

Can you imagine the prayer meeting? There was everyone praying before the big battle... tension... nerves... anxious bladders... knowing that very soon they may meet their maker to whom they were addressing their requests now... wanting safety, yet more than that, wanting the safety of families... they were here because their families were threatened. They were here because life had been unbearable under the heavy yoke of the Ammonites for 18 years, and now, finally, someone had enough nous and fortitude to organise the army to respond.

They were here because after a series of correspondence, the Ammonites had flatly refused to believe that not one square centimetre of Israelite land had once belonged to the people of Ammon.

& now as they faced the opposition, ready to die if needed, their judge and possible dictator prayed in Judges 11:30-31... *If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.*

Excuse me! Did I just hear it right? Did he just say that he would offer up a person to God as a burnt offering? Ahum... excuse me Jephthah, sir, but do you not know that God wants burnt offerings of animals, not people!? Did you get bored in reading Genesis and stop when Abraham was about to kill his son on the altar... you do know that God did provide a ram!

Yet Jephthah made the vow in solemn prayer before the battle.

No one corrected him. He was their leader.

To top it off, like Moses, he had been rejected by his people, and now he was back to be like the stone the builders rejected becoming the capstone. He was the son of a prostitute, whose half brothers had kicked him away for fear that he might inherit part of his father's portion.

After years of surviving in a foreign place, and becoming the leader of a band of thugs, family ties may not have meant much, but at least he could see the irony in now being called on to protect his father's people. They came, cap in hand and offered him leadership of their army and the dictatorship of his home area as well. He said *Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my*

father's house? So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble?

They are similar to God's words in Judges 10:11-14. But there, God said NO, I will no longer rescue you. He knew that they were only using him. He was used to their sham repentance and mere words. Their hearts were like stone. They did not love him, that is not why they came crawling for help. They came crawling for help because they could not take it any more. So he said *I will deliver you no more. Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress.*

But in Judges 10 the people still tried. They removed the idols and worshiped the Lord. But God's role in the delivery is not like before. He is much more in the background. There is no direct calling of the judge by God. After a bumbling episode, the people call him.

By the end of chapter 10, the Israelites had camped together, in response to the very visible threat of a large Ammonite army ready to invade again. Yet the Israelite captains dithered about who should lead them.

In Judges 1:1, after the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, *Who will be the first to go up for us and fight against the Canaanites?* God told them. Now at the end of ch 10 the captains of Gilead ask each other "Who will launch the attack?" It is not until 11:4 that some of the elders take it on their own head to offer the position to Jephthah.

So that is why they came to Jephthah in trouble! He accepted the command of the army, and the dictatorship would be his if under God, they won.

And now in the prayer meeting, this man who vowed in the name of God, was ready to sacrifice the life of the first person who walked out of his home when he returned to it.

When they did win, because God's Spirit had come upon him to enable him to win, he went home and he shuddered in horror. For the first person to come out of his house was his daughter, dancing, singing and rejoicing. Not only was she his daughter, but she is described as his only daughter, his only child. He was devastated.

In Judges 9, Abimelech slaughtered 69 of his half-brothers. Now Jephthah would have to slaughter his

Judges

Jephthah

Chapter 11

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only child, as a burnt offering to the Lord, because of his vow. But they fought the Ammonites so that life would go on for Israelite families and life would again be blessed by God.

Would he do it? Would he realise that he had sinned in making the vow, and make an appropriate burnt offering instead? Would his love for his one and only child, his heir, sway him from completing this vow?

He tore his clothes and cried out *Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; 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.*

It sounds like he cares for her, doesn't it? Yet who does he blame for the trouble? *you have become the cause of great trouble to me.* I did the right thing, I made a vow, which I cannot take back. You have caused my trouble! I have to ask, who then would not have caused him trouble with such a vow? His wife? His servants? Someone else's daughter?

Guess how he would be welcomed home after the next fight? Who would be forced to go out the door, at the end of a long pointy stick maybe!?

What was he thinking? Did he not know that God gives without us having to bribe him? Did he not know that God does not want to bargain in our prayers... as if we play poker with him in praying, as if we are saying "I will see your 15 minutes of uninterrupted Bible reading, and I will raise you 3 conversations with that awful bloke next door, just as long as you answer me the way I want!"

Did he not know God very well? Oh, wait there! Maybe that is the point. For where are we in the Bible? We are deep in the middle of Judges. We are in that downward spiral of Israel's history in which they became less and less faithful, and God handed them over to more and more suffering.

And in chapter 10, God said he would not help them anymore. They had gone too far.

Jephthah thought that keeping a faulty vow to God was more important than the life of his child. He showed no mercy to her, just as he showed no mercy to the more than 42,000 Ephraimites soon after.

But even though God had said that he would not help his people because of their persistent sins and idolatry, we find that in 10:16 it says *So they put away the foreign gods from among them and*

worshiped the LORD; and he could no longer bear to see Israel suffer.

He did give his spirit to Jephthah to win the battle. But notice that God has been removed from centre stage. He is replaced by steely, revenge filled, self-centred Jephthah who thinks he has to buy answers to prayer off God, which meant losing his respectful daughter.

We are not told her name. She accepted her plight, and was burnt after a country holiday with some of her female friends to say farewell. and a national grieving 4-day holiday occurred each year for young girls after that, as they wept for her.

As God withdrew from helping his people because of their worsening sins, life sank to deeper and deeper lows in the Promised Land.

Do not copy their examples. Be rightly offended at the outcome of a poor knowledge of God and what people tend to do when they do not really know God but make all sorts of vows in his name.

Then as you look at our world today, be rightly offended that once again our world has little knowledge of God, and it shows. We are told in Romans 1 that God is showing his wrath by giving us up to what we desire. People will do what they think is right in their own eyes, and even claim that God says it is OK. Be appalled at the depths our society may sink to, but do not copy them.

Keep wanting to learn more of who God is and how we can know him through Jesus, living for him in godliness, and calling on Him in the right way.

And pray that God will again have mercy on our society and save people from the evil that is so flourishing.