

JUDGES—WEEK 10

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Judges, Week 10 — From Humble Beginnings

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Once again Israel cries out to the LORD in repentance. This time, the LORD raises up an outcast—someone who had been rejected and was living the life of an outlaw.

But the people saw leadership skills in him and made him their commander. Jephthah led them to victory but showed breathtaking immaturity in doing it, leading to the sacrifice of his daughter.

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Joshua, Week 10 — From Humble Beginnings

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1 Judges 10:10–18

And the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, “We have sinned against You, because we have both forsaken our God and served the Baals!”

So the LORD said to the children of Israel, “Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites and from the people of Ammon and from the Philistines? Also the Sidonians and Amalekites and Maonites oppressed you; and you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hand. Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more. “Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress.”

And the children of Israel said to the LORD, “We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray.” So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.

Then the people of Ammon gathered together and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled together and encamped in Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, “Who is the man who will begin the fight against the people of Ammon? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

Here we go again. Israel is back to crying out to the LORD in their distress. This is getting annoyingly repetitive.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” — George Santayana

So, the LORD recounts all the times He has delivered them and announces, “No more.” He’s had enough of their nonsense. *“Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress.”*

The Israelites respond by saying that they really mean it this time. In a way, they do.

At least they think they do.

So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD.

But what does that mean? Does it mean that they finally understand who He is and why His commandments matter? Or does it just mean they don’t like pain and they’re trying to avoid it?

Even if it’s the latter, they must have some kind of faith. Otherwise, they wouldn’t think that putting away *the foreign gods* would have any effect.

This is no different than all the previous pledges of fealty. Each time, they had “practical faith”—going through all the motions to get the desired result. But they didn’t have “heart faith”—believing in their heart that it’s all true. Their faith wasn’t “real” enough that it passed on to the next generation.

Kids see right through superficial faith.

2 Judges 11:1–11

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah. Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him.

It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel. And so it was, when the people of Ammon made war against Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon."

So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?"

And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the people of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the LORD delivers them to me, shall I be your head?"

And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words." Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

The Hebrew word translated as “worthless” (רֵיקָן, ray-qeem) is interesting. It’s primary meaning, used for vessels, is “empty.” Of other things, it means a thing too empty to be of value. It’s a bit like the slur in English, “nobody’s home.”

Not surprisingly, Jephthah was able to band empty men like this together under his command. They formed the ancient version of a gang.

Like modern gangs, they got their sense of self-worth from being in the gang “family.” Their organization under Jephthah and their devotion to their “family” gave them power, which they used for evil.

So, it’s not surprising that the elders of Gilead thought Jephthah had great skills as a commander.

He certainly had a lot of experience.

“I can’t spare this man—he fights.” — Abraham Lincoln (of Ulysses S. Grant)

Many people saw Grant’s drinking and smoking and wanted him fired. But imperfect people can still be indispensable. Peter, especially after he denied Christ three times, was another one. And then there’s Paul.

God doesn’t follow the neat and tidy plot lines we would prefer.

3 Judges 11:12–18 (ESV)

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?” And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, “Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably.” Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said to him, “Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, ‘Please let us pass through your land,’ but the king of Edom would not listen. And they sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh.

“Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab.”

It’s always good for the *casus belli* (the cause/justification for a war) to be written down so that history doesn’t get it wrong. To wit, the technical *casus belli* for the 2003 gulf war was Saddam Hussein’s repeated violation of the cease fire agreement, not simply Iraq’s possession of WMDs.

<https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/17300.htm>

Here we see that the king of the Ammonites has his history wrong. He thinks the Israelites just took his land unjustly.

In today’s passage, Jephthah begins a rather lengthy and detailed exposition of the true history of how this all came to pass. This talent for diplomacy separates Jephthah from Abimelech. Despite their somewhat similar family histories, Jephthah is better prepared.

He’s obviously well-schooled in Israeli history.

No one is born with this kind of schooling (though you can be born into it). And Jephthah didn’t learn all this from leading a band of thugs; he learned it as a child. How? What did he have that Abimelech didn’t?

Since Jephthah, like Abimelech, was raised by his mother in the ancient version of a single parent family, the most obvious difference is in their mothers. Abimelech had the tiny advantage of at least being raised by Gideon’s concubine, (פִּלְגֶשֶׁת׀, pee-leh-gesh, in Hebrew).

But poor Jephthah was raised by a full-up prostitute, (זֹהֲנָה׀, zoh-nah, in Hebrew). Somehow, his “Les Misérables” upbringing gave him the tools to ultimately become a leader. Scripture doesn’t give us the details; they’re only implied by the result. Someone, presumably his mom, taught Jephthah well.

There’s an epic tale of a mother’s love, implied but not detailed here, that built Jephthah’s character.

But he had some major resentment he had to work through before he could use that character for good.

4 Judges 11:19–28 (ESV)

“Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, ‘Please let us pass through your land to our country,’ but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory, so Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? 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. Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever contend against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them? While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time? I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon.” But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.

Here, Jephthah recounts (from Numbers 21:21–26) how Sihon refused to allow the Israelites safe passage through his kingdom and then attacked them. *Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel.* Israel didn’t pick that fight; Sihon did.

But Jephthah adds a curious detail not mentioned in Numbers—*“Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory.”* That may be an obvious truth, but mentioning it is still clever diplomacy.

Jephthah is giving Sihon (and also the current king) an out. Sihon isn’t depicted as belligerent; he just made the reasonable decision to not trust the Israelites. Even though Sihon made the wrong call, it was made in good faith. In other words, all this nastiness could have been avoided, if only ...

But Jephthah’s approach isn’t entirely peaches and cream. After starting out soft, he hardens things with a bit of “my God is bigger than your god.” *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.*

Jephthah is saying that the current borders are correct “according to the gods.”

But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.

Jephthah made an airtight case to the king that he shouldn’t start a war with Israel. It didn’t work. Was it a waste of time?

No. Now there’s a record of exactly what happened. The recording of the original conquest and the diplomacy preceding it helped Jephthah make his case. This recording may prove useful too.

History is important.

5 Judges 11:29–40 (ESV)

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. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 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.” So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. 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.

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. 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.” 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.” 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.” 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. 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 that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.

Jephthah is a sinner. (Who isn’t?) But the mistake he makes here is shocking. It’s wrong on many levels. First off, he makes this vow after *the Spirit of the LORD was upon him*. He should have been confident by that point. Making this kind of desperation vow to gain victory shouldn’t have even crossed his mind.

Second, the vow is nuts. What kinds of things come out of the door of a house? Besides his wife and daughter, what are the possibilities? Does he let barnyard animals into his house?

Third, and most importantly, what kind of deal is this? Could this kind of random sacrifice please God?

Of course not.

But it gets tougher. How can this even happen in a world run by a sovereign and loving God?

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: — Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 3, 1a.

This is way too long for a single DEEP. My series on Job tries to tackle it. That starts here:

<https://www.ailbe.org/columns/thedeep/item/9805-job-42-10-17>

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have your kids, or anyone, ever questioned your faith?
2. How do gangs work?
3. Who in our time is a story of great rise from humble beginnings?
4. Have you ever seen notably clever diplomacy or apologetics?
5. Have you seen something so terrible that it made you question God's sovereignty?

Items for prayer: