

Judges 10 & 11 – “The Leader Israel Deserved”

(Pew Bible Page: 211-212)

Intro: “When the people are faithful, God is faithful to send them good leadership. But when the people are rotten, God sends rotten leaders as a judgement over the people.”¹ So says Warren Wiersbe. This is a principle easily observed in all walks of life – national, commercial, governmental, and familial. God seems to go out of His way to give men the kind of leadership man deserves – sometimes as a blessing, but other times as a curse. Tonight’s story is one of those accounts. In Jephthah, we find the rejected savior; a misunderstood warrior; and a tragic father. Jephthah was the leader Israel deserved. Let’s investigate his story and learn...

Proposition: God is at once merciful and just in raising up over His people the leadership they deserve.

Billboard: (vv.10:17-11:11) The Rejected Leader
 (vv.11:12,24,29,32-33) The Misunderstood Deliverer
 (vv.29-40) The Failed Father

(vv.10:17-11:11) – The Rejected Leader – God used Jephthah to deliver His people, yet Jephthah was not a leader desired by his family or the nation. The choice of Jephthah was a “marriage of convenience” only. Note first that Israel could produce no leader from its “socially acceptable” classes. When war came, Israel was forced to seek leadership from one rejected by his family and civil authorities. **Judges 10:17–11:3 - 17** *Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. 18* *And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.” 1* *Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. 2* *And Gilead’s wife also bore him sons. And when his wife’s sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father’s house, for you are the son of another woman.” 3* *Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.* Because of the circumstances of his birth, Jephthah was a man rejected by both his family and his community. When Jephthah’s brothers drove him from his home, the Elders of Gilead concurred with his family’s actions (cf. v.11:7). No one wanted Jephthah. He was a social outcast, not for anything in himself, but because he was an illegitimate child. Old Testament Law specifically forbade anyone born illegitimately from entering the assembly of God’s people: **Deuteronomy 23:2–3 - 2** *“No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD. 3* *“No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever.* As far as Israel was concerned, Jephthah was in the same category as their oppressor, Ammon. Yet God chose Jephthah to be Israel’s deliverer.

Verses 4-11 tell us how this “marriage of convenience” came to pass: **Judges 11:4–11 - 4** *After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. 5* *And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. 6* *And they said to Jephthah, “Come and be our*

¹ Warren Wiersbe

Judges 10 & 11 – “The Leader Israel Deserved”

(Pew Bible Page: 211-212)

leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites.” 7 But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father’s house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?” 8 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.” 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.” 10 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “The LORD will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say.” 11 So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah. Interestingly, Jephthah’s call is not like that of Gideon or Barak. Gideon’s call came through theophany, Barak’s through a prophetic word. Jephthah’s call came through a political committee sent to “eat some crow,” seeking the help of the man they had previously driven away.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God chose to deliver Israel through a man Israel rejected and despised.

[ILLUSTRATION] I wonder if this sounds somewhat familiar to our ears? Who else in Scripture was called by God to deliver His people after first being rejected by the people? Perhaps Joseph comes to mind, or Moses, or maybe David. Like Jephthah, those men were rejected by their brothers, but chosen by God to rescue the very people who had driven them away. But of course, those men only foreshadow the real Deliverer, don’t they? Jesus is the anti-type toward which all these Old Testament types point! Like Jephthah, the circumstances of Jesus’ birth were suspect. Jesus too was rejected by the nation’s leaders. Jesus’ family doubted His sanity. Jesus’ closest friends denied they even knew Him. And yet, He was God’s Messiah, sent to redeem His fallen people. The Deliverer needed by fallen humanity is foreshadowed by Old Testament characters like Jephthah – but those Old Testament characters can never ultimately deliver God’s people themselves, for each one failed in the end, just as we’ll see that Jephthah failed. But each one pointed toward the one who was coming who *could* deliver God’s people – Jesus.

[APPLICATION] **Matthew 21:42 - 42** *Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “ ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?* We are always looking for a better man to become our deliverer. If we could just find the right preacher, priest, prophet or king, we think – well, then, all our issues would be resolved. But the whole point of the book of Judges is that “**Judges 21:25 - 25** *In those days there was no king in Israel, and it was a disaster. And the point of the books of Samuel and Kings and Chronicles is that Israel’s kings couldn’t fix Israel’s problems either! There is only one solution to the dilemma of God’s people: Jesus is the better prophet, priest, king, and sacrifice that alone can deliver God’s people from their sins. Jephthah points forward to Jesus.*

(vv.11:12,24,29,32-33) The Misunderstood Deliverer – Jephthah agreed to become Israel’s leader, but his first move must have seemed strange to the people. Instead of leading the army in an attack, Jephthah first sought to resolve the conflict without bloodshed through diplomacy. **Judges 11:12 - 12** *Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, “What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?”* There follows a long section of text in which

Judges 10 & 11 – “The Leader Israel Deserved”

(Pew Bible Page: 211-212)

Jephthah attempts to reason with the Ammonite king, demonstrating from Scripture that Israel was the rightful owner of the land of Gilead, the land east of the Jordan River that the king of Ammon was seeking to conquer. We need not spend time reviewing Jephthah’s argument. It is enough to say that Jephthah based His reasoning on Scripture. Jephthah rehearsed the story of the conquest just as it had been passed down in the Word, concluding with a declaration of faith in what God had done for Israel: **Judges 11:24 - 24** *Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess.* This is clearly a statement of faith, and it is equally an offer of peace. What Jephthah said was, “*You keep what your god has given you, and we’ll keep what our God has given us. Why should we fight each other?*” We see here the faith that Jephthah was famous for in Hebrews 11:32-34. Jephthah trusted and obeyed what God had said. Jephthah was a man of faith. The Ammonite king, of course, didn’t care a pin about this, rejecting Jephthah’s diplomatic offer of peace and choosing war instead. Likely, the king of Ammon misunderstood Jephthah’s diplomacy as a sign of weakness. That was a mistake, as verse 29 tells us: **Judges 11:29 - 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.* The result of this is given to us succinctly in verses 32-33: **Judges 11:32–33 - 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.* Jephthah’s enemies misunderstood Jephthah’s offer of peace and chose war instead. By faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, Jephthah delivered Israel from her enemy.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] By faith, Jephthah was a better man than his enemies knew.

[ILLUSTRATION] This also points us toward Jesus, doesn’t it? Was any man ever more misunderstood than Jesus by those to whom He came offering peace? **John 1:11 - 11** *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him,*” said John. The prophet Isaiah said: **Isaiah 53:3–6 - 3** *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4* *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5* *But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6* *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Jesus, like Jephthah, was a misunderstood deliverer, sent by God to rescue His erring people.

[APPLICATION] Our world is waiting for it knows not what. People all around the globe long for peace, crying, “Peace, peace – but there is no peace.” The Prince of Peace has come offering peace to any who will put their faith in Him. He is holding His hands out toward the world all day, every day, offering peace to His enemies just as Jephthah offered peace to the people of Ammon. But like the king of Ammon, the people of this world misunderstand the messenger, despising and rejecting the gentle and lowly Jesus – counting Him as too weak to give them true peace. That is a fatal mistake, for just as Jephthah turned from the peace table to the battlefield decimating His enemies, so Jesus will one day

Judges 10 & 11 – “The Leader Israel Deserved”

(Pew Bible Page: 211-212)

turn from peace to bring judgment on all who refuse His free offer of grace. The king of Ammon squandered the opportunity to make peace with God’s people. Let us pray earnestly for those in our generation who are likewise neglecting the offer of peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(vv.11:30-40) The Failed Father – So far, the story of Jephthah has twice foreshadowed our Lord Jesus, but in these verses, we find a heartbreaking epilog to an encouraging story of victory by the underdog, Jephthah. Jephthah saved the nation, but lost his family, because he made an unnecessary and rash vow: **Judges 11:30–40 - 30** *And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 31 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.” 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.* Surely this must be one of the most shocking stories of idolatrous unfaithfulness in the whole Book of Judges. Why did Jephthah make such a rash vow? God’s Spirit was giving him strength. He knew that God had kept His promise to Abraham, Moses and Joshua to give them the land. He had the courage to lead God’s army against God’s enemies. He probably even knew that God’s Word forbade human sacrifice. Why did Jephthah feel he needed to make this vow? We may speculate, but in the end, we are simply not told.

The incongruity of Jephthah’s actions is so striking that many students of the Word seek to explain it away. “Yes,” they say, “the implication of the text is that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, but that’s hardly believable. Surely what is meant is that he devoted her to service at the tabernacle. He must have made her serve in the nun-like ministry that we know some women fulfilled at the door of the tabernacle (cf. 1 Samuel 2:22).” I understand the impulse but be careful about the temptation to casuistry – making things say what you’d prefer them to say. The old rule of interpretation is a good one: “If plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.” And strange as it sounds, the plain sense of the passage fits well into the overall theme of the Book of Judges.

Judges 10 & 11 – “The Leader Israel Deserved”

(Pew Bible Page: 211-212)

It fits because the theme of Judges is that God’s people need a better King. The Bible goes out of its way to make sure that each of the Judges we have studied is shown to be a seriously flawed individual. The judges are not to be taken for heroes. Jephthah may not have been responsible for being illegitimate, but he certainly knew better than to follow the idolatrous practice of human sacrifice. Jephthah was no hero.

It fits too because it accords with the plain sense of Scripture. Listen to this comment from the Expositor’s Bible Commentary: “The yearly commemoration of this noble girl makes sense only if she died at the hands of her father.... The death of this innocent girl came because of a rash vow. Jephthah knew that it was a sin to break a vow (Num. 30:2), but in this case it was a greater sin to fulfill it.” Why would they have commemorated her annually if she had only gone to serve as one of the women at the gate of the Tabernacle? A plain sense understanding best fits the facts given in the text.

Finally, it fits because:

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Jephthah was the leader that Israel deserved. Like Israel, he was capable of great victories of faith but also of shocking idolatry and unbelief.

[ILLUSTRATION] In two ways, Jephthah foreshadowed Jesus: he was the rejected leader and the misunderstood deliverer, just as Jesus was. But in this last way, Jephthah did not foreshadow Jesus. The plain fact is that we recoil in horror at the way his story ends. Yet, we find him in Hebrews 11, celebrated for his fidelity to faith. How can this be?

[APPLICATION] Jephthah doesn’t foreshadow Jesus; he foreshadows you and me. Perhaps the answer to why he is included in Hebrews 11 is found in Genesis 15:6 - **Genesis 15:6 - 6** *And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.* Viewed from the perspective of grace, are we not all like Jephthah? Every sin against a Holy God deserves death. And yet, day after day, God pardons His elect; balances their accounts; applies the perfect righteousness of Christ to wretched sinners like you and me. I know what Jephthah did was horrible, but every sin against God is horrible. Even the ones that in our eyes are the “smallest” ones. The story of Jephthah simply serves to point out again the amazing grace of our Savior, and our complete lostness as men and women.

Conclusion: It’s grace, it’s grace, it’s grace, that gets your name and mine written into the Lamb’s Book of Life. Israel got the leader she deserved in Jephthah, but isn’t it wonderful to know that *we didn’t get the leader we deserved?* By grace we got Jesus, and that makes all the difference.