

Exhortation

“By faith . . .”

15. Jephthah (Heb. 11:32)

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PERHAPS OF ALL the men and women in Scripture whose true characters are overshadowed by the events of their lives, there is none more so than Jephthah. He was expelled from his family, lived in exile, led Israel to great victory and made a vow. What is perhaps not always recognised is that Jephthah is amongst only a handful of judges mentioned in Hebrews 11.

What this says about Jephthah is that, above all, he was a man of faith. The writer to the Hebrews recognised this, and yet there is no direct reference to Jephthah's faith in the record in Judges 11. But look at what he achieved through faith. Hebrews 11:33,34 catalogues what the characters mentioned in verse 32 were enabled to do “through faith”. Reading this list, Jephthah springs to mind several times. He subdued a kingdom, he “waxed valiant in fight”, he “turned to flight the armies of the aliens”. In all this we find that faith was the key. And, amongst those faithful judges mentioned in Hebrews 11, Jephthah stands out as one who had faith at the start of his recorded work, whilst the others had to develop it during the course of what they did.

Jephthah arrived on the scene when Israel had once again realised their need for God, having been oppressed by the Philistines and Ammonites (Judg. 10:15-18). Then the Ammonites invaded and encamped against Gilead. Suddenly the Israelites faced war. They knew they should rely on God for help, but they also realised that they did not have a godly man to lead them. What a sad indictment on the nation at this time!

There was one man who could help them, but it was going to take a lot of pride-swallowing to call on him. But desperate times called for desperate measures, and so the men of Gilead went to Jephthah, their illegitimate half-brother whom they had exiled out of fear and jealousy. They went to him because Jephthah was a man of God, and, whether they liked it or not, his brethren could not deny it. His might and valour went hand in hand with a faith in God. We find from the attitude of Jephthah's daughter later in

the chapter that he had obviously raised her with the same faith as he had, a faith which he maintained through the trying times of exile. No matter what happened to him, Jephthah always kept faith with God. God was such a part of his life, and his faith was maintained to such an extent, that word of it had got back to Gilead. So when his brethren needed a godly leader they knew where to find one.

We know that in the era of the Judges there was often no faith, nor was there a perceived need for it. But just look at the result when there was none: chaos and ruin. Therefore any sort of victory could only be had by a return to what had been lost: faith in God. And a victory was what Jephthah got. It is made all the more significant because of the faithless times in which it was gained.

When Jephthah agreed to lead an army against the Ammonites he knew he could not rely on the Gileadites. They had expelled him and, had it not been for the Ammonite invasion and the state in which they found themselves, they would not have had him back. Their attitude was unpredictable; but Jephthah's was not. He knew where his strength lay: in his God. And so we find that, once he was confirmed as leader, Jephthah always addressed God and never the men of Gilead. With his faith firmly fixed he “waxed valiant in fight”, “turned to flight the armies of the aliens” and led Israel to victory—a victory given by God that would not have occurred had there been no trust in Him to provide it.

Jephthah's example of steadfast, unshakable faithfulness in the face of adversity is where we find the main lesson for ourselves. In his day godless men turned to him in a time of crisis because God was with him and they knew it. What of today? Are we known as men and women of faith? May it be that in this godless age we are each an example of faithfulness, so that, in a time of crisis such as the one to come, men will look to us and accept that salvation is of the Lord.