

Jephthah, or the Faith That Leads to Faithfulness

by A.B. Simpson

A.B. Simpson's sermon on Jephthah emphasizes the transformative power of faith and the importance of faithfulness to God amidst adversity.

Scripture: Judges 11:30, Matthew 25:21

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Trust in God"

Description

A.B. Simpson's sermon on 'Jephthah, or the Faith That Leads to Faithfulness' emphasizes the transformative power of faith and God's ability to use the despised for His glory. Jephthah, born into misfortune and rejected by his family, rises above his circumstances through God's grace, demonstrating that true faith leads to faithfulness. His vow to God, fulfilled with the sacrifice of his daughter, illustrates the depth of commitment required in our relationship with God. Simpson draws parallels between Jephthah and other biblical figures, highlighting the importance of living a life of unwavering fidelity to God, even amidst trials. Ultimately, the sermon calls believers to trust in God's plan and to be faithful servants, reflecting the character of Christ in their lives.

Transcript

"Well done, good and faithful servant." Matt. 25: 21; Judges 11: 30 to 36.

The story of Jephthah illustrates with great power two important principles in the divine economy. The first is that God uses the things that are despised to confound the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. The second principle is, that God not only wants men who can trust Him, but men whom He can trust.

I. Jephthah was born a child of misfortune. Through no fault of his, the bar sinister was upon his life, and he was cast out as a poor bastard boy, despised by his brethren, forsaken by his family and thrown upon the cold mercies of the world. In most persons this engenders a spirit of misanthropy and bitterness, and often develops into hard and heartless unbelief and ungodliness.

How natural it is to say, "What is the use of trying, everything and everybody is against me; the very heavens are hostile, and either there is no God or there is no God for me; religion is for the fortunate and favored ones. I am a child of cruel fate, and as everybody is against me, I shall be against everybody,

except as I can use them for my own advantage." This is the natural development of human character apart from the grace of God. But grace always proves an exception to every ordinary and natural law. And so in Jephthah's case we find this poor little child of shame and wrong rising through the pressure of unfavorable circumstances to stronger elements of character and nobler qualities of life, and wringing strength and success from the very difficulties that threaten to crush him. This was not through mere personal qualities in Jephthah, but it was undoubtedly through the grace of God, for we find Jephthah a man of deep devotion and intense fidelity to God.

His life resembles another eccentric one, of which we read in the book of Chronicles, namely Jabez. His name signifies "sorrow," and he when born was such a little, wizened abortion, that his mother called him "Jabez," expressive of the sorrow that he had caused her. And so Jabez was thrown into life as a little miserable good-for-nothing, but when he grew old enough to think and pray, he turned from his distressing circumstances to his God, and we read of him this glorious chapter: "Jabez called upon the Lord God and said: `Oh, that Thou wouldst bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!'" And it is added, "God granted him that which he requested."

So it was with Jephthah, when all else forsook him then the Lord took him up, and, trusting in Jehovah, he lived to have a glorious revenge upon his unkind people by bringing them a blessing instead of the curse that they had given him.

We have a little touch of his character in the name he gave his new home. He called it the land of Tob.

Tob means "good," and this is but a little straw to tell how the wind blew in Jephthah's life.

We read of another man later in Hebrew history who called a certain land that Solomon gave him, "Cabul." Now, Cabul means "disagreeable." Poor Hiram looked at his country through the green glasses of discontent, and everything was green; but Jephthah looked at his land in the golden light of faith and hope, and all was bright.

Beloved, God wants His people to be delivered from sorrow just as much as from sin. Israel's long and sad failure in the wilderness all began in the spirit of discontent, and, "as it were," murmuring. They did not murmur outright, but they, "as it were," murmured, and from this they went on until the climax was rebellion and judgment, the loss of Canaan and the curse of God. There is in the spirit of gloom, sadness and discontent a morbid and unwholesome touch just as defiling as actual sin. It chills the whole temperature of the spiritual life, and hurts every plant of faith and love. One breath of frost in Florida destroys the orange crop for years, and one touch of morbidness and selfish sentimental sorrow will not only chill our own spirit, but will depress everybody that we come in contact with, and lower the temperature of a whole community of happy Christians. Let us live in the "land of Tob," and let us accept the fulness of His atonement, who not only bore our sins and sicknesses but our sorrows, too.

The name of Jephthah himself is significant. It means "God opens," and it expresses, no doubt, the trust which looked to Jehovah to open his way and clear his path of all difficulties and trials until the valley of Achor became the door of hope, and the thorns and thistles of sorrow became the myrtles and the palms of victory.

Next we find Jephthah surrounded with a most unfavorable set of companions. The narrative calls them "vain fellows." They were the outcasts of society, and men who had been thrown as waifs upon the current of life and they naturally gravitated to a stronger center like Jephthah. Now, such companions are not

favorable to the development of the highest character.

How often we hear people complaining that others have led them to do wrong. And yet we find in the story of the Bible that many of God's noblest lives are molded through the very influence of uncongenial associations. Joseph grew to the very pinnacle of moral greatness in defiance of the people around him. David, in his exile years, was surrounded by the outlaws and outcasts of Israel, but through the power of his own personality and the grace of God that was with him, these men became transformed into his noblest followers and friends, and afterward were made the very princes of His kingdom. So the Lord Jesus Christ takes us, a company of poor, worthless sinners and things that are despised, and, by the transforming power of His grace, He lifts us into His own likeness, and crowns us with His own glory. And so, as we are thrown into the society of evil men, be it ours to lift and ennoble them, and instead of letting them draw us down let us lift them up to the mounts of blessing, where God has set us, in order that we may be the lights of a dark world and shine the brighter through the very darkness that surrounds us.

They tell of a good Methodist preacher in England, who was arrested and put in jail because of his street preaching. He prayed so loud that the very authorities of the jail were glad to get him out. There is no place, and there is no society where we may not live the life of Christ and receive the glory of His indwelling. There is no depth of sin and misery so great but that He can lift us up, and turn our sorrow into joy and our curse into a blessing.

Still, He uses the "base things of the world and things that are despised, yea, and things that are not, to bring to naught the things that are, that no flesh may glory in His presence." And so the day came when Jephthah's brothers were glad to send for him to be their deliverer, and Jephthah had the high honor of returning good for evil, and saving the people that once despised him. This is the way that God loves to vindicate us -- to make us a blessing to those that hated us and wronged us. His promise is, "I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee."

When Jephthah responded to their appeal, and came for their help, we see in his very words and acts the spirit of godliness and a lofty faith. We are told explicitly that all his words to his own people were "before the Lord." He spoke as in Jehovah's presence. And so when he sent his challenge to his enemies, it was couched in language of the loftiest faith. He repelled their claim by reminding them how they had treated Israel in the wilderness and forced a conflict, and then how God had taken their land and given it up to His own people, and destroyed the power of Og and Sihon, their giant kings. And now Jephthah referred the battle once more to Jehovah, and went against his adversaries in the name of Jehovah God. The battle was not his, but the Lord's, and such faith never can be confounded. It was not long before Jephthah returned in triumph from the slaughter of his enemies. His country was delivered, his claims vindicated, and his enemies were destroyed.

II. But now we see in Jephthah another lesson, not only of the loftiest faith, but the sublimest faithfulness. In the hour of peril he had vowed a vow unto Jehovah, pledging that when he returned in victory the first object that he met should be dedicated to the Lord, an offering to Him. As he came back amid the acclamations of universal triumph, the first who met him when he approached his home was his beautiful daughter, and as he realized all that his vow had meant he was overwhelmed for a moment with the deepest emotion. But not for an instant did he hesitate in his firm and high purpose, nor once did that dear child shrink back from the sacrifice imposed upon her, but stood nobly with her father, demanding that he should fulfill his vow to the utmost, and together they stood true to their covenant God.

There has been much discussion as to the real meaning of Jephthah's vow, and the real fate of Jephthah's daughter; but there are several passages and constructions which can leave no doubt in the mind of a candid reader that it was not a literal human sacrifice that Jephthah offered, and that the fair child was not slain upon the altar like the children of Ammon before their god of fire, but that her fresh life was given in all its purity as a living sacrifice of separation and service to Jehovah.

In the eighteenth chapter of Deuteronomy we find the most solemn warning given to Israel against imitating in the least degree the cruel and wicked rites of the Ammonites, especially in offering human sacrifices. Now these Ammonites were the very people against whom Jephthah had gone forth to war, and as a godly follower of Jehovah he must have been familiar with the commandments of the book of Deuteronomy. For him, therefore, to directly disobey these solemn injunctions would have been to prove false to all his character and all the meaning of his victory in the name of Jehovah.

Again, in the twelfth chapter of Exodus, it is clearly taught that the firstborn of Israel were all to be recognized as the Lord's, and liable, therefore, to death, like the Egyptian firstborn. But, instead of their lives being literally required, they were redeemed by the blood of a lamb, and the Paschal lamb was offered instead of the life of the Hebrew, and that life was still regarded as wholly the Lord's, given to Him in living consecration, of which the whole tribe of Levi was regarded as the type, and, therefore, it was separated unto the service of the Lord as a substitute for the lives of the firstborn.

In all this was clearly taught the lesson that what God required from His people was not a dead body, but a "living sacrifice." It is much harder to live for God than to die for God. It takes much less spiritual and moral power to leap into the conflict and fling a life away in the excitement of the battle than it does to live through fifty years of misunderstanding, pain and temptation. It would have been easier for Jephthah's daughter to have lain down amid the flowers of spring, the chants and songs of a religious ceremonial, the tears and tributes of the people who loved her, and know that her name would be forever enshrined, than to go out from the bright circle of human society and all the charms of youth and beauty and domestic and social delight, and live as a recluse for God alone, giving up the dearest hope of every Hebrew woman, not only to be a mother, but to be the mother of the promised Christ; giving up also, along with her father, the fond desire of a son to share his honor and his sceptre, to prolong his name. All this it meant.

This was the sacrifice she made. And so we read that she did not go aside to bewail her approaching death, but she went aside for two months to bewail her "virginity," the loneliness of her own life -- then she gladly gave her life a living sacrifice to God.

There are several other considerations that might be added if necessary to establish this construction of the passage. It is enough to briefly refer to the fact that the phrase in verse thirty-nine is in the future tense, and refers to her future virginity and not her past, and also that the translation of the fortieth verse in one of our versions is that the daughters of Israel went yearly "to talk" with the daughter of Jephthah four times in a year. It is not necessary to pursue the argument further. Enough for our present purpose that we catch the inspired lesson. That lesson is supreme, unqualified, unquestioning fidelity to God. Jephthah is the man that can depend upon God, but Jephthah is also the man on whom God can depend.

God is looking for such lives, and on such men He will put the weight of His highest service and His eternal glory. God help each of us to be such a man of whom the Psalmist says, "He sweareth to his own hurt, and he changeth not."

How tender and beautiful the lesson which this passage gives to the young as well as the old! Just as Isaac stands out in the older story in a light as glorious as Abraham in yonder sacrifice on Mount Moriah, so Jephthah's daughter's sacrifice must not be forgotten in the honor we pay her father. Sweet child of single-hearted consecration! God help her sisters and her followers to be as true. Oh, beloved, do not wait until desire shall fail and age chill the pulses of ardent youth, and the world will fall away from you itself, but when the flowers are blooming, and the cup is brimming, and the heart beats high with earthly love and joy and hope, then it is so sweet, it is so wise, it is so rare, to pour all at His blessed feet, as Mary poured her ointment on His head, and some day to receive it back amid the bloom and joys of yonder land, where they that have forsaken friends and treasures, fond affections and brightest prospects for His dear sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall have the still richer joy of knowing that they have learned His spirit and understood His love.

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