

Jephthah Answers the Call

Bible Background • [JUDGES 11](#)
Printed Text • [JUDGES 11:4–11, 29–31](#)
Devotional Reading • [ACTS 15:6–21](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **ACKNOWLEDGE** that people who have had disagreements can unite to defeat a common foe; **EXPRESS** remorse for alienating others; and **DISCUSS** the importance of reaching “a meeting of the minds” on motives and expected outcome before accepting a leadership role.



Growing up in a family of boys, Jesse knew what it was like to have to compete not only to get his parents’ attention but have his voice heard. When the four boys all went off to college, Jesse was the son who stayed in touch with his parents through email and phone calls, while his older brothers partied and only called home when they needed money.

One holiday, his father fell sick and the boys tried to make it back to their hometown to see him. Jesse, always responsible and in touch with his parents, was able to make it home. The rest of his brothers, who were irresponsible with not only their money but also their relationship with Jesse and his parents, scrambled trying to make it home. One by one, the brothers reached out to Jesse for help. While Jesse could have left his brothers to fend for themselves, he decided to help them get home, one by one—after discussing how they could all work together to care for their father.

Soon after, their father passed. At the funeral, all of Jesse’s brothers chose to follow Jesus. When asked why, they pointed to Jesse’s leadership and his example of being there not only for his parents, but also for his brothers when they needed him.

Even in moments of adversity, a leader can rise up to lead those who once worked against him or her. Have you ever experienced a time when God called you to lead those who once rejected or resisted your leadership?

Keep in Mind

“And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head?” ([Judges 11:9](#)).

KJV

Judges 11:4 And it came to pass in process of time, that the children of Ammon made war against Israel.

5 And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob:

6 And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon.

7 And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father's house? and why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress?

8 And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayest go with us, and fight against the children of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

9 And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head?

10 And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words.

11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Jephthah uttered all his words before the LORD in Mizpeh.

29 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon.

30 And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands,

31 Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

NLT

Judges 11:4 At about this time, the Ammonites began their war against Israel.

5 When the Ammonites attacked, the elders of Gilead sent for Jephthah in the land of Tob.

6 The elders said, "Come and be our commander! Help us fight the Ammonites!"

7 But Jephthah said to them, "Aren't you the ones who hated me and drove me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now when you're in trouble?"

8 “Because we need you,” the elders replied. “If you lead us in battle against the Ammonites, we will make you ruler over all the people of Gilead.”

9 Jephthah said to the elders, “Let me get this straight. If I come with you and if the LORD gives me victory over the Ammonites, will you really make me ruler over all the people?”

10 “The LORD is our witness,” the elders replied. “We promise to do whatever you say.”

11 So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him their ruler and commander of the army. At Mizpah, in the presence of the LORD, Jephthah repeated what he had said to the elders.

29 At that time the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he went throughout the land of Gilead and Manasseh, including Mizpah in Gilead, and from there he led an army against the Ammonites.

30 And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD. He said, “If you give me victory over the Ammonites,

31 I will give to the LORD whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”

The People, Places, and Times

Jephthah. A skilled negotiator and warrior, Jephthah was chosen as a leader to defeat the Ammonites because of his ability to negotiate with both the Israelites and the Ammonite king. Although he was ostracized by his family for being the illegitimate child of his father Gilead and a prostitute, Jephthah rose as a leader to become Israel’s judge. Jephthah’s history and family line could not change his destiny—God would still use him. He would, however, make a vow that would cost him dearly—and teaches us about the brashness of coming into covenant with God without counting the cost.

Ammonites. The Ammonites were a group of people who descended from Ammon, the son of Lot’s younger daughter ([Genesis 19:30–38](#)). This is important to note because Ammon was an ally to Moab, another nation conceived through the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters. In the time of the judges, the nation of Ammon was at war with Israel. After defeating the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim, Ammon was an impenetrable enemy that Israel had a slim chance of defeating. Defeating them would require uncanny wisdom and much faith in God.

Background

Israel had a longstanding issue with idolworship and God had grown tired of their disobedience. He allowed Israel to experience increased territorial takeover by other nations. Jephthah was part of a long succession of judges intended to rule and deliver Israel from their distress. The Ammonites, a fortified group from Ammon that ruled over Israel for eighteen years, were allied with Moab in the north. Jephthah was called to defeat the Ammonites to give Israel a reprieve

from their troubles. This call came after his family ostracized him for being born of a prostitute. When Jephthah finally settles in Tob, he hears that Israel is under attack and is asked by the elders of Gilead to lead them against the Ammonites.

In Depth

1. Feelings of Rejection ([Judges 11:4–8](#))

Because his brothers and community rejected him, Jephthah entered into a position of leadership with emotional baggage. He carried this resentment with him as he navigated his position as judge and soon-to-be leader of the Israelites. He reminds the elders of Gilead that although they needed his help, they had also been the ones who rejected him. The elders admit their guilt and beg Jephthah to lead them into victory over the Ammonites. But there was something in it for Jephthah as well: not only would he be a judge in the land but also ruler over the people—including his brothers who had rejected him. This kind of power could have gone to Jephthah's head, but he remained focused on his assignment to deliver the people from trouble.

2. Seeing the Bigger Picture (vv. 9–11)

Once Jephthah accepted his position as leader, he had to see the bigger picture: though his family and community had rejected him because of his familial history, he had to take on the role and responsibility of ruler. The city where he accepts this role, Mizpeh, means “lookout” or “watchtower.” This is symbolic of Jephthah's role as ruler, as he will “lookout” for the people of Israel and negotiate on their behalf. At Mizpeh, Jephthah repeats to the Lord what the community said to him, as a testimony to what had been proclaimed over him (vv. 9–11). Scholars believe that this process of repeating what was said was a rite of passage in ancient times. There was a bigger implication in Jephthah's acceptance of this role as leader.

3. Making a Vow to the Lord (vv. 29–31)

By accepting the physical responsibility as leader of the people, Jephthah also had to accept the spiritual responsibility of leadership. His vow to God to make a burnt sacrifice of the first thing that greeted him after victory over the Ammonites seemed like a noble vow, but Jephthah had no way to knowing what or who would greet him after the war. For Jephthah, offering a sacrifice to God as a thank you for blessings was a part of the culture. As a leader, Jephthah had to be mindful that being overzealous in his pursuit to reclaim his status did not cause him to promise something he could not fulfill.

Search the Scriptures

1. Why do you believe the elders agreed to let Jephthah rule over them if he was victorious over the Ammonites ([Judges 11:9, 11](#))?
2. How did Jephthah's troubled childhood influence him to make a rash vow?

Discuss the Meaning

Sometimes people who once shunned us will need us to help them carry out their goals in the future. Despite this, God wants us to do what is right for everyone, even if that means joining with people who have wronged you. How can we join unlikely partners to accomplish God's work?

Lesson in Our Society

Have you even been in trouble and said to God, "Lord, if you just get me out of this situation, I promise to (fill in the blank)?" We often make promises to God and each other that are often times impossible to keep, even if we mean well when we make the promise. Scripture reminds us that we should let our "yes" be "yes" and our "no" be "no" ([Matthew 5:37](#)), for to promise anything beyond that can lead us down a path of broken promises.

Make It Happen

In a world where we are pulled in many directions to commit ourselves to people and causes, it can be easy to step into roles of leadership that require more of us than we're willing to give. Often, it is our desire to reclaim our position in community. So we take on more responsibilities than we should, making it hard to keep our promises. This week, remember Jephthah's story and find ways to lead others without overpromising.

More Light on the Text

[Judges 11:4–11, 29–31](#)

4 And it came to pass in process of time, that the children of Ammon made war against Israel.

The phrase "And it came to pass" introduces a new scene related to the previous scene or event. It can also indicate the passing of time. Another way of saying this is "After a while," implying that some distance has passed between the events that came before the current episode, but that they are related. As such, [Judges 11:4](#) establishes the current state of war with the Ammonites (literally "sons of Ammon" or "children of Ammon") is related to the preceding threat of war by the Ammonites against Israel in [Judges 10:17](#). Up to this point in the story, the Israelites had been under Ammonite subjugation, but now tensions have broken into war between the two nations.

5 And it was so, that when the children of Ammon made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to fetch Jephthah out of the land of Tob: 6 And they said unto Jephthah, Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Ammon.

Gilead was both a personal name and the name of the northern Transjordanian territory occupied by the Israelite tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh ([Numbers 34:14–15](#)). The

Ammonites, who occupied central Transjordan, were on the march to engage Israel in Gilead. The theological justification for the war was that the Israelites were facing the consequences of worshipping foreign gods ([Judges 10:6–7, 13](#)). They had rebelled against God, so He allowed them to be oppressed by the Ammonites. When the Israelites could stand their affliction no longer, they cried out to God for deliverance (v. 15), and He took pity on them (v. 16). What usually followed was deliverance in the form of a military “deliverer” raised by God to save the Israelites from their enemies (cf., [Judges 3:9, 15](#)). However, as the Ammonites were encroaching on the Gileadites, there was no deliverer for Israel. When the military captains of Gilead realized this, they asked one another who would fight against the Ammonites for them and be their head ([Judges 10:18](#)).

Their unlikely hero was Jephthah, a mighty warrior and son of Gilead. The text is ambiguous whether his father’s name was Gilead or he was descended from the line of Gilead. Jephthah’s story follows a popular motif in the Old Testament narratives of the least becoming the first (e.g., [Genesis 25:22–23](#); [Judges 6:15](#); [1 Samuel 16:13](#)). He was unlikely because his mother was a prostitute (Heb. *‘ishsha zonah*, **eesh-AH zoh-NAH**; [Judges 11:1](#)). It is unclear whether she was a professional sex worker or a woman whose status as an unmarried mother placed her outside social boundaries, since the term used here often refers to a woman having extramarital sex (cf. [Hosea 1:2](#)).

One detail that should not be overlooked, in light of the family values rhetoric regarding the myth of the absent Black father, is the fact that despite Gilead’s relationship with Jephthah’s mother, Jephthah knew his father and was raised within his father’s household. Gilead provided for him, including him in his inheritance. The fact that a father is not married to his child’s mother does not equate to absenteeism. Nevertheless, his father also had sons from his legal wife, and when they grew older, they forced Jephthah to depart from Gilead to keep him from receiving part of their father’s inheritance. Jephthah fled to the land of Tob, where he built a reputation as the leader of a band of outlaws (v. 3). The elders traveled to Tob to bring Jephthah back to Gilead to be their military leader.

7 And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, Did not ye hate me, and expel me out of my father’s house? and why are ye come unto me now when ye are in distress? 8 And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, Therefore we turn again to thee now, that thou mayest go with us, and fight against the children of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.

It must have surprised Jephthah when members of the same extended family who had expelled him from Gilead came to bring him back from Tob to lead the military campaign against Ammon. He responded skeptically, reminding them of how they had mistreated him when it suited them. Jephthah accuses the elders of being complicit in his being separated from his family line and inheritance (cf. v. 2). The elders seem to infer that Jephthah will not comply with their request. In response, using a more conciliatory tone, they up the ante; they will make him the head (Heb. *ro’sh*, **ROASH**) of all Gilead. The elders’ initial offer was for Jephthah to take the temporary position of military leader or ruler (Heb. *katsin*, **kat-SEEN**). However, now if he would come with them and lead them in battle against the Ammonites, then they would also make him head of the Gileadites, as the military captains had originally planned ([Judges 10:18](#)).

9 And Jephthah said unto the elders of Gilead, If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the LORD deliver them before me, shall I be your head? 10 And the elders of Gilead said unto Jephthah, The LORD be witness between us, if we do not so according to thy words.

Jephthah was likely aware of the captains' offer and feigned reluctance as a negotiating tactic to get the elders to offer to make him both captain and head. The position of military leader was temporary and ceased once the battle was won. However, the offer to make him the head or leader of the Gileadites was a permanent civil position. Jephthah proffered that if God gave him the victory, then they should make him their head. The elders agreed to these terms, reversing Jephthah's fortunes: the cast-out son who was made the least among his brothers would become the first as their ruler.

The formula, "The LORD be witness between us," was used by two or more parties entering into an agreement or covenant to invoke God as a witness to compel the parties to comply with the terms of the agreement (cf. [Genesis 31:49](#)). The oath uttered by Laban, "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another," has been turned into a sentimental benediction. However, it was a covenant made between two adversaries, Laban and Jacob, and was a thinly disguised threat from Laban to bring harm to Jacob if he mistreated Laban's daughters, Rachel and Leah.

11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and captain over them: and Jephthah uttered all his words before the LORD in Mizpeh.

The relationship between Jephthah and the elders was not unlike the one between Laban and Jacob. An element of distrust required them to call on God as a witness to their covenant. Jephthah and the elders departed for Mizpeh or Mizpah, where they ratified the agreement to make Jephthah their military and civilian head after the conflict ceased. Mizpeh was a sanctuary located on the border of Gilead between Ephraim and Benjamin. Laban had named it Mizpeh ("watchpost") because it was the place where he invoked God to watch between Jacob and him. Now, after having successfully negotiated the leadership position with the elders, Jephthah was installed as captain and head over all the Gileadites. He concluded the ceremony by affirming his agreement before God.

29 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed over Gilead, and Manasseh, and passed over Mizpeh of Gilead, and from Mizpeh of Gilead he passed over unto the children of Ammon.

Despite the circumstances of Jephthah's birth, God raised him up to be the deliverer in Gilead, and He approved the decision by the elders by bestowing His Spirit on Jephthah. Certain judges in the book of Judges were endowed with the Spirit of God, which granted them power and authority to accomplish the task before them, with sometimes mixed results ([Judges 3:10](#); [6:34](#); [13:25](#)). Endowed with the Spirit, Jephthah goes out to meet the Ammonites. This signals that the focus is less on God delivering the enemy into Jephthah's hand and more on the vow Jephthah made.

30 And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, 31 Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

“If...” These two letters can wield such tremendous power. Jephthah makes a vow to God that included a conditional clause foreboding terrible events to come. Before engaging the Ammonites in war, Jephthah vows that if God gives them into his hand, then whatever came out from his house to meet him, he would offer up to God as a burnt offering. Jephthah's vow interrupts the flow of the narrative. The normal sequence should have been the coming of God's Spirit upon the judge, who goes out to meet the enemy, who is delivered into his hand as a result of the judge being endowed with God's Spirit. However, there is a departure from pattern before the reporting of the battle resumes in v. 32. This signals that the focus is less on God delivering the enemy into Jephthah's hand than on the vow.

When Jephthah returned home, his only child, a daughter, ran to congratulate him with singing and dancing. Jephthah was devastated! Since sacrificing humans is against God's Law ([Leviticus 18:21](#), [20:2-5](#); [Deuteronomy 12:31](#), [18:10](#)), Jephthah's anxiety to ensure his personal victory meant that his daughter's life would be dedicated to religious service. She would remain a virgin and never marry. She bemoaned her fate by spending two months in the mountains ([Judges 11:37-40](#)).

Say It Correctly

Gilead. **GI**-lee-ad.
Ammon. **AH**-moan.
Mizpeh. miz-**PEH**.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Jephthah, Rejected by His Family, Flees
([Judges 11:1-3](#))

TUESDAY

Jephthah Resolves a Dispute with Edom
([Judges 11:12-18](#))

WEDNESDAY

Jephthah Reveals God's Aid of Israel
([Judges 11:19-22](#))

THURSDAY

Ammonite King Rejects Jephthah's Claims

(Judges 11:23–28)

FRIDAY

Jephthah Sacrifices His Daughter to Fulfill His Vow

(Judges 11:34–40)

SATURDAY

Leaders Discern the Way Forward

(Acts 15:6–21)

SUNDAY

Jephthah Answers the Call

(Judges 11:4–11)