

**Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Monday : Rash Promises: Jephthah: Judges  
Chapter 11**

One of those Bible stories which is not going to be a favourite with Sunday School teachers. It is an odd story to today's audience because Jephthah's daughter (the story's innocent victim) is not even given a name; and because Jephthah's wife (assuming he had a wife to have a daughter) doesn't get a mention. It is an odd story by any standards because it tells of a father who apparently murders his only child because he has made a stupid promise to God – although God's law at the time prohibited murdering children (Deuteronomy 12.31 and 18.10). It is an odd story because Jephthah seems not to have reckoned with his little girl being the one to dance up the garden path to meet her Dad when he returned victorious from battle; and yet this was just what was expected of little girls at that time. And if you want any more oddities try the local population signing up for a battle, and only then looking round for someone to lead them into battle. (Sounds like the Goon Show: *"We've got an army...er.. don't we need a general?"*)

The detail is also a little confusing. Whoever put the story together gets rather mixed up between the different tribes and their different gods, and what happened when. The more solid bits are: This takes place East of the Jordan, and harks back to the end of the Exodus story when some of the Israelites settled outside the Promised Land – including settlement on land taken from tribes that had refused to give them peaceful passage to the Promised Land. Jephthah's complaints letter is fairly solid – though a request for passage from several thousand people, promising that they wouldn't be stopping, could well have been regarded suspiciously.

The name Jephthah means "He opens". You might think that this fits quite well with a man who opens his mouth without thinking; although this is the same man who tries rational argument before rushing into battle. (In the next chapter, he rushes into a murderous battle with his Israelite neighbours.) Because so much of the Bible carries messages that are still relevant, we tend to forget that the Book of Judges is about what we would call primitive times. Human sacrifice was probably regularly (or at least occasionally) reported on Facebook. Jephthah (technically a monotheist) is quite happy to tell the Ammonites that Their god (though he gets the god's name wrong) gave them their land, and the Israelite God gave the Israelites their land.

It is worth noting that there is some debate about whether the daughter was killed by her father or just dedicated to shrine service as a perpetual virgin. (No choices for her either way!). The majority view is that she was killed; and killing would be more obviously consistent with the mountain mourning of the girls. (Though it is generally reckoned that the custom attributed to Jephthah's daughter was actually an ancient pagan rite that the Israelites chose to preserve, but wanted to disguise as something of their own.) Women not having children (and men not having women who had children) was such a big deal because, before any firm belief in resurrection, you lived on in your children... or not at all.

Jephthah's isn't the only rash promise, though it is the most stupid. Those who offered him the leadership if he won the battle – welcoming back the bastard outcast and bandit – were also being rather rash. (Not the first or the last successful warrior without any obvious peacetime leadership credentials.) Note the absence of any mention of consulting Jehovah before deciding on either the battle or the leader. The other dimension of Jephthah's promise is the familiar one of bargaining with God. You let me win, and I'll give you, God, something really valuable. OOPs, it's my only child. Oh well, so be it!