

JEPHTHAH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Acts 15:6-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Judges 11

JUDGES 11:4-11, 29-31

⁴ Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel, ⁵ the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ “Come,” they said, “be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites.”

⁷ Jephthah said to them, “Didn’t you hate me and drive me from my father’s house? Why do you come to me now, when you’re in trouble?”

⁸ The elders of Gilead said to him, “Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead.”

⁹ Jephthah answered, “Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?”

¹⁰ The elders of Gilead replied, “The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say.” ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

²⁹ Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, ³¹ whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”



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KEY VERSE

Jephthah answered, “Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?”—Judges 11:9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the conditions of the agreements made between Jephthah and the elders of Gilead.
2. Compare and contrast the vow of the elders of Gilead with the vow of Jephthah.

3. Dramatize a situation in which participants work to overcome suspicion of one another.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. Imperfect Leaders

B. Lesson Background

I. Reluctant Ally ([Judges 11:4-7](#))

A. Present Need ([vv. 4-6](#))

How Do We Respond?

B. Past Abuse ([v. 7](#))

II. Leadership Contract ([Judges 11:8-11, 29](#))

A. Position Promised ([vv. 8-10](#))

B. Commitment Confirmed ([v. 11](#))

C. Spirit Strengthens ([v. 29](#))

III. Rash Vow ([Judges 11:30, 31](#))

A. The “If ...” Clause ([v. 30](#))

B. The “Then ...” Clause ([v. 31](#))

Rash Promises

Conclusion

A. On the Lookout for Leadership

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Imperfect Leaders

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.

B. Lesson Background

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.

I. Reluctant Ally

([JUDGES 11:4-7](#))

A. Present Need ([vv. 4-6](#))

4. Some time later, when the Ammonites were fighting against Israel,

The historical review was a reminder about what was given early in [Judges 10:7-9](#)—that idolatry in Israel has consequences. Israel is attacked by people immediately to the east. These raiders are intent on looting, and they often commit atrocities against anyone who resists.

5. the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob.

Gilead, located east of the Jordan River, is territory allocated to tribes Reuben and Gad plus the half-tribe of Manasseh of Israel’s 12 tribes ([Deuteronomy 3:12-17](#)). *The elders of Gilead* apparently can find no one locally who is willing and able to lead a military resistance. So in desperation and shame, they travel northeast as a group to *the land of Tob* to ask Jephthah to return. Conjectures have been made that he knows some of these men personally. He may have looked up to them in his youth. But in figurative terms, they are crawling to him for help.

What Do You Think?

How should we deal with people who come to us only because they need our help?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding fellow believers

Regarding unbelievers

6. “Come,” they said, “be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites.”

The elders of Gilead make their offer to Jephthah, and the task that they have for him is very specific. They do not ask him to become a fellow elder, etc. The request to *be our commander* is that Jephthah serve as a military leader.

As that leader against the Ammonites, Jephthah is aware that he and his men will have the spoils of war if they are the victors (compare [Numbers 31:9-12, 25-47](#)). Jephthah, however, has no assurance of victory. His situation is different from that of Gideon in the [previous lesson](#). Gideon was called by the Lord. Jephthah is being called by men who need help.

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

The war in Vietnam was one of the more troublesome military ventures in American history. It was a proxy war: North Vietnam supported by Communist China and the Soviet Union vs. South Vietnam backed by America and its allies. American involvement was significant by the mid-1960s, and the country became deeply divided over the war. Protests sprang up all over the country. Many believed the government had lied to them about the reason for the war, the need to escalate it, the number of casualties, and the chances for victory. The military draft became increasingly unpopular, and many thousands were accused of draft dodging.

Provisionally for Israel, Jephthah was willing to serve! (Apparently Israel had men willing to fight as soldiers, but no one qualified to lead them.) Most of us never have had to face the danger of armed warfare. But we are called to demonstrate spiritual courage now, as our country struggles through another wrenching time of cultural decline. This applies to both spiritual leader and “foot soldier.” When the challenge comes to engage in spiritual battle, do you respond “Here am I. Send me!” ([Isaiah 6:8](#))? —C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances, if any, would you refuse to serve in your country’s armed forces?

Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering cases of armed intervention on behalf of another country (rescue)

Considering cases of self-defense after being attacked

Considering service as a noncombatant

B. Past Abuse (v. 7)

7. Jephthah said to them, “Didn’t you hate me and drive me from my father’s house? Why do you come to me now, when you’re in trouble?”

Jephthah responds to the invitation with two rhetorical questions. The first one confirms that at least some of these leaders were involved in his being sent into personal exile. Jephthah makes the accusation that they had hated him, and that they had at least concurred with the decision of his brothers when they drove him from home. He rebukes the elders of Gilead for their part in his expulsion from the area many years before.

Jephthah’s second question serves as a reprimand. Since they are congenial toward him only in their hour of need, their hypocrisy is clear.

Comparisons have been made with the occasion in Egypt centuries prior to this event when Joseph’s brothers appeared before him. That family situation also involved more than one mother, but that factor was not as important as it is here (see the Lesson Background).

What Do You Think?

In what circumstances, if any, should past mistreatment be considered in making decisions?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In issues involving only family members

In issues involving governmental power structures

In issues involving only unbelievers

Other

II. Leadership Contract

(JUDGES 11:8-11, 29)

A. Position Promised (vv. 8-10)

8. The elders of Gilead said to him, “Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all of us who live in Gilead.”

Jephthah’s rhetorical questions result in the conditional promise we see here. We notice that *the elders of Gilead* are using a negotiating tactic that is still used today. These leaders had decided beforehand that whoever leads the fight against the Ammonites will be *head over all of us who live in Gilead* (see [Judges 10:18](#)). But the initial offer in [Judges 11:6](#) is only the position of “commander.” Getting resistance to that, the elders now make their best and final offer, an offer decided in advance.

9. Jephthah answered, “Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me—will I really be your head?”

The new offer to be *head* gets Jephthah’s attention! If the Lord enables him to be victorious, are they definitely saying that that will happen? The last phrase in this verse is given as a question, but can also be taken as an affirmation: I will be your head.

A subtle change has taken place. In the previous verse it was the elders who gave the conditions for Jephthah’s becoming their head. In this verse the same conditions are repeated and become Jephthah’s conditions to them.

10. The elders of Gilead replied, “The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say.”

In [verses 9-11](#), Jephthah seems to take a little revenge against his own people as they swear an oath to make him their head as well as commander over the fighting forces. It is either all or nothing! The sting of illegitimacy now becomes tolerable as Jephthah contemplates his change in circumstances.

It is a serious thing to incorporate the name of *the Lord* into a vow, and that is what *the elders of Gilead* do when they say that *the Lord* is their *witness*. The leaders of Gilead understand that Jephthah may not believe them, so they say that with the Lord as their witness, they will keep their word.

This type of oath is done in special situations. When Ruth made her pledge to Naomi, she incorporated the name of the Lord into her statement ([Ruth 1:17](#)). The high priest put Christ under oath when he commanded Jesus to say whether or not he was the Christ ([Matthew 26:63, 64](#)). Normally, however, the Christian is not to swear oaths in the name of the Lord ([Matthew 5:33-37](#); [James 5:12](#)), although Paul takes a vow on at least one occasion ([Acts 18:18](#)). Christians are to be seen as trustworthy when they speak.

What Do You Think?

How should we respond when faced with the opportunity to take an oath or vow that is expected by culture?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding legal, courtroom situations
- Regarding oaths of office
- Regarding wedding vows
- Other

B. Commitment Confirmed (v. 11)

11. So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

The scene changes as Jephthah accompanies *the elders of Gilead* to a place named *Mizpah*, also spelled Mizpeh. There is more than one town of this name; one view identifies the location as being on the east side of the Jordan River. Another Mizpah is situated about six miles due north of Jerusalem ([Joshua 18:26](#); also known as Jebus per [Judges 19:11](#)), between Ramah and Bethel (see [Judges 4:5, lesson 1](#)).

It was the elders who gave the original invitation to Jephthah, but now it is *the people* who have the final confirmation on his being their *head and commander*. The same two words that were used in [verses 6](#) and [8](#) are used in reverse order. It is logical that Jephthah wants immediate authority to organize the people for the pending military campaign.

But first, Jephthah tries diplomacy. [Judges 11:12-28](#) (not in today's lesson text) informs us that he sends messengers to the king of Ammon to discover the nature of that man's grievance against Israel. The king responds with the charge that the Israelites had taken his land when they came out of Egypt. Jephthah's reply shows that he knows the facts of history better than does the king of Ammon! Ultimately, however, that king reveals that he is not interested in the facts of history, as he refuses a peaceful solution that is based on those facts.

C. Spirit Strengthens (v. 29)

29a. Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah.

[Verse 6](#) of our text indicates that it is men who call Jephthah to serve, not the Lord. In the verse before us, God sanctifies that decision, given that *the Spirit of the Lord* comes on Jephthah.

In Old Testament times, the Spirit of the Lord comes on select individuals to empower them for specific tasks. An example is Bezalel, who received the Spirit of God to lead in the construction of the tabernacle ([Exodus 35:30, 31](#)). In the book of Judges, there are four judges who receive this special gift: Othniel ([Judges 3:9, 10](#)), Gideon ([6:34, lesson 2](#)), Jephthah, and Samson ([14:6, 19; 15:14](#)). The fact that the Spirit comes three times on Samson indicates that the gift is not permanent.

What Do You Think?

How can we make sure we are not hindering the Holy Spirit in helping us meet life's challenges?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In everyday living
- On special occasions
- In emergencies

29b. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.

Jephthah needs more men in his fighting force. (Contrast the Lord's systematic reduction of Gideon's army from 32,000 to a mere 300 in [Judges 7:2-8](#).) It may be that the Spirit leads Jephthah to go on a recruiting tour throughout Gilead, and then north into the tribal territory of Manasseh. He would be well-known to the people of that area, for it is not far from Tob, where he lives. He returns to his starting point, organizes his forces, and begins his advance to the east to make contact with the foe.

III. Rash Vow

([JUDGES 11:30, 31](#))

A. The "If ..." Clause (v. 30)

30. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands,

Previously a vow was made by the men of Gilead, who asked Jephthah to return. This time it is Jephthah who makes *a vow*. He is doing something that he has not done before. He is ready to lead an army into battle, and he may feel insecure. He might have made raids on these people in the past, but this was an entirely different type of operation. This was not Jephthah's method—until now.

Jephthah's vow is more than a wish, and it goes beyond a simple prayer. This is a vow made to the Lord with the condition of what he wants

to accomplish in the impending battle. His desire is to have victory, and he uses a figure of speech to express it—that he wants the oppressors delivered into his hands.

B. The “Then ...” Clause (v. 31)

31. “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”

This verse is the famous vow of Jephthah. There are different opinions on what he actually intended to say, and what he did as a result.

The verses that follow reveal that Jephthah’s army was successful. When he comes home, it is his daughter who comes out to meet him with tambourines and dancing—his only daughter. Jephthah is grief stricken. The middle part of [Judges 11:39](#) reads this way in literalistic Hebrew: “he did to her his vow that he vowed.” Therefore it is certain that he kept his promise. It is also certain that the Spirit of the Lord had come on him earlier (v. 9), and it is certain that he is listed in [Hebrews 11:32](#) as a person of faith.

The older view about Jephthah is that he actually sacrificed his daughter when she returned from bewailing her virginity. The rationale for this interpretation includes these major considerations: (1) actual sacrifice is the natural sense of the text; (2) actual sacrifice was the interpretation for 2,000 years; (3) the old Greek translation of the Old Testament has “whoever” comes from his house, not “whatever”; and (4) neighboring people groups regularly sacrificed their children to their gods. The list could continue, but these are the major points.

In about AD 1200, Rabbi Kimchi proposed a different interpretation: Jephthah gave his daughter to the Lord to serve at the tabernacle (see [1 Samuel 1:23-28](#)). Support for this theory is based on (1) translating the final phrase of the verse at hand as “or I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering”; (2) the fact that the Hebrews are not to imitate their neighbors’ practices, including human sacrifice ([Deuteronomy 12:30, 31; 18:10](#)); (3) the daughter bewailed her virginity, not her death; and (4) Jephthah’s inclusion in [Hebrews 11](#) argues against his actually sacrificing his daughter.

Jephthah was faithful. He knew the history of his people. He was not crushed by rejection or adversity, but rose above it. He could overlook the bad behavior of his brothers in order to help people in need. He received a special gift of the Holy Spirit, and he kept his word—especially to God.

RASH PROMISES

Remember as a youngster when you made a hasty promise “not to tell,” but you ended up doing so anyway? Perhaps it involved a pledge to keep a secret, but you couldn’t resist gossiping about such juicy information. Perhaps someone told you not to tell anyone of a prank he or she committed, but you violated trust and did so anyway. There are all kinds of rash promises people make; the promise “not to tell” is just one of them.

There’s a lot of overlap in meaning of the words *promises*, *oaths*, and *vows*. All involve the making of a commitment, and God takes such commitments seriously (see [Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12](#); etc.). Jephthah, Saul ([1 Samuel 14:24, 43-45](#)), and others did so as well. The ungodly King Herod found himself trapped in a rash promise he had made ([Matthew 14:6-11](#)).

Before committing ourselves too quickly to certain paths in our service for Jesus, it’s important to count the cost of doing so ([Luke 14:28-33](#)). The more significant the opportunity seems to be, the greater should be the depth of prayer about it ([Colossians 4:3-5](#); etc.). The godly counsel of the spiritually mature can also keep us from making rash commitments ([Proverbs 15:22](#)). —C. R. B.

HOW TO SAY IT

Abimelech Uh-*bim*-eh-lek.

Ammon *Am*-mun.

Ammonites *Am*-un-ites.

Bezaleel Bih-*zal*-ih-el.

Gad Gad (*a* as in *bad*).

Gilead *Gil*-ee-ud (*G* as in *get*).

Jephthah *Jef*-thuh (*th* as in *thin*).

Mahatma Gandhi Muh-*hot*-muh Gon-dee.

Manasseh Muh-*nass*-uh.

Midianites *Mid*-ee-un-ites.

Mizpah *Miz*-pah.

Philistines Fuh-*liss*-teenz or *Fill*-us-teenz.

Reuben *Roo*-ben.



Visual for Lesson 3. Use this visual in conjunction with [Judges 11:8, 9](#) to open a discussion of how God is our ultimate leader in all situations.

Conclusion

A. On the Lookout for Leadership

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.

B. Prayer

We ask, O God, that you help us find, train, and follow leaders who will accomplish your will among us. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The God who makes a lump of coal a diamond can create faithful leaders from imperfect people.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

To begin class, write the following names and numbers on the board:

Barack Obama—69, 57

George W. Bush—90, 71

Bill Clinton—73, 54

George H. W. Bush—89, 60

Ronald Reagan—68, 56

Ask the class if they can guess what the two numbers after each name indicate. (They are the highest approval rating received by the president during a certain point in his administration followed by the highest disapproval rating received by the same president during another point in his administration.) After a few guesses, reveal the answer, noting that at a certain point in time, more than half of the American public disapproved of the job their president was doing!

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Imperfect Leaders” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work in groups or use as a whole-class activity.

After either activity lead into the Bible study by saying, “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 even though he had huge imperfections.”

Into the Word

Divide your class into three groups. Each group will prepare to act out a fictitious job interview for Jephthah.

Assignments and sample interview questions follow.

Group 1—Candidate’s Background (vv. 4-7, refer to vv. 1-3, if needed)

Tell us about your family background.

What qualifies you for this job?

Group 2—Job Desired (vv. 8-11)

What do you see as your job responsibilities?

What would you expect from us if you perform your duties to our satisfaction?

Group 3—Spiritual Background (vv. 29-31)

How would you describe your relationship with the God of Israel?

How will you ensure that God will help you succeed?

Allow time for the groups to perform their portions of the interview.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “All Is in Order” activity from the reproducible page. Have students work in small groups to put the key events of [Judges 11:4-11, 29-31](#) in chronological order.

Close either activity by saying, “Jephthah would not be someone we would expect to be a leader of God’s people. He had a rough background, was not well-liked by the people he would lead, and had a rather manipulative view of God. Yet God saw fit to use him! How can we ensure that those who are chosen for church leadership today get the preparation they need to do the best job possible?”

Into Life

To close, turn with the class to [1 Timothy 3:1-13](#). Have the class call out qualifications for church leaders found in these verses. Write them on the board as they are mentioned.

With that list before the class, ask the following questions:

How can we go about finding leaders with these qualifications?

What specific behaviors do you think would disqualify a person from leadership?

What part would the time frame of such behavior and whether or not it is habitual play in your consideration?

What types of training would help prepare people to meet some of these qualifications?

What other steps can a church take to prepare people for future positions of leadership?