**Jephthah**

Has it occurred to you that bribery is embedded in much of our daily lives? If you think about it, we are often on one end or the other of a bribery transaction. Few would be willing to work an 8 hour shift without being compensated so our employers bribe us to show up. When extraordinary effort is required, we are bribed by overtime pay or bonuses. Merchants are so driven by their pecuniary interests that they must be bribed to give us their merchandise. Bribery does not always involve money as we can be bribed to trade time for time. If you have ever told your son you will take him fishing when he completes his chores, a bribe has been offered while no money is exchanged. As we continue our study of the book of Judges, we see a man who makes a vow in the form of a bribe that results in unforeseen consequences.

Chapter 10 begins with very brief mentions of the judgeships of Tola and Jair. Tola was from the tribe of Issachar and led Israel for 23 years and Jair who was from the tribe of Manasseh in Gilead led for 22 years. Nothing is recorded about the circumstances that led to their being called to judge Israel. Along with Ibzan, Elon and Abdon, they are sometimes referred to as minor judges due to the minimal information recorded about them.

Verse 6 records the familiar refrain, “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord”. They served the various gods of the Canaanites. As punishment, God sold them into the hands of the Ammonites and Philistines for 18 years after which they cried out to God, confessing their sin. God recalled to them the previous times He had saved them when they were oppressed but this time He would reject their plea. He told them to appeal to the gods they had chosen to see if they would save them. The people again confessed their sin but this time they rid themselves of the idols they worshipped and returned to God who could no longer bear their misery. With their relationship with God restored, the Israelites prepared to throw off the yoke of the Ammonites. Their search for a leader led them to Jephthah who is introduced at the beginning of chapter 11.

Jephtha was described as a mighty warrior, the son of a Gileadite and a prostitute. He would have been of the half tribe of Manasseh which settled east of the Jordan River. He was driven away from his father’s family by his half brothers and became a soldier of fortune, attracting a group of adventurers to join him. Likely his reputation as a warrior caused the elders of Gilead to ask him to lead them against the Ammonites. Jephthah extracted a promise from the men of Gilead that he would be the head over all who lived in Gilead if he was able to defeat the Ammonites.

Jephthah sent messengers to ask the Ammonite king why they were attacking. He replied that the Israelites had stolen the land from his people. In response, Jephthah gave the king a history lesson on how the Amorites had taken over the land from the Ammonites. Israel took the land from the Amorites when they were attacked as they tried to peacefully traverse the land on the way Caanan. Furthermore, he said that God had granted the land in question to Israel and asked what land their god had granted. Finally Jephthah noted that since they had occupied the land for 300 years, the Ammonites had already had ample time to retake it if they were able.

The king ignored the message Jephthah sent which set off a war. Jephthah advanced against Ammon but paused to make a vow to God that he would offer as a burnt sacrifice the first thing he saw coming out of his house if God would give Ammon over to him. He then went to fight against Ammon and God did deliver the enemy into his hands. When Jephthah returned home after the victory, the first thing he saw coming out of his house was his daughter. In anguish, he told his daughter about the vow and that he could not break it. She agreed that he should not break his vow and asked to have two months to spend with her friends and mourn that she would never marry.

Much has been written about the fate of Jephthah’s daughter. Was she sacrificed as a burnt offering or not? Verse 39 says that he did to her as he vowed, however most biblical scholars believe that she was dedicated to service at the tabernacle which required her to remain unmarried for life. At least one writer disagreed, saying that only Levites could serve (but see Luke 2:36). Another possibility is that God let Jephthah proceed with his vowed action but saved the daughter in the same fashion He saved Isaac (see Gen 22:12). Since Jephthah is commended for his faith in Heb. Chapter 11, it is unthinkable that God would have allowed him to burn his daughter as a sacrifice.

During our study Deuteronomy, we discussed the unfortunate story of Jephthah and his daughter because of God’s requirements for vows (see Deut. 23:21-23). Jephthah was rash to utter the vow and he compounded his error by making his vow conditional, in essence thinking he could bribe God with his vow. He would sacrifice the burnt offering if God would deliver the Ammonites to him. Note that his agreement with the men of Gilead was also conditional, they would accept him as the leader if he was successful. I have previously written about how humans are often transactional and Jephthah’s experience with Gilead and God were seen by him as transactions. Our expectation is that we will benefit from transactions and the other party expects the same so our transactions need to be mutually beneficial to come to fruition. I can offer my services for $1 million per year but unless a company sees that it will benefit proportionally, no transaction occurs. There must be a bilateral agreement. On a macro level, the marketplace establishes an price equilibrium for transactions so that they are viewed as equitable. God had no need for the burnt offering that Jephthah proposed, instead He wants our love and obedience (see Is. 1:11-30, Hos. 6:6, 1st Sam. 15:22, Mark 12:33). On the cross, Jesus traded His righteousness for our sin, a most inequitable transaction in our view but God sees things differently. Furthermore, His covenant with us was established unilaterally without our involvement. He sacrificed His son on the cross without requiring anything in return from us, we only need to accept the free gift of salvation He offers us (see Rom. 4:4-5).