



Lesson 83

Jephthah's Foolish Vow

Story Elements

- **Text:** Judges 10:1-12:7
 - **Setting:** circa 1160 B.C. in Gilead
 - **Main Characters:** God, Jephthah, and Jephthah's unnamed daughter
 - **Plot:** Jephthah becomes Israel's deliverer, but his victory is marred by a foolish vow.
 - **Key word(s):** " _____ " (11:30, 39)
- **Climax: Judges 11:35** *And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back.*

Introduction

1. (10:1-5) After Abimelech, Tola, the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, judged Israel for twenty-three years. After him, Jair, a Gileadite, judged Israel for twenty-two years.
2. (10:6) Soon, the Hebrews fell back into their besetting sin: _____.
 - a. (10:7-9) God again punishes Israel through oppressive enemies: this time it is with the _____ and the Philistines.
 - b. (10:10-14) The Hebrews cried unto God, confessing their sin, and God responded (probably through the preaching of prophets, cf. 6:8) with a stern rebuke, saying, "Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation."

APPLICATION → Matthew Henry comments, "It is necessary, in true repentance, that there be a full conviction of the utter _____ of all those things to help us and do us any kindness which we have idolized and set upon the throne in our hearts in competition with God."¹

- c. (10:15-18) The children of Israel put away the false gods from among them as the Ammonites gathered for war. The elders of Gilead wondered who would lead the Hebrews into battle. Interestingly, the next judge was not chosen remarkably (as other judges) but through the common dealings of human government.

Jephthah's Vocation

3. (11:1-3) Jephthah is introduced to the reader as the son of Gilead and the offspring of an harlot. Because of his despised birth, Jephthah was cast out of his hometown, and, like many societal castaways, he became a leader of a band of _____.
 - a. Since Jephthah was called a "mighty man of valor," and since we know that he was a leader of violent men, we can assume that he became renown for _____ the Ammonites.
 - b. (10:4-10) With such a reputation for combat, Jephthah was the one to whom the elders of Gilead turned when they needed a military leader.

APPLICATION → With Jephthah's rise to leadership we are reminded that God often chooses the despised things to do his work. "One would not have thought this abandoned youth was intended to be Israel's deliverer and judge, but God often humbles those whom he designs to exalt, and makes that *stone the head of the corner*

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 351.

which the builders _____; so Joseph, Moses, and David, the three most eminent of the shepherds of Israel, were all thrust out by men, before they were called of God to their great offices.”²

Jephthah's Victory

4. (11:11) Jephthah accepted the offer to lead (and to rule) the Gileadites. Binding the elders to their word before the LORD in Mizpeh, Jephthah indicated his heart was, in some way, _____ to God.
5. (11:12-28) Before beginning the war, Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and reminds him that the Hebrews have a right to the land for which they fight.
 - a. Jephthah recounts the history of Israel taking the land from the Amorites and how Israel lived there uncontested for about _____ years.
 - b. The king of the Ammonites rejected Jephthah's message, and the war commenced.
6. (11:29-33) Before battle, the "Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah."
 - a. Such an act of divine favor does not give a stamp of approval on the man's holiness (or lack thereof) but simply shows that God enabled Jephthah for military _____ over Israel's enemies.
 - b. Jephthah subdued the Ammonites and sacked _____ cities.

Jephthah's Vow

7. Before Jephthah went to battle, he vowed, " _____ cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."³ (11:31)
 - a. Upon returning victoriously to his house, it was Jephthah's _____, his only child, that came out to meet him.
 - b. Jephthah mourned the tragic turn of events, but his daughter encouraged him to keep his vow and _____ gave herself as an offering.
 - c. Before being offered as a sacrifice, she was allowed to mourn her virginity with her friends in the hill country for two months.⁴

APPLICATION → There are two theories about the fate of Jephthah's daughter: (1) She was indeed offered up as a burnt offering – an indication that Jephthah was syncretizing _____ worship with the worship of the LORD; (2) She was devoted to a life of celibacy, like a nun, and so her life was a living sacrifice. I believe her fate is purposefully vague so as not to read into it God's approval of the vow or the performance of it and instead to invite us to meditate deeply on the blessedness of our One True Sacrifice.

Answer Key: Key word(s): vow • 2. idolatry; a. Ammonites → insufficiency • 3. outlaws; a. raiding → refused • 4. inclined • 5. a. 300 • 6. a. victory; b. twenty • 7. whatsoever; a. daughter' b. willingly → Canaanite

² Ibid.

³ It is my opinion, since ancient Hebrews housed their animals with the family, that Jephthah expected a sheep or goat or some family pet to be the first to greet him and not a human.

⁴ Her mourning her virginity was motivated not only out of the sadness of the loss of her young life, but out of the loss of the family line. Without her, Jephthah's family came to an end.