

# LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

• JUDGES 10–12 •

*"Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him. And the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the sons of Ammon. And they afflicted and crushed the sons of Israel that year; for eighteen years they afflicted all the sons of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in Gilead in the land of the Amorites" (10:6-8).*

Some preachers are rather dramatically inclined. For example, a preacher who was preaching on the Holy Spirit had arranged with one of the members that when he said, "The Spirit descended like a dove" the member would release a dove from the balcony. As he preached, the time for the cue arrived, and the preacher said, "The Spirit descended like a dove." When nothing happened, the preacher repeated, "The Spirit descended like a dove." Still nothing happened. The preacher spoke the phrase a third time. From the balcony came the member's voice saying, "A cat ate the dove! Do you want me to throw the cat down?" This preacher made a tragic mistake. Perhaps he learned from his mistake. We must recognize mistakes when they occur and learn from them. As we view the life of Jephthah, we learn from the mistakes that were made.

The people of God once again did "evil in the sight of the Lord" (10:6). They were worshipping

the Baals and Ashtaroth, the idols that Israel was worshipping before the first judge was ever sent to them (2:13). In spite of the oppressions and deliverances of the past, they continued to worship these gods, unable to learn from their bitter experiences. In fact, by this time, they were also worshipping the idols of Syria, Zidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia (10:6). No wonder "the anger of the Lord burned against Israel" (10:7).

Because of God's extreme displeasure, He sold them into the hands of Philistia and Ammon. Having played only a supporting role in the oppression of Moab years earlier (3:12, 13), Ammon was now the principal oppressor being supported by Philistia. Ammon occupied the territory east of Jordan between the territory of Moab and the Jabbok River. North of the Jabbok River was the region of Gilead. Joshua 13:24-31 says that Gilead was divided in half when Joshua gave each tribe their inheritance, with the southern half being given to the tribe of Gad and the northern half being given to the half tribe of Manasseh.

For eighteen years, the armies of Ammon troubled the people of Gilead. In addition, Ammon would cross to the west side of the Jordan and fight with the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim (10:9). Out of the "sore distress" that they were experiencing, Israel "cried out to the Lord" once again, pleading for deliverance (10:10).

As in the days of Gideon, God prefaced His deliverance with a reminder of how faithful He

had been and how they had rejected Him numerous times. This rebuke, however, was stronger for it concludes with God saying, "Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress" (10:14). God's patience had been pushed to its limits. At this point, no deliverance would be given.

Nonetheless, the people of Israel continued to cry to Him and began to put away their idols (10:15, 16). Seeing their repentance and knowing of their suffering, God was "grieved for the misery of Israel" (10:16; KJV). In spite of their continuous rejection and rebellion, God loved His people. Because of His love, He would give them another deliverer. Subsequent to God's decision to deliver Israel, the Ammonites set up camp in Gilead, and Israel was ready for battle in Mizpeh, a city of Gilead. The people and the leaders began to look for someone to lead the fight against Ammon. In 11:1-3 a flashback in time occurs for the purpose of introducing Jephthah. At some time in the past, a controversy had arisen between Jephthah and his brothers.

The name of Jephthah's father was Gilead. This man is not to be confused with the grandson of Manasseh who served as one of the tribal heads of the family (Numbers 26:28-30). Jephthah's father lived many years after the death of that Gilead. The only thing that is known about Jephthah's father is what is said in chapter 11.

Gilead had several sons, one of whom was the product of his illicit relationship with a prostitute. His name was Jephthah. Jephthah had grown to become "a valiant warrior" (11:1). Gilead's other sons sought to disinherit Jephthah because they were legitimate sons and Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. Therefore, Jephthah was forced to leave his home and his family (11:1, 2).

Jephthah established his new home in Tob. He became the leader of a band of "worthless fellows" (11:3). These men were of extremely low moral character, but were good soldiers. With this band of men, Jephthah conducted many raids against the nation of Ammon. They were similar to the raids of the legendary Robin Hood, as he robbed from the ones who were oppressing the people.

With this background, we are brought back to the time in which the leaders of Gilead were looking for a leader to lead them against the

nation of Ammon (11:4). Since Jephthah had the reputation as a "valiant warrior" and was already a thorn in the side of Ammon, who would be a better choice to lead God's people in battle?

The elders of Gilead invited Jephthah to be their leader (11:5-10). Because of what had been done to him, Jephthah was unwilling to help unless something was in it for him. Consequently, the leaders of Gilead guaranteed Jephthah that he would be named the ruler of Gilead if he would lead them against the Ammonites. Therefore, "Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them. . . ." (11:11). Though he was motivated by unworthy motives, the deliverer of God's people was now in place.

Jephthah corresponded with the king of Ammon before the battle took place (11:12-27). Jephthah's first letter simply asked why Ammon was fighting against him (11:12). No doubt the king of Ammon was surprised to hear that this renegade bandit was now the leader of the forces of Gilead. The Ammonite ruler responded by saying that he was simply trying to reclaim the land Israel had taken from him when they came out of Egyptian bondage. In his reply, Jephthah denied that they had stolen any land and requested a peaceful conclusion to the matter. "But the king of the sons of Ammon disregarded the message which Jephthah sent him" (11:28).

Jephthah was left with only one alternative—it was time to fight. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah (11:29), and he positioned his army for battle. In return for a victory over Ammon, Jephthah vowed that he would offer the first thing that came out of his house to greet him as an offering to God when he came home from battle. Without much detail, the victory over Ammon is related (11:32, 33). "The sons of Ammon were subdued before the sons of Israel." As he returned home, Jephthah's daughter came out to meet him. Sorrowfully, Jephthah "did to her according to the vow which he had made" (11:39).

From this story of Jephthah, two mistakes surface which we must be careful to avoid. Paul said some Old Testament events were written for our examples (1 Corinthians 10:6). Some examples of the Old Testament can be emulated; some must be avoided.

## MAN'S WILL INSTEAD OF GOD'S WILL (11:12-18)

Through his letter to the king of Ammon, Jephthah discovered that the reason for the invasion was to recover the land that was allegedly taken from Ammon by Israel when they came out of Egypt. Jephthah responded to this accusation by giving the king of Ammon a brief lesson in history.

First, Israel took no land from Ammon or from Moab on their journey from Egypt. Israel had camped in Kadesh, from which Israel had asked permission from Edom as well as from Moab to travel through their land. Being denied permission, Israel traveled around these two regions and camped in Arnon. From Arnon, Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, requesting permission to pass through his land. Sihon not only denied permission, he actually declared war against Israel. Because of Sihon's acts of aggression against Israel, God gave His people victory over the Amorites and allowed them to occupy their land. Since God gave Israel this land, Jephthah reasoned that it was rightfully theirs. Jephthah appealed to the reasoning of the king of Ammon by asking, "Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? . . ." (11:24). In other words, if in their minds the Ammonite god gave them a place to live, would they not live there?

Jephthah appealed to the fear of the king of Ammon when he reminded him of the victory that God's people won over the Moabite forces that were led by Balak (11:25). (See Numbers 22—25.) Jephthah asked the king of Ammon, "Are you more powerful than Balak?"

Finally, Jephthah challenged the honesty of the Ammonite ruler by pointing out that Israel had lived in this land for three hundred years (11:26). If Israel's occupation of the territory was the issue, why was it coming now? If God's people have no right to this land, why was this issue not resolved years ago? Jephthah ended his correspondence by maintaining that Israel had done nothing to hurt Ammon and that the Lord, the Judge, would judge between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon (11:28). The result of the king turning from the truth was that the Ammonite forces were crushed, and their oppression of God's people was terminated. The king of Ammon should have listened to the words of truth rather than being consumed with his own designs.

This same danger of turning from truth certainly exists today. As God's children, *we must be extremely careful to be guided by the truth and not by our own desires*. In James 4:13-15, James tells about some who were making plans for a year in advance. They were going to move to a certain city, do business in the city for a year, and then move on to the next city. James declares, "Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that'" (James 4:15).

God's children are not to be guided by their own wills. Whether making a major decision about where one should live or a decision about what one should wear, the child of God is to be guided by the will of his heavenly Father. When we are guided by the will of Jehovah, our will becomes lost in His will, His desires become our desires, His goals become our goals. We will no longer ask unimportant questions like, "Do I want to tell my friend about Jesus?" or "Do I want to be involved in the work of God?" When we are guided by the truth of God's will, what *we* want to do is not important.

Matthew 7 contains the teaching that is expressed in "The Wise Man" song which our children sing. It simply says that those who hear and are guided by the words of Christ are wise, similar to a man who founded his house on the rock. The fool refuses to be guided by the truth and sets out on his own course. Like a man's house which was built without a foundation, this person's life will one day come falling down around him! Those who turn their heads from the truth and follow their own desires are destined for destruction! That was the lesson that the king of Ammon learned. Sadly, many today have not learned it.

As God's children, *we must be extremely careful to be guided by the truth and not by the teaching of others*. One symptom of this problem is seen when it is observed that a person has strong convictions, but they are founded only on what someone has taught him. Instead of investing the time and effort in studying the Bible for himself, he is content with what someone else has said. Some people preface an expression of their beliefs by saying, "I have always been taught. . . ." This is an indication that a person has based his beliefs (and perhaps his life) on what others have said and taught in the past. The individual has done little study for the purpose of formulating his own beliefs. This tendency is especially dangerous when one realizes that our

eternal judgment will be based upon God's will, and not upon what we have always been taught.

### **RASH VOWS INSTEAD OF RIGHTEOUS VOWS (11:29-31)**

Jephthah made a foolish vow. He promised God that he would offer the first thing that came to meet him if God would grant a victory against the Ammonites. Look carefully at this vow Jephthah made.

The Bible says that Jephthah "did to her according to the vow which he had made" (11:39). It is difficult to know what Jephthah actually did with his daughter. Did he offer her as a human sacrifice? Or, did he offer her to God by committing her to a celibate life of perpetual service to God? Strong views are held on each side of this question!<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to arrive at a decisive answer from what is said in the text. However, it is clear from the text that Jephthah did make a *rash* vow.

God's people today must learn from this mistake. Rather than making rash promises regarding matters God has never required of us, we must be busy doing what He *has* required.

In Luke 14:26 Jesus said that if a man would not "hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters," he was not

qualified to be His follower. The word translated "hate" in that passage refers to a matter of priority. If I have two Bibles on my shelf (one with a black cover and the other with a brown cover) and I select the brown Bible, the word "hate" describes what I have done to the black Bible. I do not have any emotional enmity toward the black Bible; I simply chose the brown Bible. That is the meaning of the word in Luke 14 as Jesus tells us to hate our parents, spouses, etc. We are not to feel emotional enmity toward those people. On the contrary, we are to love our families. If it ever comes to a choice between our families and Jesus, we must choose Jesus. We are not to have a single devotion or loyalty above our devotion and loyalty to God.

We might say, "I would gladly die for Jesus if I needed to." The possibilities of this occurring in the foreseeable future are remote in our country. Of what benefit is it to discuss, "What I would do for God if. . ."? God's only requirement is that we give our bodies to Him as "living sacrifices" (Romans 12:1). A day may come when we may be called upon to die for our faith in Jesus. For now, God demands that we live for Him. Living a life on the altar of self-sacrifice entails having no goals but God's goals, no ambitions but God's, no dreams but His.

---

<sup>1</sup>John L. Kachelman, Jr. (*Studies in Judges*. Abilene, Tex.: Quality Publications, 1985), summarizes the major arguments for and against the view that Jephthah actually offered his daughter as a human sacrifice.

In favor of the "human sacrifice" view would be the following arguments (p. 111): (1) The times were those of lawlessness and disregard for God; thus, there would be no qualms in a literal offering. (2) Jephthah was brought up surrounded by a pagan influence which advocated the sacrificing of humans to the gods. (3) The Hebrew word for "burnt offering" is used with the sense of killing. (4) If Jephthah could kill 42,000 fellow Israelites in cold-blood he could sacrifice his daughter. (5) The word "lament" (v. 40) seems to be best understood as "to recount," suggesting that this treacherous deed was recounted annually. (6) The text says that "he did to her according to the vow which he had made" (v. 39). This indicates he really sacrificed her. (7) Jephthah's great grief indicates that he was going to kill his daughter. (8) An important point to consider outside of the text is that it was generally understood that Jephthah killed his daughter up to the Middle Ages. Thus the weight of the early church historians and teachings closer to the period agree with the conclusion that Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter as a burnt offering.

In favor of the view that Jephthah committed his daughter to perpetual service to God would be the following arguments (pp. 111-12): (1) Human sacrifices were contrary to God's laws (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31). (2) Although the Hebrew word for burnt offering normally means a burnt offering, it can be used to

denote complete surrender to the Lord. Thus Jephthah offered his daughter in perpetual Tabernacle service where she remained a virgin. (3) The conjunction in 11:31 can be translated "or" (as in the NASB) thus signifying Jephthah provided himself with an option in case a human came out first. He would either offer the human in dedication to the Lord OR he would offer the animal in a sacrifice. (4) The Hebrew in verse 40 can be translated, "The daughters of Israel went yearly to talk with, or sympathize with, the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year." (5) The Law provided an "out" for Jephthah's rash vow. He could redeem his daughter for a sum of money thus releasing her (cf. Leviticus 27). (6) Jephthah is listed in "Faith's Hall of Fame" (Hebrews 11:32) and it is inconceivable that he would be there if he had committed such a gross sin.

A thorough discussion of the "human sacrifice" view can be read in *Judges* (pp. 146-49) in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series (Cundall, Arthur. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968) and in *Judges* (pp. 125-30) in the Pulpit Commentary series (Hervey, A.C. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950).

A thorough discussion of the "perpetual service" view can be read in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I & II Samuel* (pp. 385-95) in the Keil-Delitzsch series (Keil, C. F. and F. Delitzsch. Translated by James Martin. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.; reprint, 1978), in 1961 *Teacher's Annual Lesson Commentary* (pp. 111-14) in the Gospel Advocate series (Nashville, Tenn.: Gospel Advocate Co., 1960), and in *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (pp. 164-65) (Archer, Gleason L. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982).

We might say, "When I retire, I am going to travel everywhere preaching." God requires that each of us tell the story of Jesus to others so that they "will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). The phrase translated, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel," could be rendered, "As you are going into all the world, preach the gospel to every creature." Spreading the good news of Jesus is something we are to do every day we live in every place we go. Before we promise to devote our lives to evangelism in our retirement years, we need to look at how much evangelism we are doing now. If we do not feel the burden to share the gospel with others now, we will not feel the burden when we retire. Rather than making promises about what we

will do later, we must make sure that we are doing what we have been told to do now.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Jephthah's deliverance of God's people from Ammon points up mistakes that are made by many people. The ability to learn from one's own mistakes is a valuable skill indeed. It is also essential to learn from the mistakes of others.

Even God's champion made fundamental errors at times. Such stories are a storehouse of valuable lessons for God's children today. From these stories we can learn that God can work in our lives to help us overcome our mistakes.

—Craig Tappe

---

# Applying Scripture to Life

---

## On Preaching

One person boasted, "Our preacher can preach twelve different sermons from one text," to which his friend countered: "Our preacher can take any text and preach the same sermon."

## "It's Closing Time"

Late in the last century, two French writers went to visit a well-known scientist, Pierre Berthelot. The scientist predicted that in years to come mankind would develop awesome weapons of terrible power. "We are only beginning to list the alphabet of destruction," he said and went on to express his fears that the human race might destroy itself. One of the writers spoke up. "I think," he said, "that before that time comes, God will come down, like a great gatekeeper, His keys dangling at His waist, and say, 'Gentlemen, it's closing time.'"

## Introductions

A small speaker was once being introduced to a meeting, and the chairman made a mistake in his introductions. He said, "Our short speaker will now give us a well-known talk!"

## A Modern Motto

At the city hall in Glasgow, Scotland, there were inscribed over the main entrance for generations the words: "Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the Word." After World War II the building was renovated, and the ancient city motto was shortened to: "Let Glasgow flourish." Modern streamlining had eliminated what was absolutely vital.

## His Cup Runneth Over

Near the Madeleine in Paris on a lovely spring morning, two beggars were ensconced. One had a sign which read, "Blind

from birth," but no one paid any attention to him. The other beggar had a sign with the words, "You can see the spring; I cannot." His cup was flooded with money.

## Something Was Moving

The story of the bird which got into the building and flew around during the sermon is to the point. One elder was upset by the distraction, but another elder was consoling: "Thank God, something was moving!"

## Visual Strengthening

One day when he was rather discouraged, Frederick W. Robertson visited a shopkeeper who belonged to the church. The shopkeeper showed him a picture of Robertson on the wall. He said that whenever he was tempted to sell someone shoddy goods, he looked at his preacher's picture and was strengthened to do right.