

GOD PORTRAYS MORE WOMEN

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

(Judges 10-11)

THIS YOUNG LADY, whose first name we do not know, is not mentioned until verse 34 of chapter 11. The previous verses tell us about her father. We need to know his history and character to rightly appreciate his daughter.

Jephthah was an illegitimate child. As one has observed, he could never say, "How dear to my heart are the scenes of my childhood." He was the unwanted child in his father's household. He was snubbed by his half brothers and insulted because of his birth. Children can be terribly cruel to one another. It is brutal for adults to cause children to suffer the results of their sin and indulgence. The day came when Jephthah's half brothers thrust him out of the home. They said: **"Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house for thou art the son of a strange woman"** (11:2). **"Then Jephthah fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob: and there were gathered vain men to Jephthah, and went out with him"** (11:3).

Socially an outcast and despised, Jephthah developed spiritually till God pronounced him, **"A mighty man of valor"** (11:1), though of humble origin one need not go out of life a derelict. Born again by the incorruptible seed of the Word of God, he may depart a respected Christian gentleman. It is not ancestry that counts with God, but it is what I am in relation to God that matters. If we overcome our handicaps and do not allow our spirits to become bitter and sour, but accept our lot and seek to be a blessing in the place we would not have chosen for ourselves, we shall greatly strengthen our character. Had Jephthah nursed the injustice and insults shown him by his brethren and awaited the hour of retaliation, how differently his story would have ended!

Jephthah's troubles were used by God to prepare him for advancement. Like Joseph, he learned skill in adversity. Someone has wisely said, "Learn to do something that needs to be done where you are, and men will make a path to your door even if you live in a desert." Though he was obliged to live among heathen, he did not become an idolater. Like Daniel, he served God continually. If he did not have many friends at home, he found plenty abroad. He earned their friendship. The heathen were kinder to him than his brethren who professed to serve God.

In Jephthah's day Israel was in a deplorably low spiritual condition. It seemed as if they could not multiply gods fast enough to worship.

They “**served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the Lord, and served not him**” (10:6). But when they were in trouble, they cried unto the Lord. The Lord ironically said to them: “**Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation**” (10:14).

They demonstrated their genuine repentance by putting away their strange gods and turning to the Lord sincerely and, like the returning prodigal said: “**We have sinned: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day**” (10:15), and, like the father in Luke 15, “**God’s soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.**” What a Father-heart God has! “**And it came to pass in process of time, that the children of Ammon made war against Israel**” (11:4).

As the children of Ammon approached to attack them, the people of Israel felt keenly the need of a competent general to lead them against their foes. There was not one among them who could qualify. Jephthah’s brethren had meantime heard of his attainments in Tob, and they humbled themselves and went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob. And they said: “**Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon**” (11:6). They requested him to be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. “**And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the Lord deliver them before me, shall I be your head? And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The Lord be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words**” (11:9, 10). So he granted the undeserved appeal for help from his brethren and immediately went to Mizpeh where he uttered all his words before the Lord.

Then he challenged the children of Ammon, who accused Israel of having stolen the land from them. As a matter of fact, Ammon had not had a foot of that land for more than three hundred years. But Jephthah replied by quoting from a chapter or two of the Book of Numbers; and he called the Lord to be Judge between the children of Israel and this children of Ammon.

“**Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah**” (11:29). How wonderful are these words! Through discipline, submission to the Lord, kindness to his brethren, obedience to the Word of God, and prayerfulness he became a vessel meet for the Master’s use and prepared for good work. Why is the Spirit of God not free to act in your life?

- Are you nursing any old grudges?
- Are you irritable because of your circumstances?
- Are you wasting your time blaming people, or your circumstances?
- Are you so obsessed with your own importance that God cannot use you?

Jephthah was so in earnest that he vowed a vow unto the Lord and said: “**If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s,**” or “*I will offer it up for a burnt offering*” (11:30, 31, marg.).

We are told: **“Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few . . . When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than thou shouldst vow and not pay”** (Ecclesiastes 5:2, 4, 5).

Jephthah went to battle from his knees. God heard his supplication and delivered twenty cities and valuable farm country into his hands. **“Thus the children of Ammon were subdued”** (11:33).

Jephthah came to Mizpeh to his own house. His heart was full of gratitude to God for enabling him to deliver so many from tyranny. His heart rejoiced as he neared his beloved wife and only child, who were proud of him and would delight in his triumphs over himself for God and his people. But when he remembered his vow and saw his happy daughter, dancing with joy running to meet him, singing with timbrels in her hands, his heart was filled with anguish.

“And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me; for I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back” (11:35).

It was a rash vow, but he was one of those rare men whose rule of life may be expressed thus: “I cannot go back on my word.” The widow’s gift was a rash one, but the Lord commended it; Mary’s ointment was an extravagant waste in the eyes of others, but the Lord has kept it in everlasting remembrance on earth and in Heaven.

This dear girl was one with as sterling a character as her father. She had cultivated an appreciation for, and recognition of, others’ virtues. Listen to her noble words, brave indeed from the mouth of one so young: **“My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as the Lord hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon”** (11:36). She recognized God’s claims before her own. No wonder such courage should be commemorated. We ought not to hinder anyone from keeping his word to the Lord.

In the ensuing days can you see old Jephthah (old very quickly because of his grief) taking down the scroll and studying every word on vows in Numbers 30 and 31 and in Leviticus 27. He would remember that God had forbidden the offering of human sacrifices as a burnt offering (Leviticus 18:21). One reason the Lord drove out the Canaanites was because they offered their sons and daughters to Moloch in the fires, and that was an abomination to God. Did he not recall that, though Abram was tested when God asked him to offer up Isaac, yet God did not allow him to be sacrificed but pointed out the substitute, the ram caught in the thicket?

Jephthah remembered the wording of his vow, “I will consecrate it to the Lord or offer it a burnt offering,” and as he read Numbers 31, he would see that of the sixteen thousand prisoners of war that were taken thirty-two were given to Eleazar the priest as the Lord’s offering. He would recall too that some of the beasts were offered in sacrifice, others were devoted to the Lord for service in drawing the carts of Temple furnishings.

The symbol of one of the missionary societies was an ox standing between an altar and a plow with the words "Ready for either." This dear young woman, Jephthah's daughter, displayed rare piety, she knew to some extent the meaning of those words, "**Thy will, not mine, be done.**"

She said to her father: "**Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows.**" And he said, "**Go.**" And he sent her away for two months, and she went with her companions and bewailed her virginity upon the mountains. "**And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man. And it was a custom in Israel, That the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year**" (Judges 11:39-40).

Some, whose opinion we esteem, maintain she was offered a burnt offering, but I cannot come to that conclusion from the reading of the text. We have no account of such a rite lest any should imitate it, but it is pronounced as a thing hateful to God. Moreover if she were to die, would we not expect her to spend her last two months with her sorrowing father instead of visiting with her friends? No doubt her friends had come expecting to take part in a wedding celebration at the time of the triumph when her hand would be offered to some valiant soldier, which was frequently done at a time of victory.

Every Jewish woman considered children as a mark of God's special blessing. So we can understand her bewailing her virginity with her companions, but showing her readiness to sacrifice it, in thanksgiving to God for His deliverance and in a life of devotion to His service alone. In the New Testament we find Anna, a prophetess, who departed not from the Temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. Samuel too, from the time he weaned, was devoted to God in the service of the Temple.

We can picture this dear girl, like Anna, coming in and giving thanks to God and speaking of Him to all that looked for redemption. When her girl friends came up every year to visit her and comfort her four days, they returned much richer having had help and encouragement from one who was so devoted to the Lord and so submissive to His will.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:1, 2).

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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