Lectures on the Book of Judges

Judges 10–11 — Jephthah

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On Tola and Jair (Judges 10) we need not pause; but in Jephthah again we have solemn issues brought out But here again is found the same brand of what was worthless or untowardly in the instruments that God used in a day of declension "Jephthah the Gileadite," we are told in Judges 11, "was a mighty man of valour, and he was the son of an harlot." Abimelech was no doubt the son of a concubine; but here we descend lower still. Nevertheless he "was a mighty man of valour," who lived a kind of freebooter's life — the chief of a reckless company of outcasts and desperadoes. So low were things now in Israel, that even this man becomes an instrument of God's deliverance; and so evidently in all this was God stamping on the people His moral sentence of their state. He could not in their then condition employ vessels of greater moral worth. He plainly intended to testify to their state by the agents whom He used for their good. (Judges 11) Nevertheless we learn even from the lowest He deigned to work by that, while doubtless there was a most humiliating condition in Israel, God's rights were maintained for His people. Jephthah takes the greatest pains to prove, when he comes forward, that he has clear right on his side. This is an important principle. It was not merely that the people were unworthily oppressed by the Ammonites, but Jephthah does not venture to go to war, nor does the Spirit of God clothe him with energy for the conflict, until he had the certainty in his soul that the cause was a righteous one, and this founded upon the dealings of God with the children of Israel and with Ammon respectively. This is exceedingly instructive. Nothing justifies, in the work of the Lord, a departure from His mind or will. It does not matter what the line taken may be, no good end will ever be owned by God unless the way be according to His word and righteousness. Even the man who above all others perhaps illustrates the danger of rash vows in the joy of a divine deliverance, and that affecting him in the nearest possible way, was the very reverse of rash in entering on his service for the people of Israel. Hear what a solemn appeal Jephthah makes to the elders before he acts. Undoubtedly the desire of his own importance and aggrandizement is but too manifest; but when he enters upon the service itself, he not only takes care that the right should be felt by Israel to be indisputably with them, but that this should be known and pressed on the conscience of his adversary. So he "sent messengers unto the king of the children of Ammon, saying, What hast thou to do with me,

that thou art come against me to fight in my land? And the king of the children of Ammon answered unto the messengers of Jephthah, Because Israel took away my land, when they came up out of Egypt, from Arnon even unto Jabbok, and unto Jordan: now therefore restore those lands again peaceably." The answer however was incorrect. The king of the Ammonites did not speak candidly. It was not true that the children of Israel had taken those lands as was pretended. The Ammonites had lost them before the children of Israel took them from others whom they might lawfully attack and despoil; but God had forbidden that the children of Israel should spoil either Ammon, or Moab, or Edom. God held even to the distant tie of connection — a most striking proof and witness of the ways of our God. There had been in ancient times a link between Ammon and Moab with the children of Israel: a cloud of dishonour and of shame overhung them; yet a link there was, and God would have this at least to be never forgotten. Years might pass, hundreds of years roll over, but moral principles and even natural relationships do not lose their power. And it was of the greatest importance that His people should be trained in this. The lands might be good pasture, the temptation great, the provocation given by Moab or Ammon very considerable. On human grounds there might be a just right of conquest; but all this would not do for God, who must decide everything even in the battles of His people. God does not permit Israel, because this one or that is an enemy, to take the place of enemies to them. He stands to it that they must never have an enemy unless it be God's enemy. What an honour when Israel are permitted to take up only the cause of God! They are not allowed to enter on campaigns out of their own head. What courage and confidence may they not then cherish! So it was pressed on Israel then. The king of Ammon had forgotten, or had never enquired after the real righteousness of the case. What he felt was that these lands had once been his lands, and that the children of Israel now possessed them. More he knew not, nor wished to learn. But this was far from the true and full history of the case. The fact was that some other races and peoples had dispossessed the Ammonites of these lands. Now it was perfectly lawful for the children of Israel to treat them as intruders and strangers, who had no rightful claim, no valid plea why they should be restored. For we must remember carefully this, in looking at the dealings of God with the holy land and with His people Israel, God had always destined the land of Palestine for the chosen people. Had not He a right to do so? The Canaanites might have retreated from it; the Ammonites might have sought other lands. The world was large enough for all. There was at this time, as at every other, ample space for occupying here and there; and if the reason why they did not move was because they cared not for the word of God, they must take the consequences of their unbelief.

They did not believe that God would enforce His claims. They had no faith in the promise on God's part to Abraham or to his seed. But the time came when God would act upon that promise, and when those that disputed the title of God must pay the penalty. Undoubtedly the children of Moab, Ammon, and Edom, for reasons of relationship at least, were exempted from the sentence to which God subjected the races of Canaan. If some of these had taken away lands that belonged to the Ammonites, it was open and perfectly lawful in this case for Israel to put these intruders out of the land, and to take possession of whatever was their spoil. If Ammon could or would not seek to recover it previously, they had no title to claim now from Israel. It was on this principle then that Jephthah pleads the righteousness of the cause that was now to be decided by the sword between Ammon and Israel. Therefore is it explained with great care. "Thus saith Jephthah," was his answer, "Israel took not away the land of Moab, nor the land of the children of Ammon." Nothing justifies departure from the word of God. It matters not what is the apparent good that is to be gained, or what may be the mischief that is to be avoided: the only place that becomes a believer is obedience. So says he: "When Israel came up from Egypt, and walked through the wilderness unto the Red Sea, and came to Kadesh, then Israel sent messengers unto the king of Edom, saying, Let me, I pray thee, pass through thy land; but the king of Edom would not hearken thereto. And in like manner they sent unto the king of Moab: but he would not consent: and Israel abode in Kadesh." And what did Israel? Resent it? Not so: they took the insult patiently; and these were persons who were called to be the witnesses of earthly righteousness. How much more are we, brethren, who are the followers of One who knew nothing but a life of continual sorrow and shame for the glory of God! This is our calling; but we see even in Israel that outside the limits, the very narrow limits, in which God called them to be the executors of divine vengeance even they calmly bear and brook as they best might; and there were those that understood the mind of God, and knew perfectly well why they were not so called to do. They took it quietly, and passed along their way. "Then they went along through the wilderness, and compassed the land of Edom, and the land of Moab, and came by the east side of the land of Moab, and pitched on the other side of Arnon." It was a great way about, and extremely inconvenient. Who doubted the unfriendliness of Moab and of Edom? It was known, but intended to be so; but for all that the children of Israel, as Jephthah showed, would not go against the word of God. Now the moral importance of this was immense, for if they were simply doing the will and word of God, who could stand in their way? The object of the king of Ammon was to put the children of Israel in the wrong. Jephthah proves in the most triumphant way that the right was all on their side.

"And Israel sent messengers unto Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon; and Israel said unto him Let us pass, we pray thee, through thy land into my place." They did not wish to quarrel with the king of Heshbon, Amorite as he was, unless he were actually in the holy land; but it was of God that these Amorites, to their own ruin, would not let them pass peaceably through. This again makes the case of Israel still more clear, because it might have been supposed that surely the Amorite must be put out of the way, seeing that that most wicked race was devoted expressly to destruction. But no — "Sihon trusted not Israel to pass through his coast: but Sihon gathered all his people together, and pitched in Jahaz, and fought against Israel. And Jehovah God of Israel delivered Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they smote them: so Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that country. And they possessed all the coasts of the Amorites, from Arnon even unto Jabbok." There was the plain and sure title of Jephthah. Israel had not taken these lands from Ammon at all They had taken them from the Amorite. If the Amorite got them from Ammon in the first instance, as was no doubt the fact, this was an affair not between Israel and Ammon, but between Ammon and Sihon. It was the business of the Ammonites to have defended their claims as best they could against the Amorites. If they could not make them good, if they had lost their land, and could not recover it, what had Israel to do with their affairs? The children of Israel were in no way responsible for it. They had won the land by the provoked fight which the Amorite had drawn them into. They had sought peace, and Sihon would have war. The result was that the Amorite lost his land. Thus in fact Sihon had assailed the Israelites against their will, who had taken the land from him. The title of the children of Israel therefore to that land was indefeasible. God Himself had ordered things so. He knew right well that the presence of the Amorites upon their skirts would be a continual snare and evil. He permitted that there should be no confidence in the peaceable intentions of Israel, for the very purpose of putting them in possession of the land. Thus the king of Ammon had lost his old claim, and had no present title to question Israel's right of conquest. "So now." says Jephthah, "Jehovah God of Israel hath dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel, and shouldest thou possess it?" The king of Ammon might assail the Israelites, and renew the arbitrament of the sword, but he was unrighteous in demanding the land from Israel. "Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess? So whomsoever Jehovah our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess." After having thus completely refuted his claim over the land on the ground of its being Ammonite, whereas in point of fact it had been won from them by the Amorite, and as such had passed into Israel's hand, now he gives them a warning

from the blows that God had inflicted on a mightier king than himself. "Art thou any thing better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? did he ever strive against Israel, or did he ever fight against them, while Israel dwelt in Heshbon and her towns, and in Aroer and her towns, and in all the cities that be along by the coasts of Arnon, three hundred years?" Thus it was proved that Israel had, in whatever light regarded, a valid title, not only from long-continued possession, but from a right founded on their conquest of one of the enemies devoted to destruction by God Himself, but an enemy who had wantonly attacked them, when they would have left him unharmed, as they would the Ammonite now. In every point of view therefore the ground taken by Israel was solid, and could not be disputed righteously. The king of Ammon had no just claim whatever Being thus proved to be in arms without right, the king of Ammon was only so much the more fierce, as is usual with people when convicted of a wrong to which their will is engaged. "Then the Spirit of Jehovah 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. And Jephthah vowed a vow unto Jehovah." Here the rashness of the man enters the scene, the consequence of which is a display of what was painful in the extreme. We have had the power of God acting in deliverance, but man alone is incapable even of a safe vow to Jehovah; and who could fail to foresee the bitter fruit of rashness here? Man is as weak and erring as God is mighty and good: these two things characterise the book from beginning to end. So in this rash vow says Jephthah, "it shall be that whatsoever," etc. The same word means whosoever. There is no difference as to form. I do not myself doubt that it was put in the broadest way. "It shall be that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me." He could, if he had reflected, hardly expect an ox or a sheep to walk out of the house. It was quite evident therefore that Jephthah was guilty of the greatest rashness in his vow. "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 Jehovah's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." What came out we know too well. It was his daughter and I do not doubt that he, in his determined unbending spirit, fulfilled his vow. All are aware there are a great many who try to explain the difficulty away or soften it down. They need not be at the trouble. Scripture does not in any way vouch for the immaculateness of those even who wrought in faith. It does not throw a veil, as man loves to do, over that which is uncomely and distressing in those that bear the name of the Lord; especially as the very object the Spirit of God has here in view is to show the frightful results of a vow so little weighed before God, not at all drawn from His guidance. On the other hand, is there not real beauty in the obscurity in

which Scripture treats a matter so painful? We know that men make it a question for ingenious minds to speculate on. The spiritual man understands how it was. As the vow was without God, so an issue was permitted most offensive to the Holy Spirit. We can easily therefore comprehend how the holy wisdom of Scripture avoids details on a fact so contrary to the mind of God, as a man dealing thus with a human being, yea, with his own daughter. It seems to me then that the reserve of the Holy Spirit is as strikingly according to God as the rashness of Jephthah is a solemn warning to man.