

Jephthath, Ephraimites, Aftermath and Hebrews 11

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- [0 : 00] Lord, open our eyes, we pray, that we might behold wonderful things from your word, soften our hearts that we might receive that word, transform our wills that we might be doers of it, loosen our tongues that we might proclaim it.
- And we ask this for the glory of your Son, your living word, in whose name we pray. Amen. Well, friends, I don't know if it's because I'm getting old.
- Or not. But I have this thing that has been happening increasingly to me. That is, when I open my browser on my computer to look at the front page, it always crops up with, and I've said it to do this, the ABC website.
- Why? Because it's got news on it and I love catching up with the news. But what inevitably happens is I have come to my computer to solve a particular problem, to find out a particular thing, to perhaps buy some particular item, and it opens up at the ABC and I think, oh, that looks interesting.
- And I go and have a look at what it says and click on the right link and off I go. And then I find myself clicking on another link to something else and then another link to something else. And before long, I forget what it was I had set out to do in the first place.
- [1 : 19] It is very easy to happen. It's very easy for this to happen, isn't it? We just drift from one thing to another, to another, to another, until finally we wake up and think, where was I and how did I get here?
- Now, friends, I think that is what's happening to Israel. And I want you to see that happening to Israel as we look at this passage today. So I want you to have your Bibles open and I want you to just follow with me.
- Now, remember where we are. We are looking at Jephthah. Now, Jephthah is a full-on figure within the book. And remember, there's just the background to Jephthah.
- Israel has got into the normal pattern of sin. God has responded in anger by selling them into the hands of a foreign aggressor. The particular aggressor at this point is the nation of Ammon.
- Israel then cries out to the Lord. The Lord is a bit more hesitant than usual. In fact, he tells Israel he's no longer going to save them. Israel urges God to relent from his anger, begs him to rescue them.
- [2 : 24] But God's response, as we've seen in these previous weeks, is somewhat ambiguous. He doesn't relent and he doesn't send them a saviour. And then our focus falls on one particular tribal grouping that is close to the Ammonite threat.
- We hear about Gilead and I've supplied you with a map and hopefully there'll be a map that will occur in front of you as well. Next slide. There it is. They live on the east side of the Jordan.
- As I said, they're a grouping very close to the Ammonites. Anyway, we hear that the leaders of Israel begin to try and find a saviour themselves because God's evidently not raising one up for them. They look for one of their own and they find a certain Jephthah.

His father was from their tribe. His mother was a woman of disrepute, perhaps a prostitute. His brothers had cast him out. He had no inheritance. And so he gathered with a group of other empty, landless, propertyless men.

And there his ability bore fruit. These men gathered around him. They followed him. He was a man of standing and of leadership among them. Anyway, the Gileadite leaders ran to him and they enlisted him to be their saviour.

[3 : 33] He turned out to be a man not only gifted as a warrior, but he was also gifted with his tongue. He was a natural negotiator and he negotiated his way around the Gileadite leaders.

He won from them favours. They brought him back into the fold. They even made him head over them or promised that they'd make him head over them. He had become all of a sudden someone in Gilead. And then he set out to negotiate, you remember, with the king of Ammon.

And despite his ability with his mouth, he only had partial success with the king of Ammon. However, he committed himself and the result into the Lord's hand. He said, God will be my judge.

He declared that the Lord, the judge, will decide the dispute between him and the Ammonites. And God, the judge, did. For his spirit came upon Jephtar and he advanced against the Ammonites.

And then do you remember last week, just before he attacks the Ammonites, he makes this fatal mistake. He makes a vow. We looked at that vow last week. He vowed to sacrifice as a burnt offering whatever came out of the door of his house when he returned safely from battle.

[4 : 37] And he was indeed victorious in battle. His defeat of the Ammonites was strong and thorough. And he did return home. But when he returned home, it was his daughter who came out of the house first.

She was the object of his vow. And she was offered as a burnt offering. And as we saw last week, that event exposed the nature of Jephtar. Do you remember?

He was Jephtar. Jephtar, the empty man, made warrior and deliverer. Jephtar, the man with the mouth, the gifted negotiator. Jephtar, the self-centered man, and Jephtar, the theologically weak man.

The man who didn't know his Bible well and therefore made some terrible mistakes. So that's the story of Jephtar so far. Now, that's the background to our passage. Very important to understand that background as we come to this passage.

So have a look at it with me. Chapter 12, verse 1. We're introduced to a new party in all of this, the Ephraimites. Now, let me tell you just a little bit about Ephraim, the tribe of Ephraim.

[5 : 41] You can see it there on the data projector screen, or you can see it in the map I provided you in the outline. As you can see, Gileadites live across on the east side of the Jordan near the Ammonite threat.

Ephraimites are an Israelite tribal grouping who live on the west side of the Jordan. That is, they live in the hill country of Canaan. And they are a large and dominant tribe.

They're a very important tribe at this time in Israel's history. Not only that, they know they're important and consider themselves to be important. What's more, they've proved themselves valuable in battle for earlier judges in Israel.

For example, during the time of Ehud, they rallied around him, won a great victory over the Moabites. In the time of Gideon, they were also immensely helpful. Although they did, they had a propensity to be a little contentious.

They moan and groan about not being invited earlier. And so we have, there are the main parties in our story for today. Jephthah, skilled warrior from the east side of the Jordan, who's just won this great victory over the Ammonites.

[6 : 48] Ephraimites, from the west side of the River Jordan, a great and important tribe in Israel, although a bit contentious, with anyone else exercising leadership. Let's see what happens when these two meet together.

Take a look at it with me. Ephraimites gather, verse 1. They are called out by their leaders, and they stream across from the west, and they cross over the Jordan River to Zaphon.

You can see that on my map. They challenge Jephthah, the negotiator. Look at the second half of verse 1. They say this. They said to Jephthah, why did you go out to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you?

We're going to burn down your house over your head. Seems a little extreme, doesn't it? They're fighting words, aren't they? And the charges are very clear. Jephthah didn't call them out to fight with him. Perhaps they feel as though their importance has been neglected.

They're being sidelined. Or perhaps they feel that they missed out on a share of the booty in war. But look at their threat. It's clearly angry. We are going to burn down your house over your head.

[7 : 53] Now, I don't know how much they know. But the words they use against Jephthah would not come easily to him. After all, they use the word house.

And they use words about burning. And Jephthah has already himself burnt down his metaphorical house, hasn't he? He has offered a burnt offering of his only descendant, his daughter.

He might have a physical house left, but he doesn't have any metaphorical house left. He has no descendants. He has burnt it down himself or her down himself. The words of the Ephraimites would not come without some rather sharp edges to him, would they?

They would sting. Anyway, let's see what he says in response. Verses 2 and 3. Jephthah responds to the Ephraimites. I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites.

And although I called you, you didn't save me out of their hands. When I saw that you wouldn't help, I took my life in my hands and crossed over to fight the Ammonites. And the Lord gave me victory over them.

[8 : 58] Now, why have you come up today to fight me? Let's see if we can assess what Jephthah said. First, his response is somewhat typical, isn't it? We've already seen Jephthah's gift with the mouth.

He is a skilled negotiator. And what he does here looks strikingly similar to his negotiations with the king of Ammon. First, he rebuffs the charges. Not true.

Second, he gives his own account of things. Third, he brings the Lord into things. Fourth, he ends with a rhetorical flourish that indicates that he thinks he's in the right.

Now, I need to say that we cannot be certain, but there are some indications that Jephthah is tinkering a little with the truth here. After all, the account of the battle against Ammon does not have any record of Jephthah calling anyone else other than his own forces out to war with him.

However, he's given his defense and he's now faced with an opponent and he goes to war again. But look at verse four. Jephthah calls his own men out again.

[10 : 01] The men of Gilead come out and a war is waged. But friends, did you notice it's a civil war this time? It is a war within Israel. Tribe versus tribe. Brother versus brother.

There's no mention of the Lord being active in this one. However, we are told why it's war, why it's waged. Look at the second half of verse four. Now, our translation says that the Gileadites struck down the Ephraimites because the Ephraimites had said, you Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh.

Let me tell you what I think is going on. You see, the word for renegades actually means escapees or leftovers. Okay, it's probably quite derogatory.

It is something of a taunt based on tribal groupings. Perhaps even it's intended as a slur on all Gileadites. You know, you sort of fringe dwellers. You refugees.

You, you know, you landless people. You, you know, you don't belong really. Across the other side of the Jordan. You know, fringe people.

[11 : 07] Well, Jephthah could easily have taken it as a personal slur as well. Couldn't he? You see, look at the results and the aftermath. You see, because. Well, let me go on.

Look at verse five. We're told the Gileadites captured the fords of Jordan leading to Ephraim. And then the author interacts with the slur of the Ephraimites. Look at the next words. He says, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said.

Now that word survivor is exactly the one used before escapee. The narrator is using it back. He's using it back at the Ephraimites. It is exactly what they used of the Gileadites.

It is the word for escapees leftovers. And the taunt has come back to taunt them. Their words have been their downcoming. Their aggression has resulted in aggression.

And the Gileads act under Jephthah in revenge. They strike down the Ephraimites because of the slur against Jephthah and against them. Now, remember that Gilead is on the east side of the Jordan.

[12 : 14] And remember that the Ephraimites came from across the Jordan in the west. And they came across and through into the east side. And in verse five, we're told that the Gileadites then capture the fords of the Jordan.

You can see that on my map. These are the fords of the Ephraimites must come back across to get back to their own land in order to return home. And what happens is the Gileadites who've been victorious wait there for the survivors, the escapees.

And they attempt, as they attempt to return, they quiz them. And they use racial and tribal differences to distinguish them. Friends, I wonder if you can imagine being there. Can you imagine the Gileadite men?

Men victorious in battle. Standing around. I'm imagining it. Laughing. Mimicking the inability of the Ephraimites to pronounce words.

Watching them stream in. Taking them one by one. Quizzing them. Friend, how are you today? You look a bit weary. Where are you from? Are you from Ephraim?

[13 : 19] Are you from those losers? And then the reply. No, no, I'm not from Ephraim. No, no, not me. No, not me at all. And then the follow up question. A smirk on the face of the questioner and his mates.

Oh, is that right? You're not from Ephraim. Well, just so we know for certain. Can you just validate it for us? How about you say shibboleth for us? Can you imagine the sniggering, the anticipation, the reply, the easy slaughter of a brother Israelite?

Friends, there's nothing funny here, really. This is brother against brother. Man against man. Brutally playing on ethnic differences.

42,000 men are killed this way. Slaughtered by fellow Israelites. The massive defeat of Ammon is surpassed by a massive and cruel defeat of brothers.

Israel really has deteriorated so significantly now, haven't they? And Jephthah has deteriorated. He is seeking his own good. He's retaliating viciously, retributively.

[14 : 29] Under his rule, his men seek revenge. He acts as his brothers did to him. You see, as his brothers cast him out, as they broke bonds of brotherhood that should not be broken, cruelly and unjustly and brutishly, so Jephtar orchestrates the killing of 42,000 men.

Friends, this slaughter is massive. If you go through the counting of Israel that was done in the book of Numbers, this is a very, very large proportion of this tribe.

The enemy is no longer external, is it? The enemy is within. Israel's disintegration is well down the track now. They have progressed or regressed enormously.

With that in mind, look back at verse 7. This is the death notice of Jephtar. And I want you to just observe a few things as his death is noted. First, his period of judging is amongst the shortest of any.

Jephtar judged Israel for six years. Second, notice the reference to the fragmentation in Israel. The symbol of Israelite disintegration is this. Then Jephtar the Gileadite died.

[15 : 44] He's not the Israelite. He's the Gileadite. And he was buried in a town in Gilead. Now let's turn quickly to verses 8 to 12.

You might remember how he began this story by noticing that there were some references to minor judges before the story of Jephtar. Well, now at the end of the story of Jephtar, we come to some more minor judges.

Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. Now just skim through them quickly and notice a few things about them. What do you notice? They are not poor outsiders like Jephtar, are they? No.

They are rich and prosperous. They're not men with only one dead unmarried child. No. They are men, at least one or two of them, with multiple children who marry.

And they are not men who had bad relationships with outsiders. No. They cement relationships through marriage. They are not men who experience conflict and crisis. No. They're men who apparently live in peace.

[16 : 46] However, there are signs that a downward spiral is continuing. After all, none of these wealthy and secure judges is actually ever said to have delivered Israel. And all of them seem to focus on themselves rather than Israel.

They are growing internally rich. Their rule is apparently of benefit to themselves, not to others, not to Israel as a whole. And they do what the kings of Israel will later be condemned for.

They marry outside. The word clan is not mentioned in the original Hebrew. They married outside. It's possible they married outside Israel, used to cement relationships and alliances.

The length of their rule is comparatively short. There's no mention of the Lord at all in the lives of these men. So we wonder, where is the Lord now in Israel? Has he been active in Jephtar?

Is he still angry? What will he do now? Will he relent and help his people? It seems that by doing, by this story and these judges, we see that Israel is now in a sort of holding pattern.

[17 : 51] And we wait to see. What will he do? Friends, we have now spent three or four weeks with Jephtar. He is a complicated figure, isn't he? He is such a complicated figure that I think he has warranted such time.

I also see him as something as a transitional figure. But we really need to assess what we've found of him. What do you think? What do you think of Jephtar as we have found him these last few weeks?

If you were to write an epitaph on his gravestone, what do you think? What would you write? Jephtar. Bing, bing, bing, bing. And so on. Let me read to you a sort of epitaph that was written many years later.

Author unknown. You see, this author was inspired by God, though, to write this epitaph. You see, Jephthah is mentioned in the New Testament. He's mentioned at the end of Hebrews, that reading we read.

And after going through this long catalogue of the great ones of faith, such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and others, the writer pens these words. Hebrews 11, 33 following.

[18 : 57] Listen carefully to the names that are listed and the things said about them. What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of flames, escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released, so they might gain an even better resurrection. This is noble company he is with, is it not? Some faced jeers and floggings and even chains and imprisonment.

They were put to death by stoning. They were sword in two. They were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them.

They wandered in the deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground. They were all commended for their faith. Yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Did you hear it? Did you hear God and his word commend Jephthah? Jephthah, a man of faith, linked with the great ones. Well, friends, my own view is that for all his faults paraded before us, in Judges, one moment in his life should be remembered and commended.

[20 : 39] I think the moment is this one. Do you remember it? Do you remember it amongst all the other moments when he's the Lord of his own life? Do you remember? It's just a few verses earlier than the ones we've looked at.

Just a few verses earlier than the one where he bargains with God. Do you remember it? He negotiates with the king of Ammon. And he says to the king of Ammon these words, I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me.

Let the Lord, the judge, decide this dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites. Now, friends, here at this moment is a man of faith. Not the negotiator, not the self-made man, not the foolish oath taker, no, the man who's willing for God to be his judge.

Friends, there's some great comfort in this, I find. After all, as we've moved through the story of Jephthah, I've painted him warts and all for you.

And this word from God in Hebrews is quite comforting, I think. After all, if God were to examine our lives, wouldn't he find us frail as well? And if God were only to commend those who were perfect, then he'd only be able to commend one human being in all of human history, the Lord Jesus.

[22 : 06] But thankfully, God does not see our frailty. Or he does see our frailty, would be a better way to put it. And he has supplied our need.

You see, friends, in the end, there is only one act of faith in us that God will look to at the end of time. One act of faith. The act of faith whereby we trusted not in our own righteousness, but the righteousness of one.

That is, he will look at more, but that's the one by which he will judge us. A life of faith in his son. That act of faith when we trusted in Jesus to make us right with God and lived that act of faith continuously.

Where we trusted in God, the judge, and we asked him, please do not judge us on the basis of our own works, but on the righteousness of Christ, this one. Friends, what great news it is that through him and faith in him, we too can stand among the righteous.

That's the first and major thing, the major thing I want you to hear today and for us to learn today. But there is more. You see, there are two more, there's some other brief things that I want to say. I wonder if you've noticed the gradual drift that has occurred as we've worked through Judges.

[23 : 20] That's happened in Israel as we've worked our way through the book of Judges. Have you noticed that subtle, almost silent drift towards self-centeredness which reaches a pinnacle within the book of Judges or at least reaches a high, this a low point if you like, with Jephthah.

I've tried to highlight it as we've found it within him. You see, we see it though in the minor Judges as well. We've seen it in the tribes of Israel as well. Friends, the opposite of a simple trust in God is an awful emphasis upon ourselves.

Self-centeredness is at the core of sin. It is destructive. It is destructive of individuals, of families, destructive of tribes, destructive of churches, destructive of nations.

And such self-centeredness is growing at all levels in our society as it was growing in Israel. There's strong signs that we too are disintegrating as a nation as God is moved to the periphery of our existence.

As we begin to cast him aside. Friends, we are not to join in. As God's people, we must be different. As individuals, as churches, as people who are led by him, him who denied his own rights for the good of others.

[24 : 44] Let's just push it home for us here at Holy Trinity because, you know, this is us. You see, friends, we here at Holy Trinity have a marvellous multi-age, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, diverse church.

It could easily be destroyed by turning to self as Jephthah did and as our world is doing around us. We are not to be like the world around us.

Let's avoid that. Let us do what Jephthah did at the one moment in his life when he got it right. Let us place God at the centre. For our God is centred on us for our good.

And he sends his son for us for our good. And his son lays down his life for our good. Let us place God and Jesus at the centre of our existence together and let us be like Jesus.

Remember to heed the words of Jesus as Paul reflects on the life of Jesus and he says, Therefore, if you have any encouragement, this is Philippians 2, from being united in Christ, if there's any comfort from his love, if there's any sharing in his spirit, that is, if there's any of the soaking up the benefits of what God has done for us in Christ, if there's any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded.

[26 : 03] That is, like-minded with the Lord Jesus. Having the same love, being one in spirit and one in mind. Doing nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking out to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others.

in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

Not that of Jephthah, but that of the Lord Jesus. Not like the rest of the world, self-centered, but like the Lord Jesus. Jesus. Let's pray.

Our Father, as we look at the life of Jephthah, we do thank you for that bright light we see at one point in his life, but we also see his disintegration as a person.

Our Father, we pray that in our own lives, our faith in the Lord Jesus might issue in good deeds and in the likeness of Christ. So Father, please help us to be like-minded, to have the same love as he displayed, to be one in spirit and mind together, to not be oriented around ourselves and to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but with humility ask our Lord to value others above ourselves, not looking out for our own interests, but the interests of others.

[27 : 39] Please, in all our relationships, particularly in our life as a church together, please cause us to have the same mindset as the Lord Jesus Christ, our great deliverer.

We pray this in his name. Amen. Amen.