah sacrificed his daughter. This **doesn't** mean of course that God approved of the action, I'm sure that it grieved his heart.

Here was a foolish promise. Jephthah hadn't heard God's rule prohibiting human sacrifice. What he **had** heard was that it was right to keep your word, to keep your promises. He knew that God kept **his** promises, he brought his people safely through the desert to the land he'd **promised** them. Maybe he was mindful of what it says in Numbers 23:19, '*God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind. Does he **speak** and then not act? Does he **promise** and not fulfil?*' God keeps his promises, Jephthah knew he had to keep **his**, no matter how misguided he'd been.

Jephthah was on the way of knowing God, and he **did** understand God to a certain extent, but he was a work in **progress**, and there was a lot still to learn. Like all of God's children, the work's **begun**, but we're a work in progress. We've still got a lot to learn, but God's promised to bring that work to completion, and God **keeps** his promises.

So God used Jephthah to bring deliverance for his people from their enemies. He used a man cast out by his people to **save** his people. He was concerned that everyone knew the truth about what God had done. And he was a deliverer who kept his **promise**, although it was a foolish promise.

Jephthah was an outcast chosen by God to deliver his people from their enemy: **Jesus** is described by Isaiah as despised and rejected by men, but **he** was God's Chosen One to save us from **all** our enemies.

Jephthah was concerned with the truth of God: **Jesus** is the Way, the Truth and the Life, no-one comes to the Father but through him.

Jephthah made a foolish promise but kept it which led to tragedy: **Jesus** was the means of God keeping **his** promise to save his people, leading to glorious **victory**. Jesus, the true and promised Saviour.