

Jephthah: The Nobody Who Saved Everybody

At the east end of the reflecting pool in Washington, D.C., stands the majestic statue of General Ulysses S. Grant. It commemorates Grant's military leadership that was so critical to the Union's victory in the Civil War. Some 2½ miles away, in a nondescript park, stands a much smaller statue of a Civil War leader whose name you have probably never heard of – Major General John Rawlins. But without Rawlins, it's unlikely that there would be any statue of Grant in Washington at all.

When Grant was appointed by President Lincoln to lead the Union Army, Grant called on Rawlins to be his chief of staff. Grant and Rawlins had both lived in Galena, Illinois, just before the war. Rawlins knew Grant's strengths and he knew his weaknesses, especially his weakness for alcohol. Before he agreed to take the position with Grant, Rawlins got him to pledge that he would abstain from liquor for the duration of the war. And in the times when the general threatened to fall away from that promise, Rawlins would plead with him and hound him until Grant relented. There's no question that of the two men, Grant was far more gifted as a leader and a military strategist. But it's also true that Grant without Rawlins would scarcely have been able to climb into the saddle, let alone lead men into battle. ⁱ

This week we're jumping to Judges chapter 11 and the story of Jephthah. Many of you have probably never heard of him because he's a nobody in the Old Testament. But as we'll see, he was a "nobody who saved everybody." And we'll learn from him several lessons that are very relevant for us today. The first is that...

I. Your Past Does Not Disqualify You.

Jephthah had a shameful past, something that he had no control over. He was the illegitimate son of a prostitute. His father was an Israeli tribal leader, Gilead, the grandson of Manasseh. His father Gilead must have been very influential though, because in later generations the whole region on the east side of the Jordan River was given his name, Gilead.

We don't know the family details, but Gilead was at least honorable enough not to abandon the boy, instead bringing him into his home. However, Jephthah had two other brothers who were not so generous. When they all became of age, the brothers drove Jephthah out saying: (Judges 11:2b-3)

"You are not going to get any inheritance in our family... because you are the son of another woman." So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, (north, near Syria) where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him.

What happens next in this story is nothing less than fascinating. Have you heard the old saying, "Don't burn your bridges behind you"? That's actually military advice, referring to the temptation to burn bridges you've crossed so that your enemy can't follow after you. But this adage is saying, "Don't do that, because you may need that bridge in the future to ESCAPE from your enemy!"

Jephthah's brother's burned the bridge when they kicked him out of the family. Verse 4 says that "*Some time later...*" not just they, but the whole clan needed to cross that same bridge to escape from their enemy. The bridge was Jephthah. When the Ammonites attacked them, Israel had no leader gifted in warfare to lead them into battle. Whom did they turn to? Jephthah. Why? Because despite his past, he was a gifted military leader, whom they needed to save the people.

What's in your past that you're ashamed of? Have you tried to delete it from your "permanent record"? Have you tried to run from it or exile it to another time zone? Have you tried to burn that bridge so that your enemies can't follow you across it? That's not a great strategy. In fact, that's not a biblical strategy.

What does the Bible say we should do about our sin? David wrote a psalm about this, psalm 32. He said that when he tried to hide his sin, things got worse:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away...

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me. (Ps. 32:3, 4)

How did David find relief? Not by burning the bridge but by walking back over it:

**Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.
...and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Ps. 32:5)**

This past week, we had two glaring examples of the right way and the wrong way to deal with sin. The president of Asiana Airlines, the parent company of the plane that crashed in San Francisco, even before all the evidence was in on what caused the crash, the president went on television, bowed humbly and said, "I sincerely apologize over the accident, and to the passengers on board and their families." The president was not flying the plane but he apologized for the pilots because they worked for him.

In a separate news story, Ariel Castro, who was arrested months ago for kidnapping those three teenage girls in Cleveland and holding them against their will for ten years, was charged this week with 329 counts of lawbreaking. He pled "not guilty." 329 counts and he pleads "not guilty." Who's the brilliant lawyer that gave him that advice?

Which of these two men is more in touch with reality? Which of these two men is more likely to overcome his past and accomplish something good, something of value in this world? Your dark past does not disqualify you unless, unless you try to burn the bridge that connects you to it. Follow David's example, "*Then I acknowledged my sin... and you forgave.*" That's how you deal with your past. Secondly, we can learn from Jephthah that...

II. Other People's Sin Should Not Dissuade You from Serving the Lord.

Do you know anybody who fits this description—

Once upon a time, they were having a blast serving God. They were gifted in some unique way – as a teacher, as a musician, as a planner – and they were using their gift to serve God, to expand His kingdom, to make the name of Jesus famous. And they loved what they were doing, but then something happened. They were falsely accused of misusing their authority or false rumors and innuendo were floated in the community that painted them as having a hidden agenda or a selfish purpose. The "noise" of these rumors got so bad that this good-hearted person felt he just had

to resign, he had to stop doing the ministry he loved because people just didn't trust him anymore, even though the stories were false.

So, they dropped out of ministry and have never gone back, even though the people who started the rumors were shown to be completely unjustified in their accusations. But your friend just won't go back. He says, "It's too painful. I can't risk going through something like that again." Do you know anyone who's got a story like that?

You need to remind them of Jephthah. That's his story. He wasn't responsible for his birth situation. He was completely innocent, but his brothers, members of his own household, took legal action against him. And it appears that the community went along with it or at least didn't stand up to the brothers because no one said, "Hey, wait a minute! Cut him out of the inheritance if you want to but shame him and drive him out of town, come on! Hey Jephthah, don't leave. You can live in my house!" Nobody said that. Nobody did that. They just let him go.

But here's where we see the emergence of a true leader, a true man of God. He does not let the sin of others cause him to become bitter or to lay down his gifts, never to use them again for God's glory. Look at the evidence of Jephthah's remarkable maturity:

Exhibit A: He immediately uses his leadership gifts in another town. "...a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him." We don't know where he led them, but he used his God-given gifts to lead.

Exhibit B: When recruited to come home and lead the army, he doesn't laugh in their faces. He seriously and carefully considers the offer. Yes, he reminds them of their sin, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?" (v. 7) But he doesn't mock them. He doesn't treat them as they treated him. He seriously considers their need.

Exhibit C: He faithfully defends his clan (the ones who rejected him!) against their enemy. I'm sure he was tempted to let the enemy "take a few whacks" at his brothers. But he doesn't do that. He loyally defends them verbally and physically.

Exhibit D: Every step of the way, Jephthah gives glory to God. First, when he returns, he repeats his commitment "before the LORD" (v.11) in Mizpah. This means he publicly announced his commitment. Secondly, in retelling the accurate history of their relationship with the Ammonites (something the Ammonite king was trying to "re-write"), Jephthah gave all the credit for any successes to God. He didn't take credit, he said:

...the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his men into Israel's hands... v. 21

...the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people... v. 23

...whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. v. 24
Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites. v.27

This Jephthah is a truly remarkable and incredibly mature man. He grew up with a stigma, something he had no control over. He was thrown out of the family as

a young adult. He was provided no inheritance or shown any compassion or grace in any way. YET, he did not let this prejudiced mistreatment control his life. In fact, it was just the opposite. He used the power of his spiritual, emotional and mental maturity to overwhelm their sin and unleash his gifts to save the very people who had sinned against him.

Do you know anyone else in history who acted like this? Isn't this an incredibly accurate picture of Jesus? He came into this world under the stigma of what looked like his mother's sexual impurity. His own biological siblings thought he was nuts! It was just as Isaiah prophesied:

**He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.** (Is. 53:3)

But when we were under severe attack, He did not abandon us. He fought for us. We who tried to disinherit Him.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities... (Is. 53:5)

And God the Father says:

**Therefore I will give him a portion among the great...
For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.** (Is. 53:12)

Have you been despised and rejected for something you didn't do? Have you been pierced by the sharp words of members of the "family of God"? Have you been "crucified" for doing what was right? Don't believe the enemy! Don't let him take you out! Don't let him win! Stay in the fight! You are in impeccably fine company. Let your maturity shine through. Use your gifts! Defend your clan! Give all the glory to God! One day, you will be given a "portion among the great." You will.

But there's one more lesson Jephthah has to teach us. It is this:

III. God's Appointment Doesn't Make You A Genius.

Just because God enrolls you in his mission, don't let it go to your head. While we are honored to be recruited and used by God to accomplish His purposes in this world, we've got to remember this: we're NOT Jesus! We're not perfect, we're not infallible, we don't become geniuses when we become Christians!

Jephthah was doing so well, wasn't he? He forgave his brothers, he didn't hold a grudge, he was using his gifts, he was remarkably courageous and wise as he fought the Ammonites. Then he did an inexplicably stupid thing. He's heading off to battle and he says to God: (Judges 11:30, 31)

If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD'S, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.

Wait! What??!! You'll sacrifice whatever comes out of your house? Jephthah, what are you talking about? Isn't this wild? So, how do we explain this?

Let's not panic. Let's take it a step at a time. First, grammatically, in the Hebrew the word translated "and" can also be translated "or" so that it could legitimately be translated, "*...whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me... will be the LORD'S OR I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.*" Some farm animals in those days, had free range within people's houses so he's not talking about

performing human sacrifice here. He's saying, "If a person comes out, I'll dedicate their life to the LORD. If an animal comes out, I'll sacrifice it to the LORD."

So, Jephthah isn't talking about human sacrifice. He knows God abhors that. But still, he hasn't thought this through. Look what happens. His daughter, his only daughter, comes out first and so this means, in order for him to fulfill his vow, he will have to send her into the Lord's service (something like committing her to a monastery) which, of course, means that she will never marry, never have children, never have a son to carry on the family name. All of this is not by her choice but by her father's choice. And both she and her dad are grieved by this.

When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break." (Judges 11:35)

We can't understand this. We think, "Hey, no big deal. Just tell God you changed your mind." And, as we say that, we prove how bankrupt our vows are, how unlike God our thinking is. A vow to us has no meaning. To Jephthah AND his daughter, vows DID have meaning. His daughter is very sad, proven by the fact that she asks for two months to grieve the situation (v.37) but she never even considers asking her father to break his vow. Instead, she says:

My father... you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised... (Judges 11:36)

So, how do we make sense of this? Was this a brilliant decision on Jephthah's part? No. This is the kind of decision which should have been made through prayer, long discussions, and more prayer before action was taken. But once it was done, once the vow was made, both Jephthah and his daughter did not make things worse by breaking the vow. They both freely decided to honor God by keeping the vow, trusting that God would bring satisfaction in spite of the mistake that was made.

And what was the outcome? She went into the Lord's service and her honorable and sacrificial decision was commemorated every year for four days as young women remembered the daughter of Jephthah, the mature servant of the Lord. And also, please consider this: Jephthah's father, Gilead, broke his vow of marriage by having relations with the prostitute, Jephthah's mother. Because of this, Jephthah was rejected, despised and his brothers disinherited him. But Jephthah did the opposite. He KEPT his vow, as painful as it was. And his daughter honored both her dad and the Lord by changing her life course so that the vow could be kept. Some commentators look at this incident and say that it demonstrates Jephthah's immaturity. I say it's just the opposite. This incident proves Jephthah's remarkable faith, integrity, maturity and effectiveness as a father. Singlehandedly, Jephthah ended a family sin – the sin of unfaithfulness. No matter what the circumstances, Jephthah was determined not to bring shame on his daughter as his father had brought upon him. And the proof of his effectiveness as a father was that his daughter joined him in upholding his vow.

Because of Jephthah's integrity, this nobody and his daughter saved everybody which made them both great somebodies in God's eyes. This is how the spiritual war is meant to be fought. May you fight like a Gileadite this week. Amen.

ⁱ Richard D. Phillips, *The Masculine Mandate* (Sanford: Reformation Trust, 2010), pp. 121-122