

A Hero Will Rise

The Book of Judges

Text

Judges 11:1-28

Topic

Israel's next hero, Jephthah, is “a mighty man of valor” who gives a speech about peace before engaging in open conflict

Title

“*Valor-Dictorian*”

Introduction

Movies about tough cops who push the limits to get the job done seem to always include a scene in which they negotiate with a jumper who is threatening to commit suicide.

Inspector Callahan, a.k.a., Dirty Harry, tells the jumper he’s not there to negotiate. He just needs his name and address. When asked why, Harry explains to him that once his body hits the pavement, it will be such a mangled, bloody mess, it will make identification impossible - even if they find his driver’s license.

Detective Martin Riggs, the original ‘lethal weapon,’ gets friendly with the jumper, offering him a cigarette. When the guy leans in so Riggs can light it, he handcuffs him to himself. Then he says, “Do you really wanna jump? Do you wanna? Cause that's fine with me. Let’s do it; let’s do it... *I wanna do it.*” Murdoch jumps, pulling the guy with him, and they land safely on the inflatable down below.

Note to self: Movie cops are probably not the best negotiators.

I got to thinking about negotiators because Israel's next judge was a good one. Jephthah is called upon to serve as Israel's hero against the invading army of the Ammonites. Before he agrees, there is some old business to take care of. You see, Israel had rejected and exiled him. Jephthah negotiates terms to make peace between Israel and himself.

After he agrees to fight for Israel, he attempts peaceful negotiations with the Ammonites, seeking to avoid open conflict.

- Ammon was Jephthah's enemy; but he sought peace.
- You might call Israel Jephthah's "frenemy." He sought peace.

The observation of Jephthah's seeking peace is a good point of contact for us, because Christians are told in the New Testament, "as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18).

We read that "peace" is a fruit that the Holy Spirit is working to produce in and through us (Galatians 5:22-23).

And we remember that Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers..." (Matthew 5:9).

As we discuss the short but colorful career of Jephthah, we'll also be looking for principles of peacemaking. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 As Far As It Depends On You, You Should Seek Peace With Your Frenemies, and #2 As Far As It Depends On You, You Should Seek Peace With Your Enemies.

#1 As Far As It Depends On You, You Should Seek Peace With Your Frenemies

(v1-11)

In case you were wondering, “frenemy” is a real word. It’s used to describe situations where one party is friendly toward another for the benefits it can bring, even though they harbor resentment.

It’s a pretty good description of how Israel treated Jephthah.

The closing two verses of chapter ten set-up the action in chapter eleven. After eighteen years of general oppression yielding no spiritual improvement, an army of Ammonites encamped against Israel. It was the goad they needed to sincerely repent, and return to the Lord.

They were ready for a judge to be raised-up, a hero, to deliver them from Ammon.

Jdg 11:1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he *was* the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah.

Jdg 11:2 Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you *are* the son of another woman."

Jephthah’s dad was monogamous, and his wife bore him sons. At least once, however, he was unfaithful and visited a prostitute, who became pregnant, bearing him a son.

I say “at least once,” because we have no justification for thinking that Jephthah’s dad was a womanizer. He may have been.

Or this may have been a one-and-done situation - especially after the consequences of the pregnancy.

I'm highlighting this to establish that the consequences of sin don't always take a long time to present themselves. The worst thing that we can think is that we are getting away with sin - that no one will ever know, and that there will be no lasting effects.

It can take a long time for your sin to be discovered. Or it could happen immediately. Don't play around with sin.

Jephthah's dad took him in, and raised him along with his other children. That arrangement lasted until dad died and the issue of inheritance came up. Being the son of a prostitute, Jephthah had no legal claim to any inheritance whatsoever.

Worse than that, his family kicked him out.

Jdg 11:3 Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out *raiding* with him.

"Fled" has a connotation that his well-being was in jeopardy. You get the impression he left with nothing but the clothes on his back.

"Tob" seems to have been a safe haven for the dregs of society. Think of the *Star Wars* cantina located in the pirate city of Mos Eisley on the planet Tatooine. It is the haunt of freight pilots and other dangerous characters of various alien races. The clientele and the management give incidents of deadly violence no more than a moment's attention.

Or maybe it was more like Tortuga, the safe but dangerous haven for pirates like Captain Jack Sparrow.

Although he was rejected, exiled, and considered a pirate, Jephthah was no degenerate. In verse one he was described as “a mighty man of valor.” We last heard that title when the Angel of the Lord first called Gideon to be Israel’s hero.

It tells us that Jephthah was definitely God’s choice to be judge. He will come to the position in an unusual way - he will be sought out and appointed by men. But make no mistake: He was God’s choice.

Do you have a sad story to tell? Has your life been difficult? Can you relate to rejection and exile? It doesn’t cancel-out God choosing you to serve Him. Forget those things that are in your past, and concentrate on the new creation you are in Jesus Christ.

2Co 5:17 Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

We are to “[forget] those things which are behind and [reach] forward to those things which are ahead, [pressing] toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

We learned from unlikely Gideon that we are already, **right now**, God’s mighty men and women of valor. Don’t be crippled by your past; rise up and walk with the Lord.

We are each Valor-Dictorians.

Who did Jephthah raid? It's unlikely he raided Jews, or they would not have approached him to help them. Jephthah and his raiders pirated and pillaged the neighboring Canaanite tribes. They struck the enemies of Israel - *not* the Jews.

It shows the spirit of peace in Jephthah's heart. He wasn't striking out, striking back, at Israel for the way that he had been treated. As badly as Israel had treated him, they were not his enemy.

People who are against you are not the real enemy. Chances are they have been taken captive by the devil to do his will. Your enemies are the non-flesh-and-blood, behind the 'seen' supernatural powers of wickedness that seek your destruction.

Jdg 11:4 It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel.

Jdg 11:5 And so it was, when the people of Ammon made war against Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob.

Chapter ten ended on this note, but with the Israelites wondering who would lead them.

Somehow they discovered Jephthah would lead them. I say "somehow" because we don't know how. We might assume that they thought of him because he was a successful raider of Canaanites; that he seemed qualified.

But it is more likely that the Lord gave the elders direction and that they sent for Jephthah out of obedience to the Word of the Lord.

I say that because we don't want to fall into the resume checking pattern of the world, picking-out who we think is 'best,' or most suitable based on skill or appearance. We need God's man; God's woman. We need to proceed spiritually in our choices.

The great example of this is the choice of Israel's first king. The Israelites chose Saul, because he was tall, dark, and handsome. The prophet Samuel would have chosen any of Jesse's older sons, in birth order.

God had chosen David. Good choice; but Samuel needed to be willing to receive God's leading instead of his own logic.

If we've learned anything in Judges, it's that God makes unusual choices. You know what? You are an unusual choice, too.

Jdg 11:6 Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon."

The offer was on the table. But there was unfinished business. These elders had done nothing to aid Jephthah when he was rejected and exiled by the only family he had ever known. As far as Jephthah knew, they were still against him.

Jdg 11:7 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?"

I don't think Jephthah was looking for an apology, or anything like that. He wanted to know if they were willing to be at peace with him. He held no grudge against them; but did they harbor hatred against him?

It would be hard to command them, if they hated him.

Jdg 11:8 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the people of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

"Be our head," or leader, indicates they were willing to submit to Jephthah after the battle. It was a formal way of saying that Jephthah would be their leader - that he would be God's judge.

It was, therefore, a gesture of peace - genuine peace.

Jdg 11:9 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the LORD delivers them to me, shall I be your head?"

He wanted to be clear - "Shall I be your head?" He was asking if they indeed recognized him as the Judge God was raising up.

Did you catch the tender phrase, "take me back home?" After all they had done to Jephthah, he considered Gilead his home.

It's amazing he harbored no ill will, but instead held on to fond memories.

Jdg 11:10 And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words."

Jdg 11:11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.

“Before the Lord in Mizpah” means that either at the Tabernacle, or before the High Priest, everything that had transpired between the elders and Jephthah was ratified in the presence of God.

A true peace was achieved. Jephthah and the elders were reconciled; together they were reconciled with the Lord. In unity, with God’s leading them, they would stand against the Ammonites.

That's the narrative. In it there are some real nuggets regarding peace, and seeking peace. I’ll highlight a few obvious ones.

Although grossly mistreated, Jephthah did not grow bitter. He did not seek any retribution, or revenge, against his family, or against the elders.

More than that, he did not grow bitter towards God. He did not blame God for his life being difficult. Instead, he respected God, raiding only Israel’s enemies.

When he was approached by the elders, his goal was reconciliation. He pressed them for unity. The unity of God’s people was more important to Jephthah than his own feelings.

Finally, Jephthah brought everyone together before the Lord - giving Him all the glory.

This whole episode could have gone differently. It could have gone badly. But Jephthah saw to it that it went godly, because at heart he was a peacemaker.

#2 As Far As It Depends On You,
You Should Seek Peace With Your Enemies
(v12-28)

I ran across this definition of what it means to be a peacemaker:

A peacemaker is someone who experiences the peace of God (Philippians 4:7) because he is at peace (Romans 5:1) with the God of peace (Philippians 4:9) through the Prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6), who, indeed, is our peace (Ephesians 2:14), and who therefore seeks to live at peace with all others (Romans 12:18) and proclaims the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15) so that others might have joy and peace in believing (Romans 15:13).

Here is what I think that is saying: Focus on what God had done in making peace with you, and you will concentrate on being at peace with everyone else.

Jephthah had resolved his frenemy problems with Israel... But he still had enemies in the Ammonites.

Jdg 11:12 Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon, saying, "What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land?"

This is totally unexpected. No previous hero had tried diplomacy, let alone the pirate of Tob who was known for his daring raids.

If you are truly at peace with God, you won't be rocked when others challenge you. You derive your identity from your union with Jesus - not from the opinions of others. You don't need to lash out at them.

Jdg 11:13 And the king of the people of Ammon answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now therefore, restore those *lands* peaceably."

It seems that Israel is always being accused of claiming land that belongs to others. In our modern world, people get worked up against Israel because, they say, she will not allow there to be a Palestinian state.

The truth is that Israel has offered the Palestinians a state of their own on five separate occasions. The real problem is that the Palestinians, and others in the Middle East and around the world, refuse to recognize the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. Their idea of peace is the extermination of all Jews.

The Ammonite claim of land was false. It was revisionist history.

Jdg 11:14 So Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon,

Jdg 11:15 and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: 'Israel did not take away the land of Moab, nor the land of the people of Ammon;

Jdg 11:16 for when Israel came up from Egypt, they walked through the wilderness as far as the Red Sea and came to Kadesh.

Jdg 11:17 Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, "Please let me pass through your land." But the king of Edom would not heed. And in like manner they sent to the king of Moab, but he would not *consent*. So Israel remained in Kadesh.

Jdg 11:18 And they went along through the wilderness and bypassed the land of Edom and the land of Moab, came to the east side of the land of Moab, and encamped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the border of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab.

Jdg 11:19 Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon; and Israel said to him, "Please let us pass through your land into our place."

Jdg 11:20 But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. So Sihon gathered all his people together, encamped in Jahaz, and fought against Israel.

Jdg 11:21 And the LORD God of Israel delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. Thus Israel gained possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country.

Jdg 11:22 They took possession of all the territory of the Amorites, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan.

There's a lot of history here, so let me boil it down. Jephthah told the king of the people of Ammon that it never was their land to begin with. Israel took no land controlled by the Edomites, the Ammonites, or the Moabites. The land in question was a part of the spoils of the Amorite conflict. The Ammonites had no claim on it.

Jdg 11:23 'And now the LORD God of Israel has dispossessed the Amorites from before His people Israel; should you then possess it?

Jdg 11:24 Will you not possess whatever Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the LORD our God takes possession of before us, we will possess.

Jdg 11:25 And now, *are* you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel? Did he ever fight against them?

The victory over the Amorites came about only because the God of Israel drove them out. Jephthah appealed, for the sake of argument, to their own theology. If they believed they should possess what they thought their god Chemosh gave them, did it not make sense that Israel should possess what they knew the Lord gave them?

Jdg 11:26 While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its villages, in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities along the banks of the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not recover *them* within that time?

Israel had possessed this land and these towns for three hundred years. The Ammonites made no efforts during all that time to recover what they claimed was theirs. Their argument was a smokescreen for their aggression.

Jdg 11:27 Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you wronged me by fighting against me. May the LORD, the Judge, render judgment this day between the children of Israel and the people of Ammon.' "

This may not sound like a strong declaration of war, but it was. The people of Canaan were always terrified of the God of Israel. They knew they could not withstand Him if Israel was walking with Him. They had experienced His miraculous hand against them.

By invoking the “judgment” of God, Jephthah was calling to mind all this history of Israel’s victories in the Promised Land.

Our current United States Secretary of Defense is retired General James Mattis. His nickname is “Mad Dog.” He’s a warrior who prefers peace. But when diplomacy fails, watch out.

My favorite quote of his goes like this: “We've backed off in good faith to try and give you a chance to straighten this problem out. But I am going to beg with you for a minute. I'm going to plead with you, do not cross us. **Because if you do, the survivors will write about what we do here for 10,000 years.**”

That is what Jephthah was saying to the king of the people of Ammon. He was pleading with the Ammonites to not cross Israel. If they did, they’d regret it. And here we are approximately 3200 years later, still talking about what Israel did there.

Jdg 11:28 However, the king of the people of Ammon did not heed the words which Jephthah sent him.

As much as it depended upon him, Jephthah sought a peaceful solution. It wasn’t to be, and we will see next time that the Lord delivered the Ammonites into his hand “with a great slaughter.”

We can glean a few more peacemaking principles from Jephthah’s dealings with the Ammonites.

He did not take their aggression personally. He didn’t get angry about it. He stayed reasonable. It’s because he knew there was something greater going on than just his feelings.

I’ll go out on a limb here and remind all of us that Israel was always to remain optimistic that Gentiles would convert.

Sure, their mandate was to destroy the Canaanites. But along the way, any who trusted the God of Israel were brought into the fold.

Think Rahab and her family in Jericho.

If your “enemies” are nonbelievers, remind yourself that their eternal destinies are of critical importance. You’re to try to maintain peace with them, even if they are against you, for their good, and for God’s glory.

Peacemaking requires we be patient. Jephthah was willing to wait, giving the king of the people of Ammon time to respond. We don’t always need to jump on something immediately - or at least without seeking clarification.

As peacemakers, we are not to compromise the truth. Jephthah’s answers to the Ammonite king were concise and truthful. He didn’t yield, not one bit.

We can’t achieve peace at any price. Peace is a goal, but it must be genuine, relying on truth.

We won’t see Jephthah’s victory until our next study, but we can peek at it:

Jdg 11:32 So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands.
Jdg 11:33 And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith - twenty cities - and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

If we were making a movie about this, we'd spend a ton of time on the battle, inventing new ways of showing-off Jephthah's mad warrior skills as a mighty man of valor.

What is communicated instead is that the Lord gave the victory. All Jephthah and Israel needed was to be on the right side.

A good question to ask is, "Am I right with the Lord in my current struggle?"

To keep it in context, ask:

- "Am I experiencing the peace of God because I am at peace with the God of peace through the Prince of peace?"
- "Am I therefore seeking to live at peace with all others and proclaim the gospel of peace so that others might have joy and peace in believing?"

For some of you, the place to begin is to realize you are at war with God. You are His born enemy.

For His part, God has made peace with you at the Cross, where Jesus took your place. You can therefore be born-again, and experience both peace with God, and the peace of God that comes from having your sins forgiven.

Surrender today.