

Jephthah, the imperfect saviour

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[0 : 00] Well, we turn now to our Bible reading, the Word of the Lord, in the book of Judges, chapter 11. And you'll find this if you have one of our hardback Bibles on page 211.

So the book of Judges, chapter 11. We're about halfway through the book of Judges at this stage. And we're going to read the story of Jephthah.

Now, beginning at chapter 11, verse 1, and I'll read to the end of his story in chapter 12, verse 7. So we'll get the whole sweep of what the author says about the life, work, and influence of Jephthah. So Judges, chapter 11, verse 1. Now, Jephthah, the Gileadite, was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute.

Gilead was the father of Jephthah, and Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.

[1 : 10] Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him. After a time, the Ammonites made war against Israel.

And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah, Come and be our leader, that we may fight with the Ammonites.

But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, Did you not hate me and drive me out of 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 to you now, that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the Lord gives them over to me, I will be your head. And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, The Lord will be witness between us if we do not do as you say.

So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah. 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?

[2 : 35] And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, Because Israel, on coming up from Egypt, took away my land from the Anon 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, and 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 Anon.

But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Anon was the boundary of Moab. Israel then sent messengers to Sion, king of the Ammonites, king of Heshbon.

[3 : 46] And Israel said to him, Please let us pass through your land to our country. But Sion did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. So Sion gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel.

And the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sion 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 Anon 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? No. While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages and in Aroeh and its villages and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Anon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time?

[5 : 00] 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. 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 Minith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-Karamim, 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.

[6 : 11] She was his only child. Beside 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. The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you?

[7 : 32] We will burn your house over you with fire. And Jephthah said to them, I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand.

And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then if you come up to me this day to fight against me?

Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim because they said, You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh.

And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, Let me go over, the men of Gilead said to him, Are you an Ephraimite? When he said, No, they said to him, Then say Shibboleth. And he said, Sibboleth, for he could not pronounce it right.

[8 : 33] Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time, 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell. Jephthah judged Israel for six years.

Then Jephthah, the Gileadite, died and was buried in his city, in Gilead. This is the word of the Lord. And may it be a blessing to us tonight.

Amen. Well, let's turn to our passage in Judges chapters 11 and 12, if you will, page 211 and 212 in our Bibles.

Judges 11 and 12, the story of Jephthah. Now, the title that I've chosen for the sermon tonight is Jephthah, An Imperfect Savior.

Or perhaps this could be a good subtitle, More Headstrong Than Wise. Some of you may know that George Frederick Handel, the great composer, whose most famous work, I guess, was The Messiah, also wrote an oratorio, an extended choral work, called Jephthah.

[9 : 50] It was his last oratorio, and apparently Handel himself conducted its first performance in Covent Garden in London in 1752. Now, Jephthah is certainly not as well known as the Messiah, but it has by no means disappeared from the classical repertoire, and you do hear excerpts from it occasionally on the radio.

Anyway, I thought I would get hold of a copy of the words of Handel's oratorio to see how closely they tallied with the biblical account. I suppose I was asking myself, how are people reading the Bible in 1750?

It was that kind of question. But I wanted to ask myself what it was about the story of Jephthah that particularly intrigued Handel and his librettist, who was a clergyman called Thomas Morell.

And it was no great surprise to me to discover that the emotional center, the dramatic center of the oratorio, is Jephthah's rash vow to offer up as a burnt offering the first person who comes out of his house after his return from defeating the Ammonites.

Now, Handel's librettist, Mr. Morell, his script writer, changes the story quite a lot and gives it a happy ending. So in Handel's Jephthah, an angel appears at the critical moment, just as the angel appeared when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son and said, don't do it.

[11 : 10] So the angel appears in the oratorio and the same thing happens and the girl is spared. She then has to live a life of perpetual celibacy, which makes her fiancé tear his hair out.

The librettist, I guess, with artistic license, introduces a fiancé and a mother and various other people who don't actually appear in Judges chapter 11. But Handel's oratorio does reflect the way the story is presented in Judges in one important respect, and that is this matter of where the dramatic center of the story lies.

And this is very different from the stories of Deborah and Barak and Gideon, which we've been reading in recent weeks. In those stories, it's the battles which are recounted powerfully with lots of vivid detail.

Do you remember Jael and the tent peg in Sisera as he went to sleep in the tent? Do you remember Gideon and his servant Pura as they crept down the mountainside after dark and listened to two Midianite soldiers discussing things in the camp, and that gave him courage to go ahead and fight the battle?

And we get a great story of the battle, the smashing of jars, the blowing of trumpets, and so on. So that's the big center there, the actual battles. Whereas here, in Judges 11, the battle story is told in only two verses, verses 32 and 33.

[12 : 28] Whereas nine verses are given to Jephthah's vow and the harrowing account of his daughter coming to meet him out of the house and what happened to her afterwards. The emotionally powerful language here comes in the nine verses about the daughter, not the two verses about the battle.

Well, let's take this story in three sections and under these three headings, which are all about Jephthah himself. First, good at geography and history. Second, bad at making vows.

Third, bad at maintaining national unity. So first of all, good at geography and history. Now we saw last week as we just bit into the first few verses of chapter 11, that Jephthah, in some ways, is a striking foreshadower of the Lord Jesus.

We saw that like Jesus, he was rejected by his own people. In the first three verses of chapter 11, he's disinherited by his brothers, he's driven out of his father's house by them.

And we saw that this figure, rejected by his own people, later becomes the savior of his own people. And we saw that the one who became their savior insisted that he should be also their leader.

[13 : 46] So Jephthah is the rejected savior who becomes the people's leader. And Jesus, too, is the rejected savior who is shown to be truly the one who carries all authority and therefore must be obeyed.

But there's a further parallel. It's a less important one, but it's an interesting parallel between Jephthah and the Lord Jesus. And that is that both of them knew their Old Testaments rather well. And it's in Judges 11, verses 12 to 28, that we see how good Jephthah is at geography and history. He's not just a muscle-bound hulk who rushes into battle shouting with his broadsword.

He's done some thinking and some study about geography and history. And before he picks up his sword, he makes a brave attempt at diplomatic, non-violent, conflict resolution.

So let's trace this through. We'll start at verse 12. You'll see in verse 12 he sends messengers, a diplomatic mission to the Ammonite king with one question.

[14:49] What do you have against me that you have come to me to fight against my land? In other words, what's your problem? What is the nature of this bone that you have decided you want to pick with me?

So the king of the Ammonites sends his answer back in verse 13, because Israel, on coming up from Egypt, took away my land from the Anon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan.

Now, therefore, restore it peaceably. Now, if we could have our map. My friend, Kenan Berker has created this map for me, which will appear by magic on the screen.

There we are. Kenan, thank you so much. And this, I think, I hope will give you some idea of the main places and how the land is all set out there. So let's allow Jephthah to instruct us in geography and history in the next few verses.

In verse 13, the Ammonite king is saying, when you Israelites came up from Egypt, now the Egypt is right down here, about at the top of the bass guitar, right down, low level down here.

[15:55] He's saying, when you came up from Egypt and the exodus from Egypt took place roughly in the 1400s BC and Jephthah lived in about 1100 BC, so something like 300 years have passed since the exodus.

So the king of the Ammonites says, when you came here from Egypt, 300 years ago, you took away my land. You robbed my nation of our land. From the Anon River, that's the one that runs there into the Dead Sea, right up to the River Jabbok.

Please now restore it peaceably. Now you'll see where those two rivers run. So the Anon into the Dead Sea and the Jabbok into the River Jordan.

And the River Anon forms the northern boundary of the land of Moab, the ancient kingdom of Moab. And the River Jabbok lies something like 40 to 50 miles north of the Anon and flows into the Jordan up there.

So the piece of land that the Ammonite king is claiming that the Israelites stole from Ammon 300 years previously is that block of land bounded by the Jabbok to the north, the Anon to the south, and the River Jordan to the west.

[17:07] It's a sizable piece of land, roughly 50 miles from north to south, roughly 50 miles from east to west. You might say about as big as Ayrshire and Lanarkshire put together.

Now just to go on a tangent for a moment, let's keep the map up just for a moment. We human beings are deeply and intractably tribalistic and nationalistic. There's something deep in our nature, it's in our DNA, isn't it, to want to belong to one group which is defined as being over against all other groups.

It's only in the Lord's Church that these tribalisms get broken down and we're able to accept each other and love each other as true brothers and sisters across international racial class, all the boundaries.

The Lord's Church is a wonder, isn't it? It's an absolute wonder. But otherwise, by nature, human beings are tribalistic and the possession of land is the main thing that strengthens the tribe.

You might say at one level, the history of the human race is the history of wars over the possession of land. But this is the issue which is causing this terrible, heartbreaking bloodshed at the moment between Israel and the Palestinians.

[18:22] Mr. Putin, if I understand the situation correctly, is wanting to control that eastern part of the Ukraine because it's a very fertile area and it produces vast amounts of food every year.

Land is the key. Land produces agricultural produce, water, timber, minerals, metals, coal, and oil. So the tribe or nation that expands its territory expands its strength.

And it's this desire to expand Ammonite territory that explains the arrival of the Ammonite army in Gilead to challenge Jephthah. You stole this piece of land from us 300 years ago.

Now restore it peaceably. Peaceably. That is to say without a fight. In other words, let's get together, we'll have a banquet, we'll make some pretty speeches to each other, we'll shake hands, sign a piece of paper, pose smilingly for the press photographers and then go home.

Peaceable. Let's do it peaceably. Now this is where Jephthah's success at higher grade history and geography really begins to shine. So keeping the map up, we'll take a fairly brisk walk through the message that Jephthah sends back to the Ammonite king starting in verse 16.

[19 : 36] Thus says Jephthah, verse 15, thus says Jephthah, Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. In other words, your facts are wrong, king of Ammon.

But verse 16, when Israel came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and then came to Kadesh, which you'll see at the very bottom of the map, that is Kadesh Barnea.

Verse 17, Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom. You'll see where the land of Edom is, saying, please let us pass through your land. But the king of Edom said, no.

Then they asked the same thing of the king of Moab, but he wouldn't consent either. So Israel remained at Kadesh, says Jephthah. Then, verse 18, they went round the land of Edom on the south side of Edom and round the land of Moab.

In other words, they respected the wishes of the kings of Edom and Moab. And then they arrived at the east side of the land of Moab and pitched camp on the north side, the other side of the river Anon.

[20 : 42] But they didn't enter the territory of Moab because the Anon was the northern boundary of Moab. And verse 19, Israel then sent messengers to Sion, king of the Ammon, Amorites, not the Ammonites, but the Amorites.

And he was the king at Heshbon. You'll see that's in the disputed area. And they sent the same request to him to pass through his territory so they can get on their way to Canaan and cross the river Jordan.

But Sion said no. He mustered his army. He fought with Israel. And notice verse 21 because it's important. And the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sion 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. In other words, that whole block of land between the Jabbok and the Anon, which the king of Ammon is claiming from Israel.

Jephthah is saying it was never Ammonite territory. It belonged to the Amorites, a different people. And Jephthah's claim is that it belongs to Israel because the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Israel the victory over King Sion and his army.

[21 : 56] And then Jephthah draws his conclusion in verse 23. So then, the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel.

And are you to take possession of them? In other words, you Ammonites have no right, no historical right to that block of land at all. Your claim, made back in verse 13, that Israel took away your land from the Anon to the Jabbok has no foundation in historical reality.

It was never your land. It was Amorite territory which Israel took over from the Amorites because of the kind gift of the Lord. So what Jephthah is doing here in verses 15 to 27 is arguing his case that the block of land in question properly belongs to Israel and the Ammonites therefore have no right to it.

He argues his case first from history, from the historical facts that he sets out here and he argues his case secondly from theology in verse 24.

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. In other words, if your deity Chemosh has any strength and power at all, be satisfied with the land that he gives you and we'll be satisfied with the land that the Lord, our God, gives us.

[23 : 23] So Jephthah, of course, is really giving Chemosh a poke in the eye at that point. Then Jephthah returns to history again. In verse 25, he reminds the king of the Ammonites that when Israel 300 years previously was journeying around Moab, the Moabite king Balak never presumed to go to war with them.

And then finally, in verse 26, he makes the point that Israel have been living in this disputed area in Heshbon and Arower, which is a bit further south, and along the banks of the river Anon for 300 years, a very long time.

And the Ammonites have never in all that time raised a voice of protest. So what on earth are they bleating about now? That's his point. I therefore, verse 27, have not sinned against you.

The fault is not me, and you do me wrong by making war on me. And then he says, and it's a kind of prayer, the Lord, the judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon. So Jephthah boldly calls the Lord to resolve the dispute, in effect, to give victory to whichever side has the right of it. And that's exactly what happens.

[24 : 35] The king of the Ammonites is in no mood to be persuaded by Jephthah's arguments from history. So he sends a curt response to Jephthah, as verse 28 implies. And then the spirit of the Lord, perhaps in answer to Jephthah's prayer of verse 27, comes upon Jephthah, and he and his army decisively defeat the Ammonites, who, in the words of verse 33, are subdued before the people of Israel.

Okay, Janet can go off now for a moment. Now let me just make two brief points about this before we come to Jephthah's vow. The first is to do with the distribution of land.

At ground level, our eye level, if you like, the nations and tribes battle over pieces of land. They always have done and still do, and I guess they always will.

But from the Bible's point of view, from God's point of view, it is God who distributes land to the peoples of the world. Jeremiah, for example, speaks of the Lord God raising up one kingdom and causing another one to fall.

Or think of Paul in his famous speech to the Athenians in Acts chapter 17. He said, God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

[25 : 58] In other words, Paul is saying, it is God who distributes land to different people groups at different times. Now, within that general picture of God's sovereignty in land distribution, the case of Israel is a special case because the possession of Canaan, that particular piece of land, that was a major component in God's original covenant promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.

However, since the coming of Jesus, membership of God's covenant people is no longer tied up with living in the land, the geographical land of Israel.

Do you remember how Jesus spoke to this Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4? He said to her, the hour is coming when neither on Mount Gerizim in Israel nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. So back in Jephthah's day and throughout the Old Testament period, it was important that the land given by the Lord to Israel should be possessed and lived in by the Israelites.

And that's what Jephthah says here in verse 21. And that's right and true for the Old Testament people of God. But for us today, it's a question of worshipping the Lord in spirit and in truth, not worshipping at Jerusalem.

[27 : 21] The Christian church has no geographical entailments. Well now, secondly, different point, but let me say this, I want to encourage all of us to develop an interest in Bible geography and history.

In fact, I'd put it like this, I would say that these are not really optional extra subjects for the serious Bible reader. They need to be part of our main curriculum. Let me put it like this, the heart of the Christian life is getting to know the Lord better and better.

That means getting to know the Lord and all his concerns better. And clearly, he's very concerned with Bible history and Bible geography. We know that because he includes so much of it in the Bible, in the New Testament just as much as in the Old.

I made the point last week that it's the history, it's the historical account of what God has done that distinguishes Christianity from all the other world faiths.

So if we don't interest ourselves in the history and the geography of the Bible, we're denying ourselves a significant part of what it means to know and to understand the Lord.

[28 : 30] So here's a suggestion. Why not get together with a good friend or with your spouse, arm yourselves with strong tea and a large slice of cake, and sit down together at the table to do a little bit of historical and geographical Bible study.

Take a passage like this one, and there are hundreds throughout the Bible. Get hold of some good Bible maps. There are good ones available these days on the Internet, as well as in the backs of some Bibles.

And then follow the stories through. And if you can get hold of Bible maps which give the physical dimensions of the land as well as the political boundaries that are marked, it's even better. It's much more exciting. So for example, when you notice for the first time in your life that the Sea of Galilee is nearly 700 feet below sea level, and that the Dead Sea is nearly 1300 feet below sea level, you simply whistle with surprise and joy.

Trust me. So, there's the first thing. Jephthah was good at history and geography, and if you and I can develop a similar interest, it will actually help to bring our Bible study to life in all sorts of ways, and we will get to know the Lord better.

[29 : 41] Our reaction, I suppose, is to see lots of names and think, I can't be bothered to work through that, but do let's bother. There will be real dividends for us. Well, let's look on now. Secondly, Jephthah was bad at making vows.

I pointed out earlier that the battle with the Ammonites is described in a very low-key way just in verses 32 and 33, and the big focus of attention in this final part of chapter 11 is on this wretched vow and its consequences.

This day of battle and victory should have ended in celebration, but instead, it ends in tragedy, and the storyteller's art is being practiced here to a fine degree.

Look, for example, at verse 34. Jephthah came home, and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and dances. She's leaping, skipping joyfully out of the front door, because no doubt, the great news of daddy's great victory against the Ammonites has preceded him to the house.

So she leaps out of the house. I guess she throws her arms around her father. Daddy, well done. The Lord has blessed you. Daddy, I love you so much. And look at the power of the text.

[30 : 53] She was his only child. Beside her, he had neither son nor daughter. Now, I won't walk through it verse by verse, but let me just make a few comments.

The Bible is not against people making vows. The apostle Paul, at one point in the book of Acts, makes a vow, which he's very careful to keep. You and I make vows if we get married.

In the marriage service, a man and his wife vow. It's a very solemn promise. Vow to each other to be faithful to each other, come what may. In Psalm 22, King David says, my vows I will perform.

And there are warnings in the book of Proverbs not to make rash vows. But Jephthah's vow is surely the classic Bible example of a vow that should never have been made and a vow that should never have been kept.

Look at verse 30. Why did Jephthah say to the Lord, if you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out or whoever 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.

[32 : 08] What can have possessed this man to say such a thing as that, especially when the book of Deuteronomy clearly says that human sacrifice is detestable to the Lord and the Lord hates it.

Didn't Jephthah know that? He knew his Old Testament history well, so why didn't he know his Old Testament law? Well, probably the answer is that he had allowed the beliefs and practices of Israel's pagan neighbors to influence him strongly.

In pagan views of man and God, man doesn't trust and obey and allow the Lord to provide. Man learns to manipulate the deity, to put pressure on the deity so as to get results.

And human sacrifice in pagan thinking is a very powerful way of securing the favor of the gods. In other words, if you're prepared to go through the pain and suffering and cost of sacrificing a human being, especially your own child, the gods owe you some big favors.

That's the pagan line of thought. Human sacrifice, as it were, twists the arm of the deity up his back and he has to favor you. Now, some commentators on Judges have tried to let Jephthah off the hook by saying that he must have had an animal sacrifice in mind.

[33 : 26] And that view, I think, is reflected in our ESV translation, which says, at least in the main text in verse 31, that whatever comes out of my house to meet me, I will offer as a burnt offering.

But if Jephthah's intention had been to make an animal sacrifice, surely he wouldn't have batted an eyelid when his daughter appeared. He'd have been watching for the first kid or lamb or dog even to come running up to him.

The fact that he tears his clothes and cries, alas, my daughter, shows that he must have been thinking of human sacrifice. His thought process, influenced by pagan ideas, was something like this.

Here he was. He was about to take on the Ammonites. It was a huge challenge. So he thought, if I promise the Lord to make him a really costly burnt offering sacrifice, offering up one of my domestic servants, it will put pressure on him and he will help me and my army to win the battle.

The promise of the sacrifice in Jephthah's thinking was the key to victory. He wasn't trusting the Lord. In a sense, he was trusting himself. And in that way, he slipped from biblical thinking into pagan thinking.

[34 : 40] I guess one lesson for us is to take great care over what kind of values we welcome into our minds and hearts. The world's values are pressing in at us all the time and it's all too possible for us to give them house room alongside the values taught by the Bible.

For example, a Christian might be very familiar with the Bible's teaching about humility and service, and yet that Christian might also follow the world's desires about status and success and prominence.

Oh yes, I know the Bible teaches me to be a humble servant, but actually I want to be thought of as important and successful. I want to be noticed. Well, let's take warning from Jephthah about the values of the world proving to influence our behavior more than the values of the Bible.

Jephthah didn't have the sense or the godliness at this point to retract his vow. He went on ahead with it. As verse 39 puts it, he did with her according to his vow that he had made.

And what had he vowed? Verse 31, I will offer it up as a burnt offering. That's what he did. Two months to roam the hills and to weep with her friends because she could never be married, and then the knife and then the fire.

[36 : 06] He should never have made that vow and he should never have kept that vow. Friends, let's beware of making rash promises. So good at history, bad at vows, and third, bad at preserving national unity.

And we'll look here at the first little part of chapter 12. Jephthah's great victory, Jen, perhaps we could show that fine piece of geography again. Thank you very much. Kenan's handy work.

Thank you. Jephthah's great victory takes place in the land of Gilead, a bit to the north of the Jabbok River. Now, the tribe of Ephraim lived on the western side of the river Jordan, the left hand side.

So when they hear of Jephthah's victory, their pride is touched in a big way because they fancy themselves as the top warriors in Israel. I guess the British army in its history knows something about regimental pride, where one regiment looks down its nose at another regiment because it reckons it's tougher and stronger and better trained.

Well, the Ephraimites obviously fancied themselves as the crack regiment in Israel. And when they hear that Jephthah and his troops from the tribe of Manasseh have subdued the Ammonites, they're so full of wounded pride that they muster their army.

[37 : 31] It was a great army. Just look at the numbers mentioned in chapter 12 verse 6. They cross the Jordan from west to east, they find Jephthah and they say to him, verse 1, why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you?

We will burn your house over you with fire. Now you may remember that an identical confrontation has happened to Gideon back in chapter 8.

There's no need to turn back to it. But when Gideon defeated the Midianites, a contingent of Ephraimite soldiers had confronted him in exactly the same way. And Gideon had been very diplomatic.

He'd soothed their egos. He'd said, brother Ephraimites, everybody knows that you're the crack regiment in Israel. It's okay. So he cleverly defused the situation. But Jephthah was different from Gideon.

He'd been the leader of a band of outlaws. He had his advanced hires in history and geography, perhaps, but he was a fierce warrior. No smooth diplomacy for Jephthah.

[38 : 35] So he says to them in verse 2, I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites. And when I called you Ephraimites, you did not save me from their hand. And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against them and the Lord gave them into my hand.

Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me? Having said which, he nods his head to his commanders, they draw their swords, and they start cutting up these Ephraimites.

There was racial provocation or inter-tribal provocation as well. Look at verse 4. The men of Gilead struck Ephraim because they said, you are fugitives from Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh.

There's tribal needle there. It's almost like the supporters of two famous football teams when they're on their very worst behavior with each other. Now, Jephthah and his men at this point behave ruthlessly, horribly.

Clearly, they kill a number of Ephraimites on the spot. And as the Ephraimites see that they're being defeated, the rest of them take off and I guess flee, literally, westwards to try to cross the Jordan and get back to their home territory.

[39 : 48] But Jephthah sends his men to capture the fords of the Jordan, and when an Ephraimite soldier asks permission to cross over, he is then given a pronunciation test.

Jephthah knew about the regional accents, of course. There have always been regional accents about, haven't there? We know all about that in Britain, don't we? Think of us, Western Isles, Aberdonian, Dazwijian, Edinburgh, or go down to England, Yorkshire, Lancashire, London.

Take a word like this, think of this word, M-U-R-D-E-R. Have you got that?

M-U-R-D-E-R. How would a man from Ayrshire say, pronounce that with a really sort of thick, quite strong, how would an Ayrshire man say that? Okay.

Murder. Murder. How would you pronounce it? Say it again. Murder. That's it. I wish, I wish I could say it like that. I would love to be able to say, for example, in the Cornhill classroom, Sebastian, if you don't do your sermon preparation more carefully and industriously, I will murder you.

[41 : 06] But I can't say it like that. I've been practicing all week and I still can't say it. Problem is, English tongue, English jaw, English brain. All I can say is murder.

Just sounds so tame, doesn't it? I wouldn't really do it in the classroom usually. Now, Jephthah, here he is, he capitalizes on his knowledge of local pronunciation.

He knew that the Ephraimites could not sound the sound SH. They could not say shibboleth.

Shibboleth simply means a flowing stream. That's not the point really.

It's just this word, it's the SH thing. All they could say was Sibboleth. And as a consequence, 42,000 of them were slaughtered. Who was at fault here?

The volatile, jealous Ephraimites who couldn't bear not to be at the center? Or Jephthah and his Gileadites? I guess both were. But it was tragic because these were all Israelites.

[42 : 08] In fact, they were so close, they were really cousins. Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph, the great patriarch, that godly patriarch. Now, there are lessons, aren't there?

Christian people also can become volatile and jealous of each other, wanting to be preened. That's what the Ephraimites wanted. They wanted to be preened and noticed rather than just being happy to serve in places where the spotlight doesn't shine.

And where there is volatility and self-promotion, relationships always become strained. These early verses of chapter 12, they have important lessons to teach us about humility and service and being delighted to see other Christians doing their work and their ministry well.

Jephthah was bad at preserving the unity of the people of God. Well, friends, almost finished, but just a final word. How can we best assess Jephthah as we look at the big picture of the Bible story? Well, he is indeed a Christ-like figure in certain very important respects. The rejected one becomes the saviour and leader of God's people, but he is a very imperfect saviour.

[43 : 25] His successor, chapter 13 onwards, the mighty Samson, if anything, is even more imperfect than Jephthah. One of the functions, then, of these flawed saviour figures is to show the human race that we need a saviour without imperfections.

A saviour who not only decisively conquers our enemy, the devil, but displays in his character the unsullied perfections of self-control, gracious speech, tender mercy, and love.

We need the saviour who is truly the friend of sinners. We need the only one who, by his atoning death and glorious resurrection, is able to bring us into the eternal presence of God.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we do thank you for these lessons from a character like Jephthah, sometimes negative lessons, warnings about how not to behave, and our prayer is that you will help us to heed them.

But we thank you again that after all these hundreds of years of preparation, finally the perfect saviour was given to us, and he was willing to lay down his life, to sacrifice everything so that we might be saved forever.

[44 : 59] So please, dear Father, fill our hearts afresh with gratitude for him, and keep us persevering and glad and joyous in our faith we pray. For Jesus' sake, amen.
Amen.