

Judges *There was no King in Israel*

4. Be careful what you promise: Jephthah *Judges 11.1-40*

Aim: To consider Jephthah's actions, his terrible bargain with God, how we are potentially tempted to act similarly, and how we can avoid doing so.

Note to leaders:

This study is something of a paperchase! The main story is in Judges 11, but references are made to various parts of the Old Testament. Be aware of this and, if you ask a specific person to find a passage, make sure it is someone confident in navigating around their Bible. If you prefer to use them, the relevant passages are included on separate sheets of paper.

The story in Judges 11 has parallels with the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac in Genesis 22. This is an interesting but potentially distracting diversion! If it comes up and you don't want to spend much time on it, the main differences to draw out are that in Genesis 22 God instigated the plan to sacrifice Isaac and he also put a stop to it, whereas in Judges 11 Jephthah instigates and God doesn't stop him.

To start with:

- Tell the group something you are proud of.
- Tell the group something you would change if you could.

Engaging with the text:

Read Judges 11.1-11.

1. How would you describe Jephthah's experiences as a young man? How would you expect these experiences to affect how he behaves?

Having been made leader, Jephthah tries to negotiate with the Ammonites, making use of Old Testament law to justify Israel's occupation of the land. The Ammonites ignore him.

Now read Judges 11.29-40.

2. What is your initial reaction to this story? What questions do you have about it?
3.
 - a. Why do you think Jephthah made the bargain he did? What did he expect to meet first?
 - b. What can we tell from Jephthah's vow about his relationship with God?
4.
 - a. What light do Numbers 30.2, Deuteronomy 23.21-23 and Deuteronomy 12.31 shed on Jephthah's situation?
 - b. Do you think he should have gone through with what he had promised? Do you think God expected him to?
 - c. What do you make of his daughter's response?

Some commentators think that Jephthah didn't actually sacrifice his daughter. They argue that God had forbidden human sacrifice and as a first-born child she belonged to God anyway (Exodus 13.2). Therefore Jephthah and his daughter both realised that his vow meant she was bound to serve God, without marrying, for the rest of her life. For an Israelite girl, the prospect of not having children was as bad as death itself. This is why she requests two months to mourn the fact that she will never marry.



5. To what extent do you agree with this interpretation? What difference, if any, does it make to the 'moral of the story'?
6. In what situations do you tend to be tempted to bargain with God? Is it always wrong to do that? (Consider Numbers 6.2, Psalm 132.1-5, Proverbs 20.25, and also dedication, baptism and marriage vows.)
7.
 - a. What effect has this story had on how seriously you think God takes your prayers?
 - b. How can we pray effectively without resorting to trying to manipulate or bargain with God?

Reflect and pray:

Read this to the group:

Even though he had been filled with the Spirit (v 29) - a very unusual occurrence in the Old Testament - Jephthah felt the need to bargain with God for help and it ended disastrously. You may have reacted badly to the idea of God accepting Jephthah's rash promise, you may have been surprised that Jephthah kept his word and you will probably have been amazed by Jephthah's daughter's obedient reaction. This can be a very difficult story to come to terms with.

Spend some time reflecting individually on what can you learn from this story about one or more of the following:

- what it means to have faith in God's ability to provide for us and protect us
- how we should interact with God through prayer
- the purposes of promises to God, including promises you may have made or be planning to make.

You may want to get people into small groups to pray about anything that has come up from this discussion. Another option would be to move into a time of worship from here. After looking at a difficult passage, it might help people to refocus on who God is.