

Jephthah – From Trial to Triumph

Judges 11:1-11, NLT

- 1 Now Jephthah of Gilead was a great warrior. He was the son of Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute.
- 2 Gilead's wife also had several sons, and when these half brothers grew up, they chased Jephthah off the land. "You will not get any of our father's inheritance," they said, "for you are the son of a prostitute."
- 3 So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Soon he had a band of worthless rebels following him.
- 4 At about this time, the Ammonites began their war against Israel.
- 5 When the Ammonites attacked, the elders of Gilead sent for Jephthah in the land of Tob. The elders said,
- 6 "Come and be our commander! Help us fight the Ammonites!"
- 7 But Jephthah said to them, "Aren't you the ones who hated me and drove me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now when you're in trouble?"
- 8 "Because we need you," the elders replied. "If you lead us in battle against the Ammonites, we will make you ruler over all the people of Gilead."
- 9 Jephthah said to the elders, "Let me get this straight. If I come with you and if the LORD gives me victory over the Ammonites, will you really make me ruler over all the people?"
- 10 "The LORD is our witness," the elders replied. "We promise to do whatever you say."
- 11 So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him their ruler and commander of the army.

As the next couple of chapters in Judges continue we see that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah and he led the nation to victory over the Ammonites who had come against them.

I want to look at the life of Jephthah today because he is listed in the New Testament as one of the heroes of faith (Heb. 11:32-34).

*And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith **subdued kingdoms**, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, **became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.***

He is one of the lives that is given to us as an example from which we can learn (I Cor. 10:11).

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Let's take a look at his life as it is recorded for us in this passage. I would like to highlight 10 things that we know about Jephthah from this scripture.

1. Jephthah was a great warrior (vs. 1).

Some translations say that he was a mighty man of valor. This has three connotations:

1. He was a courageous man who was a brave and strong warrior who had proven himself in battle.
2. It also can imply that he was a man of moral strength or virtue.
3. It can also imply that he was a man of wealth. In other words he most likely was part of a family of privilege.

Jephthah had most likely been raised in the house of his natural father and had distinguished himself in his early manhood as a faithful and courageous son who was quite successful in battle to the point that he had made a reputation for himself.

2. Jephthah had a rough start (vs. 1)

Jephthah did not have the best start in life. In a sense we could say that he was the product of a sinful relationship between his father and a prostitute. And it was not just any prostitute, but a woman whom the Bible describes as a “strange woman.”

The term “strange woman” implies a couple of possibilities:

1. She was a non-Israelite who was from one of the other nations (a Gentile).
2. She may have even been a woman of another race.

In either case, she was an adulterous partner who was one of those with whom God had forbidden them to mingle.

In spite of this rough start, Jephthah had done well. Evidently he was raised in his father’s house and to a great extent treated like the rest of the family. In spite of his rough start, he had distinguished himself as a man of valor and he had grown into a son that would make any father proud...but there was a problem.

3. Jephthah had half brothers who came to despise him (vs. 2).

There might have been many reasons why his brothers despised him. One of the most common reasons found in these kinds of relationships is **envy**. Joseph experienced this. Jesus experienced this.

He was most likely the oldest among the children and the brother’s may have been envious of his success in the family and in battle (envy). It is also possible that because of his age he would most likely have been put in charge of the rest of the brothers in the absence of the parents.

The brother’s may have been **resentful** of the fact that Jephthah was apparently treated just like the rest of the family by the father (prejudice).

But we know one thing for sure that as the time for inheritance grew closer they became more and more determined to get rid of this half-brother (money).

Even though they had lived in a brotherly relationship with him, they were not about to share the inheritance with him.

His brothers determined that Jephthah would never see a penny of the inheritance (vs. 2).

“You will not get any of our father’s inheritance,” they said, “for you are the son of a prostitute.”

Unfortunately whenever you have any kind of success there are plenty of people prepared to burst your bubble and bring you down to earth again. Even though Jephthah could not help the fact of his parentage, his half-brothers were faithful to remind him, “You are the son of a prostitute!”

The brothers knew that they had the Law of Moses on their side. In Deuteronomy 23:2 it says,

If a person is illegitimate by birth, neither he nor his descendants for ten generations may be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.

This verse says nothing of inheritance but it did address the issue of public office (Note: For Jephthah to become a judge would be forbidden under this law.)

4. Jephthah fled from his brothers to the land of Tob (vs. 3)

Evidently things got so bad around the place that Jephthah felt that the only thing that he could do was run away to the land of Tob distancing himself from the problem.

The word “Tob” literally means “a good place, a pleasant place or a prosperous place.” Perhaps Jephthah saw some hope here for a new start. Something good must have happened there at some time to get such a name.

Apparently this place drew a certain type of person—worthless rebels (NLT).

So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Soon he had a band of worthless rebels following him.

Other translations say:

- Vain fellows (ASV)
- Riff raff (MSG)
- Worthless men (GNB)
- Good for nothing men (BBE)
- Men who weren’t good for anything (NIRV)
- A group of adventurers (NIV)
- A gang of scoundrels (TNIV)

The Hebrew word literally means “empty men” as in an empty vessel that has been drained of its content. It often refers to those who are drained of any resources (poverty). Or it can be translated “worthless” when speaking morally or ethically.

These are people who at one time were better off but have had some very negative and disappointing experiences in life and who are looking for something, anything that might turn their life back into a place of prosperity.

These are the same kind of “riff raff” that were attracted to David in the cave of Adullam. They say “misery loves company”—those in debt, in distress, in discouragement, down on their luck, demoralized and depressed.

5. Jephthah became the captain over this rabble (vs. 3).

They say that “In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.” Jephthah had some experience in warfare and was a natural born leader and so people were easily drawn to him.

We don’t know exactly what this band of adventurers did. Some suggest that they raided the camps of the enemies to sustain themselves financially. This is much the same way that David lived when he was driven from the courts of Saul.

The New King James says, “worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.”

Josephus says that Jephthah supported this group of marauders financially from loot that was acquired through their various exploits.

6. Jephthah closed the door on the past (vs. 4).

“And it came to pass after some time...”

Most translations of this verse suggest that some time went by at this point.

This is not how Jephthah had envisioned his life, but it apparently was what he was left with. He would make the best of it. He would focus on forgetting the past and reaching forward to the future. He would make a new life for himself in the land of Tob.

Just when he had made his peace with the past...

7. Jephthah got an unexpected call (vs. 5).

Just when it appeared that Jephthah had been forgotten, he got a call from an unexpected source—the elders of Israel.

The nation was in trouble; the Ammonites were on the attack and they needed someone with experience as a warrior to lead them into battle. Evidently, Jephthah’s name came up in the discussion among the elders (That would have been an interesting meeting to have been in).

Perhaps they had seen that even in his exile he had taken a ragtag group of men with little motivation or passion and turned them into an effective raiding party. Perhaps (they thought) he could do this same thing with the nation.

For the elders of Israel, calling on Jephthah might involve eating a little “humble pie,” but the nation was at risk and it was no time to allow pride to get in the way.

Reread verses 5-11

When the Ammonites attacked, the elders of Gilead sent for Jephthah in the land of Tob. The elders said, “Come and be our commander! Help us fight the Ammonites!” But Jephthah said to them, “Aren’t you the ones who hated me and drove me from my father’s house? Why do you come to me now when you’re in trouble?” “Because we need you,” the elders replied. “If you lead us in battle against the Ammonites, we will make you ruler over all the people of Gilead.” Jephthah said to the elders, “Let me get this straight. If I come with you and if the LORD gives me victory over the Ammonites, will you really make me ruler over all the people?” “The LORD is our witness,” the elders replied. “We promise to do whatever you say.” So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him their ruler and commander of the army.

Amazing! **In one day** Jephthah goes from an exiled marauder to the commander of the armies of the nation. It reminds you of Joseph who **in one day** went from the jail to the palace.

8. Jephthah became the head of the armies of Israel (vs. 7-11).

9. Jephthah ended up subduing 20 cities and went on to judge Israel for six years before he died (11:12-12:7).

10. Jephthah made it into the “faith chapter” of the Bible and is listed as a hero of faith who was used mightily of the Lord (Heb. 11).

We want to learn some things from his life today (all these things happened for our admonition).

Jephthah was an unlikely candidate to be used of the Lord. He had everything against him in the natural. If he had wanted an excuse for failure he had some good ones. If he wanted to remember and harbor resentment, he had plenty of fuel for that fire.

Strikes against Jephthah

1. He was the son of a prostitute.

He had a poor genealogy. Included in this was his carrying a stigma, the burden and even the cruelty with which he was likely confronted. Even though Jephthah had nothing to do with the sin of his mother and father he would be the one who would pay most dearly for it.

2. He was rejected by his brethren.

Even though he was a faithful son, he was always treated as some who was different, someone who didn’t belong and someone who was second-class. He suffered hatred from his natural brothers, perhaps even a step-mother who found it difficult to love a son from another mother.

He may also have felt betrayed by a father who didn’t defend him against the siblings. He certainly felt unloved.

This could have left him bitter and resentful. In this season he only had God from which to draw and he entered into a realization of the truth of Psalm 27:10—

Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close.
– NLT

3. He was cut off from his natural inheritance and left in total poverty.

He had served faithfully in the nation as a warrior, he had served his family as a faithful son and now he was stripped of his inheritance and had no place to call his home. He was doomed to an apparent life of poverty.

4. He chose to run from his trouble.

He had decided the heat was too much. Fleeing the scene was not just a defense mechanism. For him it was a matter of survival. Sometimes it is easier to run from trouble than to face it day after day. Many of us have developed a lifestyle of running from trouble hoping to find the land of Tob (the pleasant place with less trouble).

We run from marriages, from churches, from jobs, from relationships at the first sign of trouble rather than standing firm and trusting God by working through it.

Often we end up just like Jephthah—in the midst of others with similar testimonies.

5. He ended up in a company of negative companions.

He found himself in the midst of other people who also had been beat up by life, people who were hurt, people who had been emptied of vision, people who were on the run from life, and people who were unconnected and wandering. He was in the midst of what the world would call “losers.”

6. He had everything against him and on top of that the Law of Moses also seemed to condemn him (Deut. 23:2).

Somehow with all of these strikes against him, Jephthah rose to become a hero of faith. How is that possible?

It is possible because our natural circumstances do not determine our destiny.

It is not about genetics. It is not about financial security. It is not about the favor of man or personal popularity. It is about the favor of God on a person’s life which is acquired by keeping our heart right and by how we respond to the things in our life over which we have no control.

It is about our character in the midst of crisis (like Joseph). When we face negative circumstances beyond our control we cannot receive these things from man, we must receive them as if they have come from the Lord.

This is why the Apostle Paul never referred to himself as a prisoner of Rome or a prisoner of the Jews, he referred to himself as a prisoner of the Lord.

It is only possible to rise in faith and overcome when we respond in seven ways...

1. We can overcome when... We do not allow our past to define us—in Christ all things have become new. We are defined by who we are in Christ.

II Corinthians 5:17

2. We can overcome when... We do not blame others for our predicament.

No one is a failure until they blame someone else. Bitterness and an unforgiving spirit will keep us in a personal prison house.

3. We can overcome when... We respond positively to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

As we follow the voice of the Holy Spirit, God will lead us from where we are to where we need to be.

4. We can overcome when... We focus on what we can do, not on what we cannot do.

Jephthah did not brood or sulk over his loss. He did not spend time in a personal pity party. Even though he had no formal title or recognition, he knew he could still give the enemy a serious headache with his band of marauders.

5. We can overcome when... We focus on what resources we do have, not what resources we do not have.

Jephthah didn't have great resources; all he had was a ragtag bunch of guys who were looking for direction. He must have concluded, "If this is the hand that I have been dealt, I will take it and do the best that I can with it."

6. We can overcome when... We stand strong in faith believing that God can bring us into our destiny regardless of what man may do to us.

When the call came, Jephthah was ready.

Jephthah's name means, "he will set free" or "he will liberate."

Before Jephthah could set anyone free, he had to be free himself. You cannot be a deliverer of others if you have not come to a place of personal freedom in Christ.

7. We can overcome when... After our deliverance comes we do not use the calamity of others as a time to gloat or repay evil for evil. Instead we overcome evil with good.

Jephthah was a very unlikely candidate to be a success in the kingdom of God. He had everything against him in the natural. If he had wanted an excuse for failure, if he had wanted a reason to drop out of the race, he had more than enough excuses available to him.

We have many Jephthah's here today. Many people who have been beat up by life. They have been disappointed, they have been let down by people who should have defended them (why didn't his father stand up for him?), they have lost out on an inheritance that we owe them, they have been rejected by people who should have loved them.

But the good news is, "The story is not over yet!" It is never over until it's over.

None of these things matter. Because in Christ

I am God's child.

I have been justified.

I am a member of Christ's body.

I am a saint.

I have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit.

I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins.

I am complete in Christ.

I am free forever from condemnation.

I cannot be separated from the love of God.

I am hidden with Christ in God.

I am a citizen of heaven.

I am seated with Christ in the heavenly realm.

I am God's workmanship.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.