

“The loser who became a winner” (8)

A young child was saying his bedtime prayers, thanking God for the day. He ended his prayer with, ‘and thank You God, for the nice boy you gave this family, Amen.’ His mother asked, ‘What nice boy?’ He grinned, pointing to himself and said, ‘right here, I was thanking God for me!’

Now there are two ways of looking at that story, you might think he was arrogant and full of himself. But in reality he was just a child who had a positive attitude. In our sermon today we’re going to look at a man named Jephthah, who just like that child had a very positive attitude.

And as we enter **Judges 10**, we see that once again Israel was trusting idols instead of the living God. **Judges 10:6** “Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines.”

You have to wonder, when will Israel learn from her past mistakes? When are they going to realise that these pagan deities only offered ample opportunity to sin, but provided no means of salvation? Well, like we have seen time and time again, they’re only going to learn the hard way.

Judges 10:6-9 tells us that God became angry with them and punished them for 18 years by allowing them to be oppressed by the Philistines and the Ammonites. And its then the Bible says in **Judges 10:9-10** “Israel was in great distress. Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, “We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals.”

Why did Israel cry out to God? Because once again they’re in trouble. And don’t people, even some Christians treat God the same way today? He’s no longer the God of the Bible but a god of convenience. And people just whip out the god card, whenever they need him and put him away when they’re satisfied.

And you all know the kind of gods I’m taking about don’t you? For example you have the god of health, he’s the one whom people only call upon and talk to when they’re faced with a health problem. And once their health problem is cured, they put him away and keep him safe for another day.

You can also have the god of fame, where people are so obsessed with becoming famous, they’re not interested in how they go about it, as long as they get famous. And once again after they’ve ‘made it’, their god gets put away until they’re fame begins to fade and they pull him out again.

You can also have the god of wealth, where people are just never satisfied with the material blessings they have. And so they will pull their god out and pray that god will make them richer in order for them to have more possessions.

I mean the list could go on loved ones, the God of the Bible has become a god of convenience. And even for some Christians, their devotion to God is one of convenience and not commitment. I know some self-professed Christians who only attend a worship service when life gets a bit tough. And as soon as everything is calm again, you never see them again for another six months.

In other words, just like the Israelites, they only want God when they need Him. And so Israel once again call upon the God of convenience but notice God’s response to Israel in **Judges 10:14** “Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!” God’s response is almost sarcastic, he more or less says, ‘let the things you’ve trusted shelter you, since you’ve refused to trust in Me!’

You see loved ones, when we rely on those gods instead of the True God, we find ourselves as lost as Israel in the distressing days of the Judges. And unlike these other gods, our God doesn’t desert His people, and so, once again God raises up another unlikely leader to deliver His people. And his name is Jephthah, whose name means ‘to open’ or ‘to release’.

And he’s another striking example of someone rising from humble circumstances. He really is ‘the loser who became a winner’ and we’ll see why as we go through his story. **Judges 11:1-3** “Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. Gilead’s wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. “You are not going to get any inheritance in our family,” they said, “because you are the

son of another woman.” So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him.”

The text tells us that he was the illegitimate son of Gilead and we can safely assume he didn't have a very happy childhood. Because he was forced to leave his homeland, to become an outcast, driven away by his 30 half-brothers. So that's a pretty miserable start to his life, thrown out of the family and homeless.

And if you or I were to look for someone to be a deliverer, then I'm sure if we were honest with ourselves, Jephthah would be the last person on our minds to choose. But people aren't doing the choosing, God is and as we shall see in the next few minutes. In spite of being rejected and exiled, God will choose him and he will rise above his circumstances and establish himself. He will gain a whole lot of experience and he will end up with a reputation as a warrior and leader.

You see loved ones, in God's eyes, everyone has worth and even though we may feel like outcasts at times, we can be assured that God loves us. And if this sermon teaches us anything today, it should certainly teach us that we too can rise above our circumstances.

The most motivated people in the world are those with full confidence in God. When we feel shattered, forsaken and lacking, we learn that the approval of others isn't what keeps us going. We learn that we need first and foremost God's approval to achieve true success in life.

Jephthah became the only hope to stop the Ammonite invasion and his fame grew through organizing a band of warriors, perhaps fellow outcasts and misfits, which in hindsight, we see as God's preparation for greater responsibilities.

In **Judges 11:4-11** we read that his half-brothers soon arrive, desperate for their estranged brother's help. He agrees, but with a condition, if he's successful in driving out the enemy, they must vow to accept him as their leader. They go on and haggle with him over this, and finally agree to raise Jephthah's status as a full citizen of Gilead with a reinstated family inheritance. Wow, Jephthah the outcast becomes Jephthah the judge and he finally gains the respect of his family.

Now let me make a very important point here which is sometimes overlooked. Jephthah didn't allow his past to hinder his future. Yes, his past hurt him and yes, he would still have those painful memories of being a child who was bullied by his brothers, unloved and kicked out of his home by his parents.

That's why I can't stand those little phrases which people say to someone who is struggling with a past hurt, 'oh let go of it', 'move on from it' or 'just get over it'. People can't 'let go' of their past, nor should they try. They might be able to 'move on', but the pain of the past remains. And telling people to 'get over it' only adds more pain.

You see loved ones, the pain of past hurts creates a form of bondage. And what these people really need is freedom from their hurts, the psychological wounds, the painful memories, the broken heart, the emotional baggage, which interferes with enjoying their lives today.

The events that produced those hurts and memories may constitute a very small part of people's past, but the hurts and memories have a direct impact on their present. And when Jesus heals those past hurts, He transforms the memories, and removes the pain. He enables the person to begin remembering and enjoying the more pleasant memories of the past.

We can learn to heal the pain of the past when we understand that the past doesn't have to weigh us down. **Hebrews 12:1** "Let us throw off every weight that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles and run with perseverance the race marked out for us". Loved ones, ask yourself, **what baggage from your past is hindering you from living for the Lord today?** Jephthah didn't allow his past to hinder his future and we shouldn't either.

In **Judges 11:13-28** we read that Jephthah doesn't immediately storm into battle. He first attempts a diplomatic solution by negotiating with the Ammonite king. And so to his credit, he tries to resolve the conflict without bloodshed and tries reasoning with the king, remembering that the inhabitants of Canaan regarded the Jews as invaders.

And so Jephthah uses this opportunity to explain their legitimate claim and divine right to possess the land. The enemy is given an opportunity to yield to God's will before force is used. Jephthah isn't afraid to combat the enemy, but he sought to avoid an unnecessary war. And it's not surprising that the king rejects Jephthah's reasoning, so both sides prepare for battle.

Now look with me at **Judges 11:29** "Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Jephthah." God chose him and then God empowered him through His Spirit for the task before him. Time and time again we see that whoever God calls upon to become a Christian, He also equips them for the task ahead. **Ephesians 4:11-12** "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."

Hebrews 13:20-21 "Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." In other words, God didn't just call Christians to worship Him, He calls Christians to serve and work in His kingdom. And He equips every one of us with the tools we need to serve and work.

Now it's evident that the hand of God was enabling Jephthah to deliver Israel but **why does Jephthah make what many regard as a rash, foolish vow?** **Judges 11:30-31** "Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

Now remember that vows in the Bible are binding obligations, which aren't to be taken lightly. They are oaths, pledges, obligations, even prayerful transactions between God and individuals. **When I married Funmi I vowed to her that, 'I, Michael Glover, take you, Olufunmilayo Abiola Peters, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part.'** **And she replied with a similar vow to me and we both declared these vows in the presence of God and other witnesses.**

But it's unfortunate that some people regard vows today as some sort of bargaining process with God. And so some people come back to their gods of convenience and like I mentioned earlier even as Christians, we may be tempted to bargain with God.

We say things like, 'God help me through this hard time and I'll pray more often than I've ever prayed before.' **'God help me get a job and I promise I will serve you like I've never served you before'.** Now we'll learn more about vows next time when we study Samson, who took a Nazirite vow. But let me say this concerning vows, they're a very serious matter in the Scriptures and not to be taken lightly. **Ecclesiastes 5:5** warns us that, **"It is better not to vow, than to make a vow and not keep it."**

Now concerning Jephthah's vow many Bible scholars are divided at this point. Some maintain that Jephthah actually did sacrifice his daughter, while others say she was given to the Levitical priests to serve in a religious setting. I personally believe that she went to serve in the tabernacle and here's my reason for thinking that way.

Everything in Jephthah's life was already dedicated to God. And we know from **Leviticus 18:21** and **Deuteronomy 12:31** that human sacrifice was an abomination, specifically forbidden by the Law and condemned as pagan practice. No Jewish priest would have ever approved or participated in it.

Jephthah realised that either an animal or a person would meet him when he returned from battle. If an animal appeared, it would be sacrificed as a burnt offering, and if a person came out, he or she would be dedicated to God for life-long service in the tabernacle. He probably expected a servant to greet him, instead, his daughter rushes out of their home.

Judges 11:34-35 "When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break."

Jephthah's sorrow came because his lineage would end with his only child, and to an Israelite this was a significant loss. Let's look at his daughter's reaction for a moment because I believe this is one of the most moving stories in the Bible.

Judges 11:36-38 "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry." "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never marry."

It's so evident that she loves her father but loves her Lord even more. And notice she isn't sad because her father made a rather rash vow and she will have to go the tabernacle to serve her Lord for the rest of her life. Her sadness centres on the fact that she had no relations with a man. She would never marry, never have children, which shows that rather than being literally sacrificed she was being devoted to an unmarried, celibate life.

Judges 11:39 "After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin." Can you imagine the joy when his daughter returned and she's still a virgin? Can you imagine how proud of her he was? But can you also imagine that now is the time she's going to have to leave the home?

What an emotional time for them both this must have been. And it was time that many women would never forget. Judges 11:39-40 "From this comes the Israelite tradition that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite".

What a great woman and forever remembered by her people for her humble submission and humble love for her Lord. What an example she was, and she still cries out to all the young women today, 'being married isn't everything,' 'having sex isn't everything', 'having children isn't everything' but serving a devoted life to God is all you need'.

And so Jephthah set apart his daughter for the Lord's service, to help out with the logistics of worship which was in line with Jewish practice according to **Leviticus 27:2-31**. And remember the fact that Jephthah won a great victory over the Ammonites further proves that human sacrifice was never being considered. God wouldn't have given Jephthah success in battle if he had intended to sacrifice a human being.

Although scholars disagree about Jephthah's vow, they all agree that it was unnecessary because God would have given Jephthah the victory regardless of his promise. He possibly made the vow just to get some reassurance from God like his predecessors did before him. Maybe he simply wanted reassurance that God wouldn't abandon him like his parents and brothers did before.

Now just before we finish let me share with you a story about a preacher who began his sermon by taking out a crisp, clean £20 note. He asked, 'who would like this £20 note?', and hands started going up. He then said, 'OK, but first let me do this', and he crumpled up the note. The students' hands remained in the air. The speaker then dropped the note on the floor and started to grind it with his shoe. It was now crumpled and dirty. Still plenty of hands were in the air. The speaker said, 'you've learned a valuable lesson. No matter what I did to the money, you still wanted it because it didn't decrease in value. It was still worth £20.'

Loved ones many times in our lives, we're dropped, crumpled, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we're worthless, but no matter what has happened or what will happen, we never lose our value in God's eyes. To Him, dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, we're still priceless.

And when we think about Jephthah's background, he could've resigned himself to thinking he was a waste of space and thought to himself that people like him never amount to much, but God turned him into a hero. If we really believe that God is working in and through us, then we can safely know that He's pleased with the work He's doing.

But why do some Christians put themselves down? They say, 'well there are others who are more talented than I am', 'there are others who know their way around the Bible better than I do', 'there are people who are more smarter than I am'.

Christian, none of that matters, but what does matter is whether we're seeking to do God's will for our lives. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 15:10** "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

Do you understand what Paul is telling us? He's saying we're made in God's image, and God doesn't make junk! If Jephthah felt he had nothing to offer, he wouldn't have attempted much in life. And if we see ourselves as worthless, we will tend to back away from relationships and challenges. Jephthah had a healthy sense of self-respect, in spite of his past and because God loves us, He never gives up on us.

God will help us conquer the pain of our past and lead us to a brighter future. Paul says in **Philippians 3:13-14** "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

In other words, don't allow your past to hinder your future. You've got a new goal now and that goal is to keep going forward in the faith until you receive your salvation.

Let me finish by quoting a poem by a man named **David Rowley**, it's called 'Hiding.'

People walking everywhere, ever on the go.

Breaking hearts, encased in stone, no one will ever know.

People smiling everywhere, putting on a show.

'How you doing?' 'Looks like rain', never talk about the pain.

Talk of things that only mask, the longings deep inside.

Smile and sing - do anything, just make sure you hide.

What's really there, just keep smiling, no one cares.

People crying, can't you see? I hope someday they find.

A friend to love and listen, a love to set them free.

I hope someday they find a friend, like Jesus is to me.