

September 10

Scriptures: Read Judges 10 & 11

Key Verse: “Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor... They said to Jephthah, ‘Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon’” (Judges 11:1, 6)

Overview

Following the deaths of two minor judges, Tola and Jair (10:1-5), Israel fell into idolatry worse than ever before. They worshipped many other gods from all the surrounding heathen nations. The Bible clearly indicates that a direct result of Israel’s sin was that they suffered oppression (10:10) under the Philistines from their southwestern side and the Ammonites from the east, who persecuted the Trans Jordanian tribes for eighteen years (10:8).

Israel had terribly broken God’s covenant. Knowing that He alone could deliver them, they cried out to Him in their distress. He spoke, undoubtedly through a prophet, saying He would no longer deliver them. This emphasized the seriousness of their sin and God’s response caused them to take decisive action. They showed genuine repentance by firstly confessing their sin; secondly, taking action to do away with the sin in their life (“they put away the foreign gods”, 10:16); and thirdly, by serving the Lord. Then God, in His mercy, raised up an unexpected deliverer, the outcast Jephthah, son of a harlot. It is always interesting to see how God chose and used unlikely, lowly, and sometimes despised people to bring Him glory. This further emphasizes the grace and goodness of God.

Jephthah became the leader of a band of marauders. His reputation as a warrior must have spread, since the men of Gilead promised to make him their leader if he would help them fight the Ammonites. Jephthah showed evidence of a strong faith in God (11:9-10) and, in a solemn ceremony, became their new leader and judge. He was not only a strong and confident leader, but also wise. In order to prevent a great war, he first tried to negotiate with the Ammonites, but they stubbornly refused to heed to the truth of his sound and valid arguments, which proved he was knowledgeable in Israel’s history. Jephthah made it clear that Israel would not give up the land their God had given them (11:23-24).

Before the battle, “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah” (11:29) to empower him, and God gave him a great victory over the enemy. However, Jephthah had made that unnecessary and rash vow which he was under obligation to fulfill if God gave him success in battle (11:30-31; Num.30:2), and we read that he did fulfill his vow. The question of debate is: Did Jephthah actually sacrifice the life of his daughter as a burnt offering to God? This is not a pleasant thought, yet it is what the text would seem to imply. However, there is another interpretation suggested by many Bible commentators that in the Tabernacle (equivalent to a burnt offering), and as such she was to leave her family and remain a virgin all her life (Ex.38:8; 1 Sam.2:22). The considerations they take into account are: (1) Jephthah is listed in Hebrews 11:32 as a man of faith, and therefore, a man of God. (2) He showed evidence of a knowledge of God; therefore, he should know that the Lord was absolutely against human sacrifice (Lev.20:1-5; Deut.12:31). (3) His daughter’s response is not what one would expect of one about to die. The period of

lamenting could be in mourning her never being able to bear children, which was so important in that culture. Since she was Jephthah's only child, it also meant he would have no posterity, which was something very serious. (4) The Scripture does not specifically say Jephthah sacrificed his daughter, and if he did, it is surprising that we read of no condemnation.

On the other hand, Jephthah, being the son of a harlot, may not have been a full Israelite and, therefore, could have been greatly influenced by the heathen. It was also evident that, in the time of the judges, Israel did not practice true worship to God, but rather mixed it with heathen ways (e.g. Gideon, 8:27). Jephthah may have had knowledge and limited understanding of God and, out of ignorance, fulfilled his vow, literally offering her as a burnt offering.

Whether Jephthah sacrificed his daughter or just offered her as a servant in the Tabernacle is not clear. We can learn by this that nothing must be done in the name of the Lord without considering the serious implications involved. In any case, Jephthah was honorable in fulfilling his sacred vow, even if it was to his own hurt (Ps.15:4), and by doing so he expressed a great reverence for God. God still used him, an imperfect instrument, to bring glory unto Himself and deliver His people.

Prayer

Lord, keep us from rash and impulsive vows to You or others. Please give us the wisdom to be deliberate in our decisions. Thank You, Lord, that You will use any one of us to accomplish Your purpose if we will be consecrated to You. We're Yours Lord.