

**Judges 11:29-40****The Source of Unbelief: Israel from Abraham to Joshua**

God promised Abraham that he would give his offspring the land of Canaan, despite the fact that there **were Canaanites in the land** (Genesis 12:6-7). This conveyance of the land to the offspring of Abraham would be delayed by four hundred years because **the inquiry of the Amorites was not yet complete** (Genesis 15:16). As the children of the promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the nation of Israel endured bondage in Egypt and then experienced the deliverance of the Lord (Exodus 14:30-31). In preparing Israel to inhabit the land promised to Abraham, God repeatedly promised to drive out before them the pagan inhabitants of the land (Exodus 23:28, 33:2, 34:11; Leviticus 18:24, Leviticus 20:23). Unfortunately, ten of the twelve men sent to spy out the land failed to believe that God could drive out the inhabitants and give the land of Canaan into the hands of Israel (Numbers 13:28-29, 13:32-33, 14:3, 14:10). God responded to the nation's unbelief by causing the nation to wander in the wilderness until all of the unbelieving generation had died (Numbers 14:22-23) and then ordered them to drive the inhabitants out of the land themselves (Numbers 33:52). Israel still knew the favor of God and God still promised to give the land into their hands, but it would require their act of faith in driving the inhabitants out. God told the nation, **if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell** (Numbers 33:55). Repeatedly in their conquest of the land, Israel failed to act in faith that God would give them the land and make them powerful over stronger nations so that they might possess the land without rival (Joshua 13:13, 15:63, 16:10). Again at the end of his ministry, Joshua warned the people against clinging to the remnant of these nations and turning away from the Lord, for doing so would mean that **God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you** (Joshua 23:13).

**The Strength of Unbelief: Israel in the Time of the Judges**

The writer sketches the spiritual decline of the nation in the introduction (Judges 1:1 - 3:6). Israel's failure to drive out the inhabitants of the land under their national leader, Joshua, was compounded after his death in 1376 BC. In the absence of a unifying figure, authority and activity was localized among families and clans, who were forced to settle alongside the inhabitants of the land in the absence of sufficient force to dispel them. The writer records the individual failures of the people of Benjamin, Manasseh, Ephraim, Gezer, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan to drive out the Jebusites, the Canaanites, and the Amorites from the land (Judges 1:21-36). Recall that the enslavement of Israel occurred when **there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph** (Exodus 1:8). Ironically, Israel walked a path back toward enslavement because among them **there arose another generation...who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel** (Judges 2:10). Their cohabitation with idolaters proved destructive, as the people were enticed by the false gods of the land. In the time after Joshua's death, **the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers...and went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them** (Judges 2:11-12). God responded to their idolatry by giving them over to plunderers and selling them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. **Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm...And they were in terrible distress** (Judges 2:14-15). Despite his punishment of his people, God demonstrated his commitment to redemption and his abounding kindness toward his people by raising up for them **judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them** (Judges 2:16). Israel had known localized leadership before. In Exodus 18:25-26, **Moses chose albe men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tends. And they judged the people at all times...any small matter they decided themselves**. During the time of the judges (1336 - 1130 BC), the Lord provided for the families and clans leaders who were empowered to save or deliver the people from a foreign power, to rule over them so that they might experience rest in the land, and occasionally to decide matters between parties. Yet **they did not listen to their judges, for they hoped after other gods** (Judges 2:17). Unbelief was a stronghold among the families and clans of Israel, such that they never experienced lasting peace. They were stuck in a cycle of despair, deliverance, disobedience, and domination (Judges 2:18-23).

### The Snare of Unbelief: Israel Under Jephthah's Leadership

Accounting for the timeline of the judges of Israel is a difficult thing. Time does not permit us to consider the various proposals scholars have made to make sense of how this period relates to the timing of other events in Israel's history. Recognizing that leadership in Israel was localized during the time of the judges, I find Robert Chisholm's proposal of two concurring sets of judgeships compelling. Chisholm's proposal is based on the pattern of phrases in the book related to Israel's rebellion.

Timeline A	Timeline B
And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. Judges 3:7	The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. Judges 6:1
And the people of Israel <u>again</u> did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. Judges 3:12	The people of Israel <u>again</u> did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtarothe, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. Judges 10:6
And the people of Israel <u>again</u> did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. Judges 4:1	And the people of Israel <u>again</u> did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. Judges 13:1

Under this proposal, Timeline B consists of the following rulers and rebellions extending from 1334 - 1130 BC:

1334-1327 BC	Judges 6:1	7 Years		The Midianites
1327-1287 BC	Judges 6:11; 8:28	40 Years	Gideon	Son of Joash the Abiezrite
1287-1284 BC	Judges 9:1, 22	3 Years	Abimelech	Son of Jerubbaal
1284-1261 BC	Judges 10:2	23 Years	Tola	Son of Puah, son of Dodo
1261-1239 BC	Judges 10:3	22 Years	Jair	The Gileadite
1239-1221 BC	Judges 10:8	18 Years		The Philistines
1221-1215 BC	Judges 11:1; 12:7	6 Years	Jephthah	Son of Gilead and a prostitute
1215-1208 BC	Judges 12:8	7 Years	Ibzan	A man of Bethlehem
1208-1198 BC	Judges 12:11	10 Years	Elon	The Zebulunite
1198-1190 BC	Judges 12:13	8 Years	Abdon	Son of Hillel the Pirathonite
1190-1150 BC	Judges 13:1	40 Years		The Philistines
1150-1130 BC	Judges 15:20; 16:31	20 Years	Samson	

Following the judgeships of Tola and Jair, the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and Ashtaroht...So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel (Judges 10:6-8). The people, distressed by the domination of foreign powers over them, attempted to restart the cycle by crying out to the Lord (Judges 2:10). However, they learned the lesson that the extension of forgiveness is not mechanistic. They thought that as long as they said the magic words, *We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God*, then God would mechanically respond by raising up a deliverer to save them. But their repetition of this rebellious pattern had proven to God that their repentance was insincere. That is why the writer states that the Lord *became impatient over the misery of Israel* (Judges 10:16).

The Ammonites encamped in Gilead and the people began to wonder who among them would begin the fight against the Ammonites. Such a man would be made head over them (Judges 10:18). That's where Jephthah entered the scene. Jephthah *was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah*. As an illegitimate son, Jephthah was driven away by Gilead's legitimate children. He settled *in the land of Tob and worthless fellows collected around...and went out with him* (Judges 11:3). As the Ammonites continued to make war against Israel, elders in Gilead again sought a leader. This time they brought Jephthah back home and asked him to be their leader that they might *fight against the Ammonites* (Judges 11:6). Despite knowing that they had hated him and driven him away earlier in his life, Jephthah agreed to fight against the Ammonites on their behalf and, if victorious, to be their head and leader over them (Judges 11:11). Jephthah sent word to the king of the Ammonites that their presence in the land was a breach of the peace. According to Jephthah, Israel had been in the land for three hundred years and had not taken land away from Moab or the Ammonites on their journey from Egypt. He reminded them that they had taken simply what the Lord had given into their hands and that the leaders of Ammon had not previously attempted to subdue them in all that time. Their presence now was taken by Israel as an act of war. The king of the Ammonites did not listen to Jephthah's words. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah and passed through Gilead and Manasseh to the Ammonites (Judges 11:29). In Judges 11:32-33, the writer records that the LORD gave the Ammonites into his hand such that they *were subdued before the people of Israel*.

The victory of Israel over the Ammonites is, however, the side story, the external setting for the main event the writer recounts. Judges 11:30-31 states, *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."* What is rendered *Jephthah made a vow* could be translated *Jephthah had made a vow*, the difference being that the vow might have been made before the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah. It might have been that Jephthah, not knowing if God was going to make him the deliverer of Israel and use him to save the people, was making a vow by which he bartered with God in order to come out successful. It also must be noted that while the writer recognized that God's Spirit had been set down upon Jephthah, we cannot know for certain if Jephthah knew that. It might be that even as Jephthah was empowered by the Spirit, he thought he was still operating in his own strength. Either way, what is clear is that Jephthah has been influenced by the *worthless fellows* who collected around him. Though he is ready to fight on behalf of the Lord's people, he does not know how to fight in the Lord's power. He thinks he must bargain, barter, and bribe his way to success. These are the ways of pagan idolaters, not the way of a holy people.

A question arises at this point. If Jephthah is convinced, as evidenced by his long speech in vv.15-27, that the land rightfully belongs to Israel, and that 'YHWH, the Judge, will judge today between the Israelites and the people of Ammon' (v. 27d), why does he think it is necessary to vow to make a costly sacrifice—one that would almost surely turn out to be *human sacrifice*—in order to ensure his victory? As noted above, the law is clear that Israel's God does not require such sacrifices; in fact, he actually forbids them. It would seem that such an abhorrent action would make YHWH even less likely to grant his request. There is no doubt that Jephthah has a considerable knowledge of recent Israelite history and from time to time seems to acknowledge YHWH as his God (11:9d, 11c, 24b, 27d, 30a, 35f; 12:3e), but all through the book of Judges the Israelites are portrayed as at best syncretistic, and at worst apostate; Jephthah's theology may have been very distorted. (Boda/Conway, *ZECOT Judges*, 541-542)

Despite the influence of **worthless fellows** and the prominence of perverted worship among the Israelites, Jephthah's supposed faulty theology does not justify his behavior. The reality is that Jephthah knew, in part, the ability of God to secure freedom and justice for Israel. He did not have to barter with God or bribe him into acting on behalf of Israel. It seems that Jephthah was not willing to take the chance that Israel would lose in battle against the Ammonites because he was determined to rule over them. The folly of his vow does not negate its intentionality. It seems clear that Jephthah knew what he was doing, that the most likely outcome of his vow would be the sacrifice of his only daughter, as it was place of women in the household to leave the home and go out to meet warriors who returned victorious. Jephthah, informed more by his culture than the commandments of the Lord, believes this is the way forward. His destructive, idolatrous theology means that he not only starts off on the wrong course, but lacks any insight into the Scriptures that would compel him to correct course before going down to destruction.

The writer records that upon his return from victory in battle to his home at Mizpah, Jephthah's daughter came out to meet him with the accompanying signs of celebration—tambourines and dances (Judge 11:34). Several theologians point out that Jephthah may have intended to cheat YHWH by making a vow that he knew could result in the death of his daughter, but hoping/intending to fulfill that vow by the death of animal or servant. They point to Jephthah's blaming of his daughter in Judges 11:35 as proof of such intentions. Even if this is the case, it only underscores the reality that Jephthah knew his vow could mean the death of his daughter and he was willing to take that chance. Jephthah tells his daughter, **I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow**. To this we will return in our conclusions from the passage, but for now we should note that this reveals the faulty nature of Jephthah's theology. He is not fully informed about the law of God. If he were, he would know two things. First, he would know that human sacrifice is prohibited by YHWH (Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31, 18:10; Jeremiah 7:30-31, 19:5). Second, he would know that God always prefers his people to obey his commands, rather than to sacrifice as a cover for their disobedience. Earlier we noted that in Judges 10:16 God was **impatient over the misery of Israel**. Indeed, Israel was stuck in a cycle of meaningless sacrifices, sacrifices offered to God without any real repentance. God was sick of such offerings. Jephthah grew up in this period of Israel's life and should have known better. If he knew the law, he would have known not to make such a vow. But even in his ignorance of the law, his knowledge of Israel's subjection to foreign rule and God's unwillingness to receive meaningless sacrifices should have informed him that it would be better to break his vow and lose the favor of God for being a vow-breaker, than to keep his vow by offering a sacrifice that not only would God not accept, but that God would abhor. The encouragement of Jephthah's daughter that her father should fulfill his vow (11:36) only goes to show how deep their wickedness went.

While some theologians have argued that Jephthah's vow was fulfilled by prohibiting his daughter from marrying, that is not the plain reading of the text. Judges 11:39-40 states, **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.**

So what do we learn from Jephthah's evil vow?

1. **God does not recommend everything he records.** Stories like this are often cited as proof of God's inability to prevent evil deeds, his indifference towards the committing of evil deeds, or his acceptance of evil deeds. However, none of these perspectives need be the case. Nowhere in the story does God approve of Jephthah's vow. Nowhere in the story does Israel's victory over the Ammonites appear as to Jephthah's vow. Nowhere in the story does God receive Jephthah's offering. This is not a recommendation of Jephthah's actions, but a recording of them. The Holy Spirit led the writer to record this tragic narrative as a demonstration of mankind's wickedness and to prove how much mankind must depend on the Lord if we are to live holy lives.
2. **God's use of an individual to accomplish his purposes is not proof of that individual's holiness.** Jephthah's foolishness in making and keeping the vow proves that the presence of the Holy Spirit neither negates nor perfects the human will. Whether Jephthah knew it or not, the Spirit of the Lord was upon him (Judges 11:29) as he made war against the Ammonites. However, God's favorable presence did not take over Jephthah such that he was no longer in control of his actions, nor did it so pervade Jephthah that his actions would all be in accordance with the will of God.

God's Spirit came upon Jephthah because God chose to use Jephthah to minister deliverance for Israel. That does not justify Jephthah's making or keeping of the vow.

3. **Influence matters.** Jephthah was influenced by *wicked fellows* and he became a wicked fellow. Not only that, but it seems that he convinced his daughter to become wicked as well. These are people who lived in Israel and had experienced some of God's favor and power. But they were more influenced by those around them. The permissive, promiscuous paganism of those who inhabited the land was a thorn in the flesh for the people of Israel. The disobedience that started when the spies gave a false witness in Numbers 14 grew stronger as Israel failed to drive out the inhabitants of the land to the point that it became a snare for Jephthah. Never forget that you are influenced by the actions of generations before you, even if you don't know what those actions were. And never forget that you will influence the generations that come after you, even if you don't live to see them.
4. **Once made, the vow should not have been kept.** Let's be abundantly clear. Jephthah should never have made his vow, but even having made it, he should never have kept it. He was motivated by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, not by the glory of God. Jephthah wasn't thinking about God's good pleasure when he made his vow; he was thinking about his own restoration. He had experienced rejection and he was intent on gaining standing in the eyes of the people, whatever it took. At every point he missed the character and the commands of God, chiefly in his keeping of the vow. It should have never happened. If he had had any real sense of the God he claimed to serve, if he had truly studied the law rather than relied on bits of what he knew, if he had just considered the history of his own life and that of the nation in his time, he would have known better. Let us know better. Don't justify Jephthah's actions. He was a fool.
5. **Our guilt detracts from God's glory.** Jephthah kept his vow. He killed his daughter. The writer records, *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.* There should have been an annual celebration of what God did to deliver Israel. They should have been remembering and rejoicing in God's defeat of the Ammonites. Instead, they came together every year to lament the daughter of Jephthah. That's what happens when we sin. We take away from the glory of God. Our acts of unbelief, our disobedience, our sin is a stain on the beauty of our Savior. We should seek to live holy lives because our pursuit of holiness reflects God's glory into the world.