

• *Jephthah*

Jephthah had to get ready for war. The Spirit of God came upon him <sup>☞1</sup>, and he began to approach the Ammonites <sup>☞2</sup>.

<sup>☞1</sup> 11:29a

<sup>☞2</sup> 11: 29b

• *Jephthah's vow*

At that point he made a vow. He said to God, '*If you will indeed give the people of Ammon into my power <sup>☞1</sup>, then it shall happen that whoever shall come out from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, that one shall be for Yahweh, and I shall offer that one up as a burnt offering*' <sup>☞2</sup>.

<sup>☞1</sup> 11:30

<sup>☞2</sup> 11:31

• *Ready to sacrifice a human life as a thank offering*

Jephthah was ready to sacrifice a human life as a thank-offering for victory. He leaves it to the providence of God as to who might come from his house first. As a military general he would have a large household of slaves. He did not have a large family. He was not thinking of his much-loved only daughter at the time he made his vow. It is a human being he is thinking of. An 'unclean' animal could not be sacrificed and would not be inside his house. Nor is it likely that he would think of an animal which 'shall come out from the doors of my house to meet' someone. The language speaks of human intention not of a straying animal.

• *A foolish and wicked pagan practice*

The vow was incredibly foolish and wicked. Jephthah is following the worst war-custom of his day. Human sacrifices were sometimes offered in the ancient world when looking for victory in battle. There was a Moabite king who offered his own son in an attempt to persuade his god to give him victory <sup>☞1</sup>. It is incredible that Jephthah should have followed this pagan superstition. It shows how true faith and weird superstition can sometimes be found in the same person. (The sacrificing of widows which still takes place in parts of the world today is equally abominable and shows that such weird and evil practises continue in pagan religions.)

<sup>☞1</sup> see 2 Kings 3:27

• *Faith and superstition in the same person*

**1. Vows often express unbelief or doubt**

**1. Vows often express unbelief or doubt.** Why did Jephthah make this vow? He lacked assurance that God would really hear his prayer for victory. 'If you will really give the people of Ammon into my power...'. This way of talking expresses some uncertainty. When we desperately want something we are tempted to start making God promises if only He will hear us. It is good to resolve to show God our gratitude and determine that we shall give back to God something of what God gives to us. Jacob promised to show God gratitude in Genesis 28:20-21. Hannah promised to give her son to the Lord if only she could have a baby boy <sup>☞1</sup>. But we must be careful not to try to bribe God. Many vows are foolish. They lead us into bondage.

<sup>☞1</sup> 1 Samuel 1:11

• *We must be careful not to try to bribe God with vows*

• *Foolish vows*

I know of a Christian woman who vowed to fast twice a week if God would keep her healthy, but she died from cancer when she was 36 years old. Another friend vowed to fast every Monday. It caused her great agony until the day came when she felt God had released her from foolish legalism. Sometimes a young Christian man vows never to marry, but then falls in love with a sweet attractive Christian lady. Then he does not know what to do about his vow! People make foolish vows about money, about their prayer life, about how obedient they are planning to be. Sometimes people set their sights on having a luxurious life-style, but then calm their conscience by vowing to use their luxurious life for God.

• *Jesus teaching is that we should generally not make vows*

• *Vows part of the Mosaic law – and Christians are not under the law*

## 2. God rebuked Jephthah's foolishness

• *Jephthah foolishly blames his daughter – but in fact he is being rebuked by God*

• *God is gracious and uses incredibly foolish people*

• *Jephthah is mentioned as a hero of faith in Hebrews 11*

Jesus said 'Swear not at all'. It was a generalisation rather than an absolute law, but as a generalisation it stands! When you feel that God is calling you in a certain direction, don't make a vow about it, just do it! Vows about the future are unnecessary, and bring bondage into our lives. If you feel called to fast once a week, then do it! But don't make a vow about it

Vows were part of the Mosaic law, but the Christian is not under the law. There are only a few situations where taking a vow is right. Generally speaking 'Swear not at all!'. Jephthah made this foolish vow because he was falling into fear about his success in battle. In his panic he tried to find a way that would persuade God to answer his prayer. But it was needless. God would have answered his prayer without the vow!

2. **God rebuked Jephthah's foolishness.** He went forward to where the Ammonites were, and God gave him victory over them <sup>1</sup>. Many towns in Ammonite territory were conquered <sup>2</sup>. It would be many years before the Ammonites could trouble Israel again. Then when Jephthah returns home in triumph. His daughter comes out to meet him <sup>3</sup>! God is rebuking Jephthah for his foolish vow. He seems to blame her! 'Oh, my daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched...!' It is a weird part of human nature that when we do something ill-advised or foolish we tend to blame the other person. Jephthah does not confess his stupidity in making such a vow. He says 'You have made me miserable' as if it were his daughter's fault <sup>4</sup>! But the vow was entirely his doing, not his daughter's. And God was rebuking him for his folly, showing him that He would ridicule any such foolish vow as that. (Something similar happened to Herod Antipas – see Mark 6:22–25.)

Jephthah's foolishness did not stop his being used by God. One might think that a man who fell into such incredible foolishness as Jephthah did would be left aside by God. But God does not use us because of how sensible we are. He uses us because of His own purpose and graciousness towards us. God rebuked Jephthah's foolishness but He still gave him victory over the Ammonites. What Jephthah achieved, he achieved through faith. What he lost – his own beloved daughter – he lost through doubt and unbelief. But God still used him and he gets a mention in Hebrews 11:32 as a hero of faith.

<sup>1</sup> 11:32

<sup>2</sup> 11:33

<sup>3</sup> 11:34

<sup>4</sup> 11:35



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