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A Valiant Warrior, But. . .
Messes. Choices. Faithful God Series
Judges 11:1-28
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So let's imagine God has a special job He needs done, and you apply. So, you meet with God's HR director, and you present your life resume. The HR director is looking through it, "This looks good; this is good." But all of a sudden, it changes. "Oh? Hmm?" He turns around, whispers with God; they whisper back and forth together, and he says, "I'll tell you what. I'll call you if we need you." So here's my question. "What is it on your life resume that would create that reaction?" What is it from your past? What is it that's part of your story that has convinced you that if you presented your life resume, that that would prohibit God from using you to do something great for Him? Maybe you could be on the B-team...maybe some little job. But what is it from your past that you think prevents God from doing something great through you? If you've ever looked at your life resume and thought, "*If it wasn't for this, God could use me,*" this story is for you.

If you have a Bible, turn with us this morning to Judges, Chapter 11. Judges is the seventh book of the Old Testament...Deuteronomy...Joshua...Judges. We started through the book of Judges last summer. We finished in chapter 10, and we'll pick it up in chapter 11 and finish the book this summer. Moses took the children of Israel out of Egypt, up to the land of promise. Joshua took them into the land of promise. He divided the land of promise into regions with different tribes in charge of conquering the different regions. But, over time, the people grew weary of fighting. They grew weary of the battles, and they decided, "Let's just settle together, together side by side with the pagans and the idol worshipers, and let's see if we can just make this work." This was a decision that cost them misery for hundreds of years. The time of Joshua is followed by a time of the judges. Judges was 400 years of darkness. Most scholars would say the 400 years of the judges were the darkest time in the history of the Hebrew people. It was a time when there was no king in Israel. It's a time described as, "*Everyone did that which was right in their own eyes,*" very similar to our contemporary culture.

A judge was different than we think of judges today. The judge was both a military and political leader and the things that define the book of Judges are what we call *cycles*. Basically, the cycle looks like this: There's a time of peace and prosperity, but the nation of Israel then pursues evil and sins against God. They join in the idolatry and the pagan worship, so God allows oppressors to come in to discipline them, to get their attention. The people then cry out to God, "Please deliver us! We're sorry! We won't do it again." And God raises up a judge, a deliverer, a hero of sorts that He empowers to lead them and set them free. As long as that judge lives, the people tend to remain in peace and safety. But after the judge dies, they quickly go back into their sin, and the cycle repeats itself. So, basically, every judge story is one of those cycles.

That's where we found ourselves in chapter 10. There were two what we call minor judges, simply because we don't know anything else about them: chapter 10, verse 1, Tola; chapter 10, verse 3 Jair. Between the two of them there's about 45 years of peace and tranquility. But then the nation of Israel once again does evil in the sight of God. They turn back to their pagan ways and their

idolatry, and God allows the Ammonites and the Philistines to come in and oppress them. So they cry out, “We're sorry! We shouldn't have done that! Please, deliver us!” But, quite unusual this time, God responds by saying, “No, I don't think I want to do that. I'm tired of all this. I've kind of had it up to here with you people.” He even goes so far as to say, “Why don't you ask one of these pagan gods to deliver you? If you think they're so great, why don't you ask them to set you free?” But the people continue in their repentance and say, “God, we understand we have done wrong. Do whatever you have to do to us to correct us or punish us. But please, deliver us.” So, they put away their idols; they put away their pagan ways, and once again, with amazing graciousness and faithfulness, God responds to their cry. The problem is there is no leader. There's no military leader. There's no political leader. The Gileadites, which is the region where this has happened, have no leadership. And that's where we left the story last August. So, we pick it up in chapter 11, verse 1:

Now Jephthah, the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, [Oh, good.] but he was the son of a harlot. [Oh.] And Gilead was the father of Jephthah. Gilead's wife bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.” So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him. (*NASB, Judges 11:1-3)

So they're in need of leadership—military leadership—and Jephthah was a mighty warrior, a mighty man of valor, literally. But he was the son of a prostitute. His father was Gilead, named after the namesake of that tribe hundreds of years before. Names were a really big deal in that culture. You didn't just name yourself that without reason. So, this would have been a significant family among the Gileadites. He had one wife and lots of sons, and one son of a prostitute. One can only imagine the dynamics at home. Every time Gilead's wife looked at Jephthah, she was reminded of her husband's little rendezvous with a harlot, and I'm sure it was very painful. It's likely her sons picked up on that and resented Jephthah. So when Gilead dies, the boys have grown up, and Jephthah's brothers drive him away. The language used there doesn't mean they had a little family meeting and thought this would probably be for the best. It means they threatened him. They drove him out. “You can leave, or you can die,” they said to him. “You're not really part of this family. You have a different mother. You have to go and there will be no inheritance for you.” When the text says **Jephthah fled**, again it's a verb that would indicate he fled for his life. It was, “Leave or die.” In an ancient culture, where there was no king, where the prevailing MO was, “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes,” the only chance of survival was within your tribe and within your family. So, when he is banished from his family and is driven out of his tribe with no inheritance, his chance for survival is slight. So he flees to the land of Tob. Nobody's quite sure where that was. Most think it was kind of the northeast part of the land of Gilead. It's kind of a rugged, wild, remote wilderness. And there he meets up with **worthless fellows**. It's very similar to David's story when he's fleeing from Saul, and he's hiding out in the wilderness, and he surrounds himself with a band of other outcasts—sinners, misfits and losers—that gathered together to make this little army of guerrilla fighters to survive. When the text says **they went out**, it doesn't mean they went out to the convenience store. It means they went out to battle. They went out to survive. They went out to do what was necessary in order to live and survive. This would have been a very difficult situation.

Now verses 1 through 3 are what we would call parenthetical, a parenthesis. Whenever you're studying a Hebrew narrative, one of the things you always look at is the structure, and this would be a structural element. The best way to understand this is if you remove the chapter divisions which wouldn't originally have been there. You read chapter 10, verse 18, and then jump immediately to chapter 11, verse 4, and the story doesn't miss a beat. It flows perfectly. So you have a little parenthesis stuck in there because the writer knows there's something you need to know about Jephthah in order to understand the point of the story. It's pretty rare that there are details about someone's personal life, but in this case, you need to know this about Jephthah to understand the point the writer is trying to make. Verse 4:

It came about after a while that the sons of Ammon fought against Israel. When the sons of Ammon fought against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob; and they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our chief that we may fight against the sons of Ammon." (Vs. 4-6)

So one can only imagine this conversation. The Ammonites are pressing in. They have no leadership, and they're talking among themselves. "We have to do this. We have to go find the outcast, and he's going to have to be our leader." One of the things that's interesting here is there isn't a question mark in what they say to Jephthah. They're not asking him. They're *telling* him. They're thinking, "We're going to go to this loser and tell him, "Here's what you're going to do. Do it." But Jephthah is not quite so sure.

Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me from my father's house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble?" (Vs.7)

Now this is actually a new piece of information. We knew that Jephthah's brothers drove him out. We did not know that **the elders of Gilead** were also involved. "You're not only banished from your family, you are banished from your tribe. You need to get out. You don't belong here. You're the son of a prostitute." When they came to Jephthah, what they offered is, "You come **be our chief.**" It's a Hebrew word that means our *general*, our *commander*. Verse: 8

The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "For this reason we have now returned to you, that you may go with us and fight with the sons of Ammon and become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back to fight against the sons of Ammon, and the LORD (Yahweh) gives them up to me, will I become your head?" The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD is witness between us; surely we will do as you have said." (Vs.8-10)

In the beginning of verse 8, the closest they get to an apology are the words **for this reason**. "Yes, it's true we sent you away; we banished you; we hated you. But it's **for this reason** we've come to get you." You have to kind of read between the lines. "We're sorry. We didn't really mean it that way. But if you come, we will make you our **head.**" It's a different word. **Head** is a word that means the *political leader*, the *boss*. "You will be in charge!"

Remember, a judge was both a political leader and a military leader. So now we have the recipe for a judge. "You can be our chief; you can be our head." Jephthah, then, is like a lawyer reading

the fine print. “Just to be clear here, I just want to make sure. So, you're saying that if I go back with you and Yahweh gives us the victory”—*Jephthah is the first one to bring God's name into it*— “if Yahweh gives me the victory, then I will be both your chief and your head. Is that right?” To which the elders say, “That's right. God is witness. God is listening. Yes. If you choose to come back, you can be both our chief and our head.” Verse 11:

Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all these words before the Lord at Mizpah.

So they go back, and before the people of Gilead and before Yahweh God, Jephthah is made both **the head and the chief**. Jephthah's words before the Lord were either a prayer or somehow seeking God's guidance in what Yahweh wanted him to do. Now if you look up Jephthah's story in the commentators, people are all over the board on how they view Jephthah. We'll talk about this more next week, but at this point, it's necessary to simply take the text at face value. Jephthah seems to believe only Yahweh can give them the victory, and he's seeking Yahweh as to what he should do next. Verse 12:

Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the sons of Ammon, saying, “What is between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?” The king of the sons of Ammon said to the messengers of Jephthah, “Because Israel took away my land when they came up from Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok and the Jordan; therefore, return them peaceably now.” (12-13)

So you might think, given Jephthah's background, he might just be this violent thug. But, actually, he's not. He's quite a good leader, and he doesn't want more bloodshed. So he's starting with negotiations. “Maybe we can work this out.” So he sent messengers to the king of Ammon and says, “You know, what's your deal? Why is it that you want my land?” The king sends back a message, “Because it's not your land; it's my land. Moses, when he came up from Egypt took it, and we want it back. Give it back and everything will be okay.”

But Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the sons of Ammon, and they said to him, “Thus says, Jephthah, ‘Israel did not take away the land of Moab nor the land of the sons of Ammon. For when they came up from Egypt, and Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh, then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, “Please let us pass through your land,” but the king of Edom would not listen. And they also sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. Then they went through the wilderness and around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, and came to the east side of the land of Moab, and they camped beyond the Arnon; but they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab. And Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, the king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, “Please let us pass through your land to our place.” But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory; so Sihon gathered all his people and camped in Jahaz and fought with Israel. The LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them; so Israel possessed all the land of the Amorites, the inhabitants of that country. So they possessed all the

territory of the Amorites, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and from the wilderness as far as the Jordan. Since now the LORD, the God of Israel, drove out the Amorites from before his people Israel, are you then to possess it?" (Vs.14-23)

It's quite impressive how well Jephthah understands the history of his people. So, he sends messengers back to the king of Ammon and says, "No, that's not the way it happened at all. When Moses left Egypt, he went through the wilderness. They crossed the Red Sea and landed in Kadesh. They then needed to go north, and then into the land of promise."

So imagine a map here. At the bottom is Egypt. You have the Nile River; you have the Red Sea. Above that, then, is the Dead Sea, then the Jordan River, then the Sea of Galilee. Almost everything we talk about with Israel is on the west side of the Jordan River. So it's Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Bethel, all those places. But there were a couple of tribes that settled east of the Jordan River. That's where all this activity is taking place.

So when Moses got to Kadesh, he sends messengers to the king of Edom and says, "We'd like to pass through your land. The quickest route is, can we just go straight north and in?" As a matter of fact, if you read the story in the book of Numbers, what they actually said is, "We won't drink your water. We won't pick your berries. We won't eat your food. We won't do anything. We have all that we need. All we're wanting is to pass through the land." But the king of Edom says, "No!" The language is unusually polite. "Please, let us come through." But Moses respects that decision, so they have to go all the way around to the east.

They get to the land of Moab and send messengers. "Please, can we just cut through your land to our land?" The king of Moab says, "No!" So once again they respect that decision and go all the way around Moab.

Now they get to a fairly small piece of ground that's controlled by the Amorites. Don't confuse this. The Ammonites, which is where the tension is, is a different people than the Amorites. So Sihon is the king of the Amorites. Israel sends a messenger. "Hey, can we please just cut through your land to our land?" Sihon, not only won't grant permission, but he fears the Israelites. So he rallies his army, and he attacks Israel. But Yahweh God gives Israel a great victory. Therefore, by legal rights, they possess the land. Everyone in the ancient world would have agreed that if Sihon and the Amorites attack Israel and Israel won, then the land belongs to them. So it is legally their land. So that's what Jephthah is saying. "If it's our land, then why are you claiming it's your land?" Verse 24:

Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives to you to possess? So whatever the LORD our God has driven out before us, we will possess it. Now are you better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive with Israel, or did he ever fight against them? While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time? I therefore have not sinned against you, but you are doing me wrong by making war against me; may the LORD the Judge, judge today between the sons of Israel and the sons of Ammon." (Vs. 24-27)

So Jephthah sends three more quick points. “If your God, Chemosh, gave you the victory, wouldn't you claim that land as your own? Well, Yahweh, our God, gave us the victory, so it's our land.”

Second of all, “Have you ever heard of Balak, the famous king of the Moabites from years gone by? Balak hated the Israelites and did everything in his power to get Balaam to curse Israel, but God kept blessing Israel. Therefore, Balak came to understand that you can't defeat the God of Israel. As much as he hated them, he signed a peace treaty because he realized you can't fight this God and win.” That's what Jephthah is saying. “Do you really think you're that much greater than Balak and the Moabites that you're going to start this war?”

Thirdly, it's been 300 years. “All this dispute with Moses was 300 years ago. It's been our land for 300 years, and no one has disputed that. So why do you all of a sudden think it's your land? Actually, Mr. King of Ammon, I'm not sinning against you. You're sinning against me. And if you insist on attacking, I guess we'll let the Judge, Yahweh Himself, make the decision as to who is right.”

One of the interesting things about verse 27 is, in a book entitled the **Judges**, this is the only verse in the entire book where Yahweh God is identified as *The Judge*. Jephthah says, “Let's let *The Judge* decide.” So the king of the Ammonites said, “Wow, I didn't know any of this. Clearly, you're right. What was I thinking? We'll go home now....” Oh, wait a minute. That's *not* what it says. (*laughter*) But the king of the sons of Ammon disregarded the message, which Jephthah sent him. None of this mattered. The Ammonites hated Israel and they didn't care about any of this. They were determined to go to war, and war it will be, which we'll talk about next week.

As we wrap this up this morning, think about this: Jephthah is such an unlikely hero. When we read verses 1 through 3, we're pretty convinced this is a story that's not going to end well. What's so interesting about this story is, it's not that God used Jephthah *in spite of* his story, but rather God used Jephthah *because of* his story. It was because his mom was a prostitute that he was despised and rejected by his own family and by his own people. This is what forced him to live a life as a mercenary, as a warrior, trying to survive in very difficult circumstances. It's precisely because of his story that he became a great warrior that God could use to do something special for Him. Perhaps the story should say, “And Jephthah was a valiant warrior”. But, instead of saying **but his mom was a prostitute**, it should say, “Jephthah was a mighty a valiant warrior *because* his mom was a prostitute.” Because that's what launched the whole story that brought Jephthah to a point where God could redeem his story and make him useful to deliver Israel.

What about you? So, God is looking through your life resume, and what does He get to when He's like, “Mmm, oh, oh, Mmm.” What is it you think is on that resume from your past that disqualifies you from God doing something special through you? God has always been in the business of redeeming our stories for His glory. We all have junk. We all have stuff. We all have stuff on that life resume that when you get to it, it's like, “Oh, I didn't know that.” Maybe it's not that God could use you *in spite of* your story. Maybe it's that God could use you *because of* your story. Maybe that's what actually brought you to Jesus. Maybe that's what got your attention. Maybe that's what has developed something within you—a perspective, a heart of compassion, or grace, or mercy—something within you that's been affected and changed to such a degree that it's something God can redeem, and actually use that part of your story to do something special for Him. I mean, isn't

that really the story of the gospel? God takes people with all their junk and makes them right before a holy God through the ultimate Savior and Deliverer? God has always been in the business of redeeming our stories and using the junk from our past to do something special for Him.

Each of these judges is a type of the ultimate Savior Deliverer to come. So, listen to my language here: “Jephthah was despised and rejected by his own, but he would ultimately be the savior and deliverer of his people.” Does that sound familiar? “Jesus was despised and rejected by His own, but through His death on a Roman cross, He would be the ultimate Savior and Deliverer of His people.” God has no B-team. If you're willing to trust Him, God can use whatever is in your story, not in spite of that, but because of that. God can redeem that part of your story and make you useful for Him, if you're willing to trust Him.

Oh, by the way, did I mention that if you just happen to be going through the *Faith Hall of Fame* in Hebrews chapter 11, you are going to find a familiar name, a man by the name of Jephthah? If the son of a prostitute can become a faith hall-of-famer, so can you!

Our Father, we celebrate Your grace and mercy and forgiveness today, that this is what the story has always been about. We all have junk on our life resume. We all have stuff that we wish wasn't there. But, God, in Your grace and mercy, You redeem back those moments in our lives and make us useful to do something special for You. Lord, may we have the courage and the faith to believe that, and to trust You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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