

Jephthah

Judges 11:4-11, 29-31
SS Lesson for 06/18/2017

Devotional Scripture: Num 30:2; Deut 23:21-23; Eccl 5:2-7

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON

Key Verse: Judges 11:9

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

LESSON INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

THE THREAT (JUDGES 11:4-5)

Fear of war (4)

Fear of war because of previous disputes (2 Chron 27:5)

Fear of war because of great distress between the nations (Judg 10:9)

Fear of war because it would influence the future (2 Sam 10:6)

Lack of trust in God (5)

Lack of trust in God because there is no belief in Him (Ps 78:22)

Lack of trust in God because of trust in things that are worthless (Job 15:31)

Lack of trust in God because of forgetting about God (Job 8:13-15)

Lack of trust in God because of depending on own abilities and strength (Jer 17:5)

THE PICKING OF A LEADER (JUDGES 11:6-11)

Issues of picking based on human standards (6-8)

Human standards that God frustrates (1 Cor 1:18-21)

Human standards that is empowered through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:3-7)

Human standards that use human wisdom (1 Cor 2:12-14)

Human standards that are foolishness in God's sight (1 Cor 3:18-19)

Issues of seeking God's approval of man's choices (9-11)

Seeking approvals through deciding whose approval is more important, God or man (Gal 1:10)

Seeking approvals through the commendations of God (2 Cor 10:18)

Seeking approvals by trying to please God not men (1 Thess 2:4)

THE SPIRIT'S PROTECTION AND HUMAN VOW (JUDGES 11:29-31)

God attentiveness to His people (29)

God is attentive to prayers (Ps 34:15)

God is attentive or the sake of His covenant (Ps 106:43-45)

God is attentive to the needs of obedient servants (Isa 58:6-11)

Unwise vows (30-31)

Unwise vows are those not kept (Eccl 5:4)

Unwise vows are slow about fulfilling (Deut 23:21)

Unwise vows be must kept even when it hurts (Ps 15:2-4)

Unwise vows are those hastily or rashly given (Prov 20:25)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

Jephthah and the Ammonites

Jephthah's Promotion Judges 10:17—11:11

Jephthah's Diplomatic Effort Judges 11:12-28

Jephthah's Vow and Israel's War with the Ammonites Judges 11:29-33

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

PRACTICAL POINTS FROM THE BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND ILLUMINATOR COMMENTARY

Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson explores the facts relating to the character of the person **Jephthah**. The **study's aim** is to demonstrate that God gives the results He wants despite the failures of the person He calls. The **study's application** is to encourage us to be prepared in heart and spirit for a call from God.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Judges 11:9

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?"

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

11:1-6. In response to the Ammonite invasion of **Gilead**, the Israelites assembled and camped at **Mizpah** (probably Ramath Mizpeh [Khirbet Jalad, about 14 miles northeast of Rabbath-ammon, i.e., modern Amman] or Ramoth Gilead [Tel Ramith, about 40 miles north of Rabbath Ammon]). The first task of Israel was to search for a military **commander**. Their search led them to seek **Jephthah** (11:4-6), a notorious leader of men whose earlier family history is summarized in 11:1-3. Like Abimelech (cf. chap. 9), Jephthah was probably a half-Canaanite (**his mother was a prostitute**). He was driven from home by his half brothers (11:2). **In the land of Tob** (probably north of Ammon and east of Manasseh) he **gathered around himself a group of adventurers** (v. 3, probably meaning "a band of brigands").

11:7-11. The elders of Gilead persisted in the face of Jephthah's rebuke (v. 8). They cemented their promise that Jephthah would be their civil leader **over... Gilead** after he won a military victory by making a formal and solemn oath with **the LORD** as **witness** (v. 10). This was followed by a formal swearing-in ceremony at **Mizpah**. In contrast with the judgeship of Gideon, who was initially called by the Lord, Jephthah was initially called by other men. However, **the LORD** was called to witness their selection (vv. 10-11) and He placed His Spirit on Jephthah to achieve victory (v. 29).

11:12-13. Surprisingly Jephthah's first step as commander of Gilead was to seek a nonmilitary settlement to the conflict. Through **messengers** he asked **the Ammonite king** why he had **attacked** Gilead. The king's reply came in the form of an accusation—**When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land**—which Jephthah proceeded to demonstrate was untrue (vv. 14-27). Yet the Ammonite **king** offered peace to Jephthah for the return of the land. **The Arnon** and **the Jabbok** are rivers that formed the southern and northern boundaries of Ammon. South of the Arnon was Moab. The Arnon flows into the Dead Sea and the Jabbok into the Jordan River.

11:14-22. **Jephthah** applied his knowledge of Israel's history (learned either from written or oral sources) to refute **the Ammonite king's** claim. In passing, **Jephthah** indicated that **Israel** had acquiesced to the refusal of **Edom** (cf. Num. 20:14-21) and **Moab** to permit passage through their lands (Judges 11:17-18). However, when Israel circled the borders of Edom and Moab, **and camped on the other side of the Arnon** (the more usual northern **border** of Moab), **Sihon king of the Amorites** also refused **Israel** passage northwest to the Jordan River, and **fought** against **Israel**. **The LORD** gave Israel the victory and **Israel took over all the land of the Amorites... from the Arnon to the Jabbok**—the land now under dispute between the Ammonites and the Gileadites (cf. v. 13). This area was really southern Gilead (the rest of Gilead was north of the Jabbok River), and its southern portion (from the Arnon to a line extending eastward from the north end of the Dead Sea) was periodically in Moabite hands.

11:23-24. Jephthah thus argued that **the LORD** had given this land to **Israel**. He concluded this point of his argument by indicating that Ammon should be satisfied with the land that their **god Chemosh** had given them and should not contest the land **the LORD** had given Israel. Historically Chemosh was the god of the Moabites, and Milcam (or Molech) was god of the Ammonites. However, Jephthah seemed to be referring to the god of that portion of the land which had previously belonged to the Moabites before Sihon had pushed Moab south of the Arnon. Another explanation is that the Moabites were in alliance with the Ammonites in this attack on Gilead, so that Jephthah was really addressing the Moabites at this point in his argument. A third possibility is that the Ammonites had adopted the worship of Chemosh by this time.

11:25-27. Jephthah also argued that **Balak... king of Moab**, to whom part of the area in question used to belong, had consented to Israel's right to this area. In fact, Jephthah claimed, the land at the time of the Ammonite invasion had been Israel's **for 300 years** without any surrounding nations contesting it. Thus

Jephthah denied any wrongdoing on Israel's part against Ammon. Ammon was in the **wrong** by warring **against** Israel.

11:28. Jephthah's attempt at diplomacy failed since **the king of Ammon... paid no attention to his message.**

11:29. The purpose of **the Spirit of the LORD** coming on **Jephthah** was to provide divine enablement in his military leadership against the pagan oppressors whom the Lord had been using to chasten His people (cf. 3:10; 6:34; 13:25; 15:14). The presence of the Holy Spirit with Old Testament leaders was primarily for the purpose of accomplishing services for God, not specifically for holy living. Thus the presence of the Spirit with Jephthah was not necessarily related to his vow or its fulfillment, recorded in the following verses. Jephthah's trip through **Gilead and Manasseh** was apparently to recruit his army.

11:30-31. That **Jephthah made a vow to the LORD** was not unusual in the Mosaic dispensation. Jephthah may have made the vow in anticipation of thanksgiving for divinely provided victory over **the Ammonites**. While the vow showed Jephthah's zeal and earnestness, many have thought it was also characterized by rashness. Some scholars have sought to protect Jephthah from this charge by translating verse 31, "it will be the LORD's or I will offer it up as a burnt offering." However, the NIV more likely reflects Jephthah's intention—**I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.**

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

Sin inevitably brings divine judgment, or discipline, in one form or another. For those who claim the name of the Lord, that discipline is specifically designed to bring them to repentance. In Judges 10, we learn that it took eighteen years of oppression at the hands of the powerful Ammonites to finally bring Israel to repentance from their idolatry (vss. 6-18). Not only did God's chastisement drive His people to confession of sin and repentance, but it also drove them to desperation. In seeking someone to lead them against their enemies, the Israelites, particularly those east of the Jordan, turned to a man they had previously rejected and disowned—Jephthah. They were no longer concerned about Jephthah's parentage or even his morality; they wanted a skilled military leader. Jephthah's initial response was what we might expect. These people who wanted nothing to do with him before now wanted him only because they needed him. The leaders of Gilead, now perhaps humbled, offered to make Jephthah "head over... Gilead" (Judg. 11:8). Jephthah's words in our text suggest a man who was looking out primarily for his own interests while maintaining some distrust toward his former countrymen. He wanted to make sure their promise to make him their head was in fact kept. It is even possible to take the Hebrew translation of Judges 11:9 as an affirmative statement rather than a question (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Hendrickson). If so, Jephthah was asserting, almost in a threatening way, that he would be their head. While Jephthah's response does not indicate that he was a very spiritually minded man, and this is somewhat borne out by subsequent events, there is one glimmer of light in his words. He suggested that any victory that came would come by the hand of the Lord. Of course, this could be taken as empty words or conventional speech that lacked sincerity. Yet in his negotiations with the Ammonites, Jephthah demonstrated his knowledge of Israel's history and of Israel's God-given right to the land, and he called on the Lord to deliver the Ammonites into his hands. This is exactly what the Lord did. Our text thus reveals in a veiled way the two conflicting sides of Jephthah's character. He was driven by past hurts and distrustful of his fellow Israelites. He was looking out for himself, no doubt because he had learned that no one else would. Yet somewhere deep within him was a flickering spark of faith. He remembered what the Lord had done in the past, and he still believed the Lord was on the side of His people. For all his faults, he was a man of faith and enshrined as such in Hebrews 11:32. While Jephthah is something of a spiritual enigma to us, he is to some degree also a reflection of us. We are not as consistent as we should be in following the Lord, but we have a gracious, merciful, and powerful God who can use people like Jephthah and people like us when we simply trust Him.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Who are the greatest leaders you can name? Chances are, even though those on your list accomplished great things, some parts of their lives were far from virtuous. Abraham Lincoln is known as the Great Emancipator. Nevertheless, he once wrote, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it." Mahatma Gandhi led India to independence. Yet, he opposed the adoption of modern technology that would have helped his nation become more prosperous, freeing them from decades of poverty. Henry Ford was a pioneer in

automotive engineering. But Ford also sponsored a weekly newspaper that published anti-Semitic views. Steve Jobs was undoubtedly a tech genius responsible for many innovations that changed the way we receive, store, and interact with information. But he was known for eccentricities such as odd diets and a refusal to bathe! It is obvious that no human leader is perfect. Even the most popular and most effective leaders have flaws. Today we will look at a judge in Israel who was used by God in spite of the man's huge imperfections.

The land of Israel was undisturbed for 40 years after Gideon defeated the Midianites (Judges 8:28). That is the last period of peace mentioned in the book of Judges. Peace came to an end after Gideon died when Abimelech, one of Gideon's 70 sons, attempted to kill all of his brothers (Judges 9). He had a three-year reign, but it was more as a ruler of a city-state, not as a ruler over all Israel. At the conclusion of a rebellion, Abimelech captured a nearby city where people had taken refuge in a fortified tower. But he ventured too close to the tower and died after being hit in the head by a millstone (Judges 9:50-55; compare 2 Samuel 11:21). The judges Tola and Jair came next, with their services lasting 23 and 22 years, respectively (Judges 10:1-3). It is generally concluded that the two men were judges at about the same time, but in different parts of Israel. The axiom "The only thing learned from history is that no one learns from history" was verified in Israel time after time. Israel's sin-cycle repeated itself anew as the Israelites again embraced idolatry (Judges 10:6). Consequently, the Lord sold them into the hands of the Ammonites and the Philistines for 18 years (10:7, 8). This is estimated as having been on both sides of 1100 BC. When the Israelites cried out for deliverance, the Lord challenged them to cry out to the gods that they had chosen (10:14). The people eventually repented and appealed to God again (10:15, 16). The Ammonites had come from the east and oppressed the Israelites on both sides of the Jordan River (Judges 10:7-9). The people had repented, but they needed someone to organize them and lead in the effort to expel the Ammonites. That man was Jephthah, and he is the delivering judge in this lesson. The opening verses of Judges 11 provide background information about Jephthah himself. His father, Gilead, had sons by his wife, but Jephthah had a different mother. This factor caused his brothers to drive him from home. Jephthah went north to the land of Tob. He had the ability to lead, and soon other men came to him. They are called "scoundrels" in Judges 11:3, which may speak to their being of low character. It is usually assumed that Jephthah's guerilla force raided nearby areas, even in Ammon itself.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

The Threat (Judges 11:4-5)

4 It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel.

5 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.

Fear of war (4)

Fear of war because of previous disputes (2 Chron 27:5)

5 Jotham made war on the king of the Ammonites and conquered them. That year the Ammonites paid him a hundred talents of silver, ten thousand cors of wheat and ten thousand cors of barley. The Ammonites brought him the same amount also in the second and third years.

Fear of war because of great distress between the nations (Judg 10:9)

9 The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress.

Fear of war because it would influence the future (2 Sam 10:6)

6 When the Ammonites realized that they had become a stench in David's nostrils, they hired twenty thousand Aramean foot soldiers from Beth Rehob and Zobah, as well as the king of Maacah with a thousand men, and also twelve thousand men from Tob.

Lack of trust in God (5)

Lack of trust in God because there is no belief in Him (Ps 78:22)

22 for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance.

Lack of trust in God because of trust in things that are worthless (Job 15:31)

31 Let him not deceive himself by trusting what is worthless, for he will get nothing in return.

Lack of trust in God because of forgetting about God (Job 8:13-15)

13 Such is the destiny of all who forget God; so perishes the hope of the godless. 14 What he trusts in is fragile; what he relies on is a spider's web. 15 He leans on his web, but it gives way; he clings to it, but it does not hold.

Lack of trust in God because of depending on own abilities and strength (Jer 17:5)

5 This is what the Lord says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord.

The Picking of a Leader (Judges 11:6-11)

6 Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon."

7 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?"

8 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."

9 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?"

10 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."

11 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.

Issues of picking based on human standards (6-8)

Human standards that God frustrates (1 Cor 1:18-21)

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

Human standards that is empowered through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:3-7)

3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. 6 We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

Human standards that use human wisdom (1 Cor 2:12-14)

12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Human standards that are foolishness in God's sight (1 Cor 3:18-19)

18 Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"

Issues of seeking God's approval of man's choices (9-11)

Seeking approvals through deciding whose approval is more important, God or man (Gal 1:10)

10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Seeking approvals through the commendations of God (2 Cor 10:18)

18 For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Seeking approvals by trying to please God not men (1 Thess 2:4)

4 On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.

The Spirit's Protection and Human Vow (Judges 11:29-31)

29 Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon.

30 And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands,

31 then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

God attentiveness to His people (29)

God is attentive to prayers (Ps 34:15)

15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry;

God is attentive or the sake of His covenant (Ps 106:43-45)

43 Many times he delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin. 44 But he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; 45 for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented.

God is attentive to the needs of obedient servants (Isa 58:6-11)

6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Unwise vows (30-31)

Unwise vows are those not kept (Eccl 5:4)

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.

Unwise vows are slow about fulfilling (Deut 23:21)

21 If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.

Unwise vows be must kept even when it hurts (Ps 15:2-4)

2 He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart 3 and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, 4 who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps his oath even when it hurts,

Unwise vows are those hastily or rashly given (Prov 20:25)

25 It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Jephthah and the Ammonites

Jephthah's Promotion Judges 10:17—11:11

10:17 The Ammonites assembled and camped in Gilead; the Israelites gathered together and camped in Mizpah. 18 The leaders of Gilead said to one another, "Who is willing to lead the charge against the Ammonites? He will become the leader of all who live in Gilead!" 11:1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a brave warrior. His mother was a prostitute, but Gilead was his father. 2 Gilead's wife also gave him sons. When his wife's sons grew up, they made Jephthah leave and said to him, "You are not going to inherit any of our father's wealth, because you are another woman's son." 3 So Jephthah left his half-brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Lawless men joined Jephthah's gang and traveled with him. 4 It was some time after this when the Ammonites fought with Israel. 5 When the Ammonites attacked, the leaders of Gilead asked Jephthah to come back from the land of Tob. 6 They said, "Come, be our commander, so we can fight with the Ammonites." 7 Jephthah said to the leaders of Gilead, "But you hated me and made me leave my father's house. Why do you come to me now, when you are in trouble?" 8 The leaders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That may be true, but now we pledge to you our loyalty. Come with us and fight with the Ammonites. Then you will become the leader of all who live in Gilead." 9 Jephthah said to the leaders of Gilead, "All right! If you take me back to fight with the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me, I will be your leader." 10 The leaders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The Lord will judge any grievance you have against us, if we do not do as you say." 11 So Jephthah went with the leaders of Gilead. The people made him their leader and commander. Jephthah repeated the terms of the agreement before the Lord in Mizpah (Judges 10:17—11:11).

At this point, Jephthah enters the story as he is the deliverer that God raised up to rescue the Israelites from the cruel oppression of the Ammonites. He was a brave and powerful warrior, but he, like Abimelech before him, had a less than impeccable pedigree. His father was Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute. Unlike Abimelech, who did away with his brothers, Jephthah was driven off by his (more legitimate) brothers. Over time, a group of rather unsavory men gathered about Jephthah, and it seems as though they engaged in some kind of military endeavors. It seems that it was these military ventures that proved Jephthah to be a **"mighty man of valor."** They did not want to share any of their inheritance with him. But now that the Ammonites were about to wage war against them, the Israelites were very eager to recruit Jephthah as their commander-in-chief (with the emphasis on the word **"commander"**).

One cannot fault Jephthah for being skeptical about the Israelites' invitation to return and to lead the nation in battle. Why should he be interested in delivering those who had driven him off earlier? And could these folks be trusted? Would they "use" him as much and as long as they could, and then cast him aside, or would he be free to direct the Israelites without interference? The leaders of Gilead assured Jephthah that they would make him their leader and that he would be remembered as Israel's deliverer for a long, long time.

And so Jephthah agreed to lead the Israelites in battle. Jephthah promised to be their leader if the Lord granted him victory over the Ammonites. The leaders of Gilead functionally vowed to stand with and under Jephthah. In turn, Jephthah repeated the terms of his agreement with the Israelites **"before the Lord in Mizpah."** This was virtually a covenant between God and Jephthah and the nation of Israel, as can be discerned from the author's statement that Jephthah repeated the specific commitments of this agreement before the Lord (verse 11).

Jephthah's Diplomatic Effort Judges 11:12-28

12 Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king, saying, "Why have you come against me to attack my land?" 13 The Ammonite king said to Jephthah's messengers, "Because Israel stole my land when they came up from Egypt – from the Arnon River in the south to the Jabbok River in the north, and as far west as the Jordan. Now return it peaceably!"

14 Jephthah sent messengers back to the Ammonite king 15 and said to him, "This is what Jephthah says, 'Israel did not steal the land of Moab and the land of the Ammonites. 16 When they left Egypt, Israel traveled through the desert as far as the Red Sea and then came to Kadesh. 17 Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, "Please allow us to pass through your land." But the king of Edom rejected the request. Israel sent the same request to the king of Moab, but he was unwilling to cooperate. So Israel stayed at Kadesh. 18 Then Israel went through the desert and bypassed the land of Edom and the land of Moab. They traveled east of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon River; they did not go through Moabite territory (the Arnon was Moab's border). 19 Israel sent messengers to King Sihon, the Amorite king who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, "Please allow us to pass through your land to our land." 20 But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He assembled his whole army, camped in Jahaz, and fought with Israel. 21 The Lord God of Israel handed Sihon and his whole army over to Israel and they defeated them. Israel took all the land of the Amorites who lived in that land. 22 They took all the Amorite territory from the Arnon River on the south to the Jabbok River on the north, from the desert in the east to the Jordan in the west. 23 Since the Lord God of Israel has driven out the Amorites before his people Israel, do you think you can just take it from them? 24 You have the right to take what Chemosh your god gives you, but we will take the land of all whom the Lord our God has driven out before us. 25 Are you really better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he dare to quarrel with Israel? Did he dare to fight with them? 26 Israel has been living in Heshbon and its nearby towns, in Aroer and its nearby towns, and in all the cities along the Arnon for three hundred years! Why did you not reclaim them during that time? 27 I have not done you wrong, but you are doing wrong by attacking me. May the Lord, the Judge, judge this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites!" 28 But the Ammonite king disregarded the message sent by Jephthah (Judges 11:12-28).

To his credit (in my opinion), Jephthah sought to avoid a military confrontation by first attempting a diplomatic solution. He sent emissaries to the Ammonite king (note that he is not named), inquiring why he was in the process of attacking Israel. The king's response was direct and to the point. Roughly paraphrased he said, "I am coming to take back the land that rightfully belongs to the Ammonites because the Israelites stole it from us when they made their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. Give it back to us, and there will be no need to fight with you."

It is interesting to observe what happens when Jephthah does battle with the Ephraimites at the end of chapter 12. Every time an Ephraimite attempted to say "*Shibboleth*," it came out "*Sibboleth*," knowing that the outcome was the difference between life and death (12:5-6). When we come to chapter 11, there is a very important distinction which the reader must make; it is noting the difference between the *Ammonites* and the *Amorites*.

The *Ammonites* were "distant cousins" of the Israelites, originating from the son of Lot's union with his younger daughter (Genesis 19:38). The Moabites were descendants of Lot's union with his older daughter (Genesis 19:36-37). The Edomites were the descendants of Edom (Esau). The *Amorites* **were not** relatives of the Israelites. Indeed, the term *Amorites* was almost synonymous with *Canaanites*:

12 When the sun went down, Abram fell sound asleep, and great terror overwhelmed him. 13 Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign country. They will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. 14 But I will execute judgment on the nation that they will serve. Afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 But as for you, you will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. 16 In the fourth generation your descendants will return here, **for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its limit**" (Genesis 15:12-16, emphasis mine).

When the Israelites escaped from Egypt, God directed them to approach Canaan from the eastern side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. This required the Israelites to pass through (or close by) the land of the Edomites, the Moabites, and the Ammonites. God would not give the Israelites the land which He had already given to their relatives, but the Amorites were another matter altogether. When the Israelites approached the Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, they made the same request they had made of their brothers, the Edomites and the Moabites. Sihon and Og chose to attack the Israelites, rather than to allow them to pass through their land. God gave the Israelites the victory, so that Israel possessed their land. This was the territory running north from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River (a distance of about 50 miles), and eastward from the Jordan River for a

distance of about 20 miles. The Ammonites' land was to the east of Israel's new territory (formerly belonging to the Amorites), for a distance of approximately 20 to 30 miles.

So, when all is said and done, the king of the Ammonites was wrong. The Israelites did not take possession of Ammonite land; they fought with and defeated the Amorites, taking possession of their land. The land east of the Jordan was then divided among the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh.

God gave the Amorites into the hand of the Israelites, who defeated them and possessed their land. But He did not allow the Israelites to possess the territory of the Ammonites:

“However, you did not approach the land of the Ammonites, the Wadi Jabbok, the cities of the hill country, or any place else forbidden by the Lord our God” (Deuteronomy 2:37).

The king of the Ammonites attempted to “re-write history” so that he would be justified in his efforts to seize Israel's land east of the Jordan. Jephthah knew his history, and he rather neatly put the Ammonite king in his place.

But Jephthah wasn't finished. He had several other lines of defense which he conveyed to this ambitious king. In addition to his historical argument, Jephthah added his theological argument. Israel is merely dwelling on the land that God (the only true God, the God of Israel) gave them. The Ammonites should likewise be content with what their god, Chemosh, gives them. If Israel's God is a greater God than the no-god Chemosh, the Ammonites would be well advised to “back off” or become the adversaries of Israel's God.

Jephthah now raises a third argument, based upon the actions of Balak, king of Moab. Balak was threatened by Israel's presence nearby (even if they claimed merely to be passing by). Balak may have tried to deal with Israel's threat by hiring Balaam to curse Israel (something that didn't work and that is not mentioned here), but the one thing he didn't do was to gather his army and seek to prevail over the Israelites in battle. If Balak did not find it advisable to attack Israel, then perhaps the king of Ammon should learn from his example.

There is a fourth and final argument, a chronological argument. It wasn't as though Israel had just recently come into possession of the territory east of the Jordan. Her military victories and possession of the trans-Jordan territory occurred some 300 years ago, and thus for 300 years, the Israelites had possession of this land. The Ammonites (and anyone else who dared to try) had ample time and opportunities to attempt taking possession of the trans-Jordan territory of the Israelites. If there is a “statute of limitations” for certain actions, surely it would apply to Israel's possession of this land.

Jephthah now concludes his debate with the king of the Ammonites in verse 27:

“I have not done you wrong, but you are doing wrong by attacking me. May the Lord, the Judge, judge this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites!”

This is the kind of diplomacy I like. It is not the “diplomacy” which has as its goal the avoidance of conflict at any cost. It is the straightforward, plain talk that seeks to discern the intentions and motivations of the adversary, that attempts to correct misinformation, and that makes it clear where you stand and what you intend to do. If the Ammonites wish to engage in war, so be it, but it is really nothing more than raw aggression. They are not seeking to correct some long-neglected wrong. And let them be fully aware that any attack will be dealt with on a higher level of authority. If the Ammonites attack, the Israelites will fight, but they will also rest their case with God, who is Judge over all. And let them recall that those nations which rejected Israel's peaceful negotiations in the past suffered defeat at the hands of the Israelites and their God.

Jephthah's Vow and Israel's War with the Ammonites Judges 11:29-33

29 The Lord's spirit empowered Jephthah. He passed through Gilead and Manasseh and went to Mizpah in Gilead. From there he approached the Ammonites. 30 Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, saying, “If you really do hand the Ammonites over to me, 31 then whoever is the first to come through the doors of my house to meet me when I return safely from fighting the Ammonites – he will belong to the Lord and I will offer him up as a burnt sacrifice.” 32 Jephthah approached the Ammonites to fight with them, and the Lord handed them over to him. 33 He defeated them from Aroer all the way to Minnith – twenty cities in all, even as far as Abel Keramim! He wiped them out! The Israelites humiliated the Ammonites (Judges 11:29-33).

The king of the Ammonites was not going to be deterred, and so he completely disregarded Jephthah's diplomatic efforts. There was going to be war and this king, like those before him, would learn the price of waging war against the Israelites and their God. It is at this point that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, energizing him for battle. The puzzling part of our passage is that much more space is devoted to Jephthah's vow and its consequences than to an account of Israel's victory over the Ammonites.

How is it that the first thing Jephthah does after the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him is to make a vow, a vow that he will later regret? The first thing we should know is that vows like that of Jephthah were not uncommon in Israel.

1 When the Canaanite king of Arad who lived in the Negev heard that Israel was approaching along the road to Atharim, he fought against Israel and took some of them prisoner. 2 So Israel made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will indeed deliver this people into our hand, then we will utterly destroy their cities" (Numbers 21:1-2).

She made a vow saying, "O Lord of hosts, if you will look with compassion on the suffering of your female servant, remembering me and not forgetting your servant, and give a male child to your servant, then I will dedicate him to the Lord all the days of his life. His hair will never be cut" (1 Samuel 1:11).

9 But as for me, I promise to offer a sacrifice to you with a public declaration of praise; I will surely do what I have promised [literally, "vowed"].

Salvation belongs to the Lord!" (Jonah 2:9)

It was rather common in Israel for an individual or a group to make a vow, promising that if God gave deliverance (in some manner) that the individual would go to offer a sacrifice and to worship, and there proclaim the work which God had done. The psalms supply numerous examples of praise offered to God publicly because of His deliverance. It is important for us to see that it was not wrong for Jephthah to make a vow to God, promising to offer a sacrifice if God would answer his request. Therefore, the only thing wrong with Jephthah's vow that I can see is that it was carelessly worded. As we shall see in just a few verses (as reflected in the title of this message), "words matter."

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/12-jephthah-words-matter-judges-101-1215>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

There is no such thing as a perfect leader. And if the elders of Gilead were looking for one, they certainly did not find him in Jephthah! Yet God used that man for his purposes in his time. There is a fine line to walk here when it comes to looking for church leaders. If the leadership values in 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-9; etc., are taken as absolute qualifications, then the church may end up with no elders and deacons! There are no perfect church leaders. On the other hand, to view these characteristics as qualities rather than qualifications may put one on the path to "explaining away" a potential leader's shortcomings—with disaster looming. The solution is to be on the lookout for diamonds in the rough, potential leaders who are open to mentoring. Paul trained Timothy and Titus for years to assume leadership roles; tomorrow's leaders need today's training.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. In God's time He will reveal His purpose for our lives (Judg. 11:4-5)
2. God's power will draw people to those He has called in time of need, in spite of any previous rejections (vss. 6-7)
3. God knows how to unite His people in order to defeat the enemy (vs. 8)
4. Under God's authority, we can set our own terms of agreement with others (vs. 9)
5. Everyone is subject to God (vss. 10-11)
6. When God establishes a leader, he will be triumphant (vss. 29-31)