

# UNLIKELY HEROES

## Judges Part 6: How God Used Jephthah

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### WARM-UP QUESTION

Have you ever felt that God couldn't use you in a significant way because of your background? Maybe you feel that you haven't been a Christian long enough, or don't know the Bible well enough. If that is the case, then you will see how God can use anyone in spite of their background. Such was the case with Jephthah.

### Jephthah (Judges 10:6—12:7)



Jephthah was the illegitimate son of Gilead (Jgs 11:1) and a leader in the period of the judges. The son of a harlot, Jephthah was dispossessed by his father's other sons and refused a share in their father's home. He moved to the land of Tob, a small Aramaean state east of the Jordan River (11:3, 5), and became leader of a band of malcontents and adventurers who went raiding with him.

When war broke out between the Israelites and the Ammonites, the leaders of Gilead begged Jephthah to return and lead their army. At first he refused because of their previous mistreatment of him. When they promised to make him Gilead's king, he accepted and became commander in chief and king

(11:4–10). The agreement was ratified before the Lord at a general assembly of the people at Mizpah (11:11) in Gilead, probably south of the Jabbok River.

After diplomatic negotiations with the king of Ammon failed, Jephthah waged war against the Ammonites. Before the fighting started, he vowed to the Lord that if he was victorious, on his return home he would sacrifice to God whoever met him at the door of his house. Then he successfully led his army against the Ammonites, destroying them with a terrible slaughter (11:29–33).

When Jephthah returned home, he was shocked to find that the first person to meet him was his only child, his daughter, playing a tambourine and dancing for joy. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter you have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me; for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow" (v 35). She submitted to her destiny, but begged that it might be postponed for two months so that she and her companions could retreat to the mountains and lament that she must die a virgin (Jgs 11:34–38). A woman in ancient Israel could suffer no greater disgrace than to die unmarried and childless. Whether Jephthah actually sacrificed his daughter, or not, is debated today.

Arguments supporting the sacrifice of his daughter:

- Human sacrifice was common during the time of Jephthah
- The early church believed Jephthah sacrificed his daughter
- The plain text seems to indicate that he sacrificed his daughter
- A vow to God was understood to take precedence over all else, even human life

Arguments rejecting the sacrifice of his daughter:

- Jephthah was likely aware of God's law against human sacrifice
- The text does not actually say he killed his daughter in a sacrificial offering
- A living sacrifice of perpetual virginity was a tremendous sacrifice in the Jewish context of that day
- When Jephthah's daughter went out to weep for two months, she did not go out to mourn her impending death—instead she went out to mourn her virginity

Jephthah also led the Gileadites against the Ephraimites, who were resentful that they had not been included in the fight against the Ammonites. They had been given a previous chance to ally with Gilead, but had refused.

Jephthah captured the fords of the Jordan behind the Ephraimites, and prevented their escape by an ingenious strategy. Gileadite guards put fugitives to a test demanding that they say "shibboleth." If they could not pronounce the "sh," they were revealed as Ephraimites and killed. The account says that 42,000 Ephraimites died at that time.

Jephthah was judge over Gilead for six years (Jgs 12:1-7), and when he died he was buried in one of the cities of Gilead. In the letter to the Hebrews, Jephthah is named with Gideon, Barak, and others as a hero of faith.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. What kind of people in our society today often feel like outcasts, much like Jephthah? What steps can you take to change the way they see themselves?
2. Jephthah made a vow to God that backfired, yet Paul made a vow to God which seems to be acceptable (Acts 18:18). Is it wrong to make vows to God?
3. What does Matthew 5:33-37 say about making vows?
4. Is it wrong to make a marriage vow?
5. What does this narrative tell you about God?

### BRIDGING THE GAP

- ✓ Your \_\_\_\_\_ will not hinder God from using you in a mighty way.
- ✓ Be careful about \_\_\_\_\_ which you cannot keep.