

Immediate Context

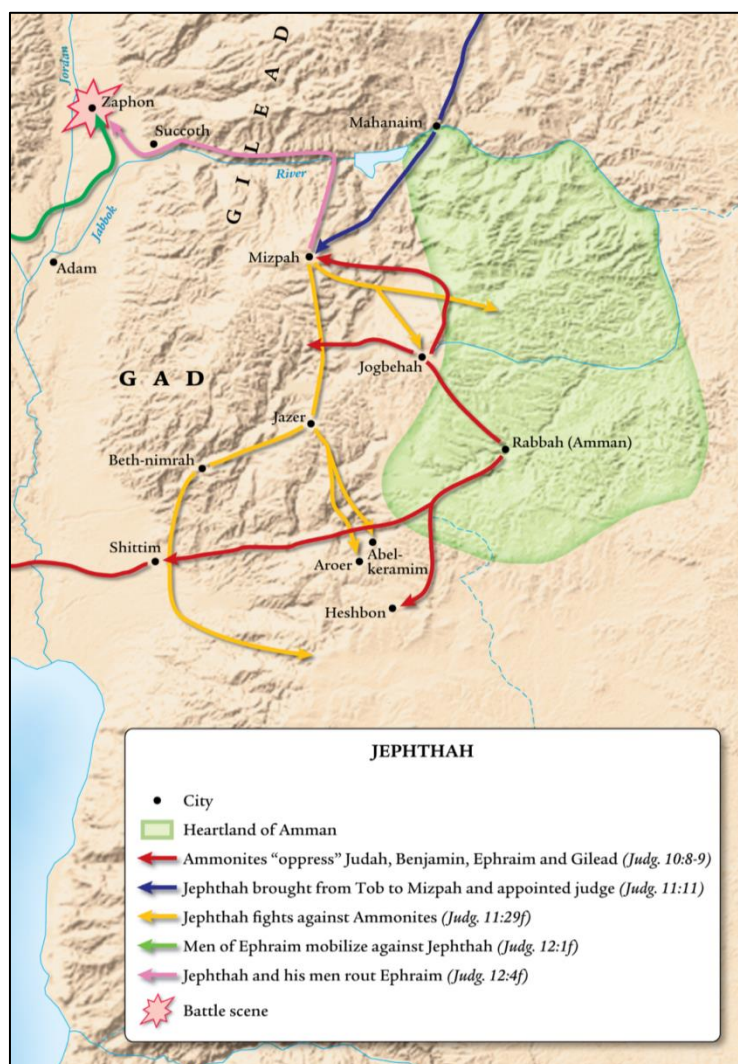
Jephthah, the formerly rejected son of Gilead and a prostitute, was now the leader of the Trans-Jordan (eastern) Israelite tribes. However, this wasn't going to be an easy reign. The Ammonites (distant cousins of the Israelites through Lot) had taken over their homeland and war was brewing. Called back from exile in a foreign land, Jephthah was commanding Israel's military and tried to negotiate a peaceful withdrawal of the Ammonites from Israel. Despite the godly wisdom Jephthah displayed in his letters to the King of the Ammonites, they ignored his arguments. It was now time for war.

Judges 11:29-33 – The Battle and the Vow

The account of Jephthah's battle against the Ammonites is rather brief. It is only discussed in verses 29-33. We read in verse 29 that the "Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah." What was the initial result of this spiritual empowerment (see *verse 29*)? Jephthah went on a successful recruiting trip throughout the Trans-Jordan portion of Israel and gathered an army with which to fight the Ammonites. This is reminiscent of Gideon being clothed with the Spirit of the Lord, blowing the trumpet, and summoning Israel to battle against the Midianites (*Judges 6:34-35*).

What was the final result of this empowerment (see *verses 32-33*)? Jephthah and Israel defeated the Ammonites soundly by the hand of the Lord. This means that God empowered and enabled them to subdue this enemy (not a complete eradication) so that they no longer tormented Israel. The map on the right shows Jephthah's military campaign as he fought against the Ammonites.

Sandwiched in the midst of this passage describing God's empowering grace upon Jephthah and Israel is a peculiar vow Jephthah made to the Lord. What was this vow and what were the likely implications of this vow? He vowed to make a burnt offering of whatever (also could be translated as whoever) would first cross his threshold to meet him when he returned victorious. Could he have intended an animal sacrifice? The Jews likely didn't keep animals in their homes (especially not dogs). Offering



the first animal that crossed his threshold verses the first born or the best animal would not be a fitting sacrifice for the Lord and doesn't make any sense in this context. His intention was to make a grand gesture of dedication. **This would undoubtedly be a human sacrifice.**

Why did Jephthah make a vow to secure victory? At the heart of the matter, we see that Jephthah was a man who was uncertain about the prospects of victory, even though he was empowered by the Spirit of God to raise an army in Israel. He believed God could grant them victory but believed he needed to somehow entice God to help them by making a bold sacrifice as the leader of the people.

Was it necessary? No. There were enough visible fingerprints of God's involvement in this matter thus far to provide a sound basis for faith (i.e. Jephthah's reconciliation and the raising of an army). Plus, there were other means of discerning God's will if he remained uncertain (e.g. prayer, God's Word, and Urim and Thumim worn by the Levitical High Priest). Even Gideon, a man plagued by doubt, did not make a sacrificial vow to secure victory, but rather sought the Lord's guidance through various means.

Was it appropriate? See *Numbers 21:1-3* and *Deuteronomy 12:29-32*. No. There were times that the Israelites vowed to completely destroy an evil enemy if the Lord would give them victory (see *Numbers 21:2-3*). Many times an enemy would only be subdued and the victor would take the spoils of war. Such a vow was a sacrifice of the spoils of war and a commitment to completely eliminate the evil influence. That was not Jephthah's vow. He was setting aside an unknown person in Israel, in his own household, for destruction. This was a violation of God's sixth commandment: "You shall not murder." A human sacrifice is completely distinct from killing an individual in the context of war or capital punishment.

Why did Jephthah make a vow involving human sacrifice? It is an indication of the remnants of the spiritual pollution of idolatry he was surrounded by in Tob. It is impossible to be immersed in worldly entanglements and be spiritually unaffected. No doubt he saw that the "greatest" acts of dedication to an idol involved human sacrifice and he transplanted that concept to Yahweh.

Why did the Lord allow Israel to be victorious after Jephthah made this foolish vow? God's deliverance of Israel was not about Jephthah, nor any individual person. It was about His commitment to Israel, His plans for the nation, and His mercy and grace. Jephthah was merely the tool the Lord would use to accomplish His plan. That isn't to say that He was unconcerned about Jephthah's vow. We will see that the Lord was VERY concerned about it and the potential precedent it would set in Israel.

Two takeaways from this passage:

1. **Spiritual empowerment is not the same thing as infallibility.** See Peter as an example in *Matthew 16:15-23*. He was divinely inspired one moment and a tool of Satan in the next.
2. We should learn of God from God's revelation of Himself, not by imposing worldly standards and beliefs upon Him. In the Parable of the Talents (*Luke 19:20-27*), the wicked servant was the one who believed the wrong things about the Lord and therefore responded the wrong way. This tragic mistake would cost him everything. **What you believe about God is the most important belief in your life.**

Judges 11:34-40 – The Tragic Choice

Why did God providentially allow Jephthah's daughter to be the first "whatever" to cross his threshold? This nipped the concept of human sacrifice being acceptable to the God of Israel in the bud. Nothing about this became palatable or desirous to repeat for anyone in Israel. If anything, this became a warning against such foolish vows.

Why wouldn't Jephthah just break the vow after he realized what it would cost him? It is likely that his vow was made before others. God delivered Israel. To break this vow, would appear to be to break covenant with God and incur His wrath upon Israel. To Jephthah and possibly others in Israel, keeping this vow was their means of securing peace. An example would be the sin of Achan (*Joshua 7*) in which one man took plunder from Jericho, items that were placed under a ban for destruction, and the consequences of the sin fell upon the entire nation.

Was there a biblical way out of this vow for Jephthah? If so, how do we reconcile this with other passages that emphasize the importance of keeping our vows? We will limit ourselves to the texts that should have been available to Jephthah. See *Numbers 30:2* and *Leviticus 5:4-10*. There was a way out of this vow that should have been taken. **A vow that requires you to sin is a vow that should be broken.** We need to be people of our word, but if we have made a vow that would require us to sin, it is better to break the vow and repent of foolishness than to go forward and knowingly sin.

Why didn't Jephthah utilize this scriptural "back door" to escape his foolish vow? Either they (Jephthah and Israel) were ignorant of God's Word, or they did not rightly esteem His Word. There were two months in which his daughter lamented her virginity in which someone could have stepped forward with this truth and no one did. It is another insight into the moral ignorance and depravity of the people.

Some have argued that Jephthah's vow did not involve human sacrifice but rather the dedication of his daughter to temple service and perpetual chastity, arguing that she is the prototype for today's Christian nuns. There is no sufficient scriptural merit for this. The flow of this entire book is meant to show us the depths of Israel's depravity. Devoting one's daughter to temple service is not consistent with the requirements of a burnt offering or the trajectory of this book.

Why didn't God intervene to stop Jephthah like He did with Abraham and Isaac? The first reason is that God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; He did not tell Jephthah to make a human sacrifice. In fact, His Word declared the opposite. **We do not need special revelation from God to tell us to do what is already clear in His Word.** Also, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was intended to test Abraham's commitment to God, while Jephthah's vow was intended to test God's commitment to Israel. Jephthah was not acting in obedience to God but in ignorance of Him and God did not still his hand.

Does Jephthah really deserve mention in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11:32? God inspired the writer of Hebrews to include Jephthah's name, so the answer is an emphatic YES! Remember that each of the individuals mentioned in the Hall of Faith not only responded to God in faith, but also experienced

moments of doubt and faithlessness. **Their name in that list is not a testimony to their personal ability, but God's ability to overcome their weakness and produce meaningful faith.**

Two takeaway lessons from this passage:

1. **Think before you speak.** Jephthah did not consider the consequences of his actions and he paid a dear price with the life of his daughter and the loss of future generations that might be born from her. His daughter paid the ultimate price. Rash words and decisions can carry permanent and eternal consequences.
2. **Know and obey God's Word.** Jephthah's tragedy could have been both avoided and averted if he had only been more familiar with and/or in submission to God's Word. Although Jephthah proved himself to be knowledgeable of Israel's history and knew the Living God, he had not benefited from the full counsel of God available to him. In a day when men live by their personal code of conduct, doing whatever is right in their own eyes, these types of tragedies are all too common. How many costly mistakes could we avoid if we would simply draw near to the Lord in His Word and allow our hearts and minds to be spiritually renewed!