

Place: Lurgan Baptist 21:1:2003

Reading: Judges 10:6 11:11 29...40

HEARTS OF IRON, FEET OF CLAY

9.THE LOSER WHO BECAME A WINNER

In 1988 the Winter Olympics brought to the public's attention a non-hero from Great Britain. His name was "*Eddie the eagle Edwards.*" Eddie nearly blind had a deep desire to be a ski jumper, and even though he finished last in the competition he became a national hero. He was sought out by the crowds who wanted his autograph and by the media who wanted to interview him. Eddie was just an ordinary person who attempted extraordinary things. Horatio Alger wrote over 100 boys novels that focused on the "*rags to riches,*" theme, and he became one of the most influential American writers of the last half of the 19th century. Whether its Abraham Lincoln going from "*log cabin to the White House,*" or Joseph from prison to the throne of Egypt, the story of the successful "*underdog,*" is one that always will be popular. We like to see losers become winners. Is that not exactly what Jephthah was ? Just an ordinary man who accomplished extraordinary things.

When Oliver Cromwell was having his portrait done the artist suggested that he should pose in such a way that his "*warts,*" would be concealed. Cromwell looked at the artist and said, "*Paint me warts and all.*"

All too often we got to extremes in dealing with Biblical characters. Either we ignore their warts and blemishes or we dwell on them so much that we lose sight of their virtues. It would be easy to adopt either course in dealing with the man to whom the Children of Israel turned for leadership when she was threatened by the twice forces of Ammon and Philistia. Now that man was Jephthah and he was one of the most unusual men in the Old Testament. A man with a chequered past and a strong character grained with great flaws. Nothing about Jephthah was painted in pale colours, his gifts and weaknesses were painted in bold colours and his inner conflicts ran deep. Yet he was the man God used to accomplish His will among His people. Now to understand Jephthah it is essential for us to understand the "*times,*" in which he lived and served God. That background is given to us in (10:6-18)

(1) A CATALOGUE THAT MADDENS

You see, Israel are at it again. (10:6) Now this is the sixth time that we see the Israelites turning their backs on the living God to throw themselves into the worship of pagan gods. Indeed here is faithlessness stacked high. Israel's state is not merely critical but disastrous. A preacher was visiting a man who professed to be a Christian, but who had drifted a long way from the Lord. They talked for a while, and then the preacher said, "*I want you to go outside and look up to heaven. You will receive a revelation. But it is pouring rain. I will get soaked,*" the man protested. "*Just do what I say it is important.*" So the man went outside and, ten minutes later, he came in soaking wet. He was

absolutely drenched, and he said to the preacher rather angrily, “ *Well, I kept looking up to heaven, but I sure did not get any revelation. I am just drenched and I feel like an idiot.* ” “ *Not bad,* ” said the preacher, “ *that is quite a revelation for a first try.* ” Unfortunately, not many of us realise the stupidity of sin. We may think of it as unfortunate or as enjoyable, but we rarely recognise it for what it is spiritual insanity. Now in this terrible catalogue we see the sin of Israel intensified. Indeed in this catalogue we see:

(a) A SINFUL PEOPLE:

Look at (10:6)

1. There was REBELLION:

Do you see how intensely and totally Israel had fallen away from the Lord ? Look at the idolatry that is recorded. There was the Canaanite gods of Baal and Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, Hadad, Baal, Mot and Anath, the gods of Sidon, Baal and Astarte, the gods of Moab, Chemosh, and the gods of the Philistines Dagon etc; My These seven false religions mentioned here included some of the most perverted and depraved practices ever known to man. Now remember here was a nation that had seen God’s hand miraculously revealed through Gideon. They had seen the disaster of apostasy in the life of Abimelech. They had known the leadership of two minor judges named Tola and Jair, but still they turned away from God until finally we reach in (Ch 10) one of the bleakest times spiritually in Israel’s

history ! 1.

2. There was RETRIBUTION:

“ *And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel.* ” (10:7) One enemy was on the west, the Philistines, the other was on the east, the Ammonites. Now the Ammonites were a desert people who lived on the eastern side of the Dead Sea ! They first overpowered the two and one half tribes which had chosen to stay in the area east of the Jordan River, a region called Gilead and occupied by Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh. Then Ammon gained sufficient power to cross the Jordan and to attack the central tribes in Israel, Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim. 1:2:

3. There was REPENTANCE:

Now we need to recognise that there is a great difference between regret and repentance. A Christian who was visiting a man in jail said to him, “ *I hope you have repented of what you have done, so you will not make the same mistake when you are released.* ” He said, “ *No ma’am I sure won’t. Next time I pull a job. I’ll be sure to wear gloves.* ” My that’s regret and not repentance ! (2 Cor 7:9=10) Regret may touch the emotions but go no further. (10:10) tells me that God refuses to respond to superficial regret, but (10:15) tells me that God does respond to genuine repentance. Regret is remorse over the consequences of an act, but repentance involves a reordering of our lives around God. I wonder is this why many of us don’t know the

working of God in our lives ? You see, until we deal with our sin in God's presence we will not God's power.

(b) A WONDERFUL PICTURE:

For against the faithlessness of the people, there stands the faithfulness of God ! Did you notice that lovely phrase in (10:16) In the Hebrew text it is even more beautiful, “ *His soul reached the limit of its endurance with the trouble of Israel.* ” Do you see what that says ? Here were God's people undergoing the discipline they deserved. I mean God could have written them off, but God's heart was in trouble over what Israel was suffering and finally He said “ *That is enough I cannot take any more.* ” My never believe Satan's lie that the God of the O.T. is a stern, unforgiving God who delights in judgement. I tell you He is a God of incessant love and infinite mercy and over and over again He displays these characteristics not only in the way He dealt with Israel back then, but in the way he works in our lives now. For He is the God of all grace.

(c) A USEFUL PARALLEL:

You see, there is a parallel between (10:6-16) and (11:1-11) a similarity between the way Israel treats Jehovah and the way Gilead treats Jephthah. Notice:

- * There was Rejection: (10:6 with 11:3)
- * There was Distress: (10:9 with 11:4)
- * There was Repentance: (10:15 with 11:5)
- * There was Agreement: (10:16 with 11:10)

Now do you see the parallel ? Gilead treat Jephthah the same way that Israel treated Jehovah ! What's the parallel saying to us ? Just this, a servant is no above His Lord. Do you recall the words of the Lord Jesus ? “ *If they have persecuted Me they will persecute you.* ” (Jn 15:20) Even from God's people the servant of the Lord may have no right to expect better treatment than the Lord Jesus Himself receives. Certainly Jephthah fared no better than Jehovah, yet this was God's man for the hour. (1)

(2) A DIALOGUE THAT GLADDENS

Now this brings us into (Ch 11) Who was Jephthah ? Well, he was the man who nobody wanted. His father was unfaithful and his mother was unclean. Jephthah was a child of shame. He was the man who was rejected by men but accepted by God ! He started life with a great advantage, but God chose him. It was the same with Alexander Whyte, well known minister of Free St. George's Edinburgh in the late 19th century. What an outstanding preacher, and writer he was. But no one would have guessed as much in 1836, when Janet Thompson brought him into this world born out of wedlock. *But God chose !* How God takes the unwanted things and moulds them in His hands as instruments of His omnipotence ! Now when we come to (Ch 11) its all about dialogue ! There is dialogue

(a) *With the Members of His Family: Jephthah is Rejected:*

Look at (11:2) We need to be reminded again and again that no man ever sins alone. The father sinned. It meant suffering for him. But it also meant suffering for his boy. My Jephthah grew up with the scars of his parents sins. Then when his half brothers became old enough they drove him away from his family and home and Jephthah became a social outcast. Here was a man alone in the world, alone except for God. Isn't it wonderful that God does not give in to human prejudices ? God is not limited by the social, parental, environmental factors that we consider important for the service of the Lord. You know, often we get the idea that before the Lord can use us we must have certain characteristics. If we do not have the right family background, social standing, or educational training we're not the kind of people God can use. Is that not the way we think ? My If the book of Judges has taught us anything it has taught us this. Our God is not the God of the stereotype, and if we need any confirmation of that look at Jephthah, a unique man who did not fit the mould. Do you know something ? So many of us suffer from an inferiority complex. Why ? Because we not feel we fit the mould.

(a)

(b) With the Controller of His Destiny: Jephthah is Refined:

Look at (11:3) Tob was north near Syria, and there Jephthah became captain of a band of adventurers. He probably attacked the Ammonites and other pagan peoples. He was a kind of Hebrew Robin Hood, and his raids brought him fame. Now this period was extremely

important for Jephthah because it was here that he learned to know God. Oh, his knowledge of God may not have been deep, but it was real. Indeed its Jephthah that uses the personal name of God more than any other person in the Book of Judges. (11:21 23, 27) Several years a group of broadcasters was holding a conference with some Soviet Christians, and one of the men asked the Russian, “ *Brother, how did you manage to survive thirty two years of Soviet labour camp ?* ” The interviewer was expecting some tale of terror or an outburst of anger. Instead the man quietly and gently answered, “ *Brethren, even a desert looks like a flower garden when you are in communion with the Lord.* ” My Your knowledge may not be deep but is it real ? Are you holding daily dialogues with the Saviour ? Are you getting to know the Lord intimately and increasingly ? Dialogue no 1 (a) No 2 (b)

(c) With the Leaders of his Country: Jephthah is Requested:

Look at (11:5-6) Jephthah's reply sounds a good deal like what the Lord had said to the people when they turned to Him for help. (10:13-14) Apparently, these Jewish leaders had cooperated with Gilead's sons in expelling the unwanted brother from the land, but Jephthah listened to them and made sure their offer was valid. Its interesting that they had no time for him in the day of their prosperity but when adversity came, when the storm blew up they request Jephthah to be their leader. It must have been a great moment for Jephthah when those elders came and asked him to be their leader. My It was not a position that he had

applied for, or negotiated for, but in God's own time the door opened, and Jephthah was elevated to the position of leader in Gilead. You see, my responsibility in my Christian life is to be involved where I am, in doing the will of God where He has put me. To learn the lessons that He is teaching me, and it is God's job to open the doors of opportunity. (10:11) makes it clear that Jephthah was living his life in the conscious presence of his God. Indeed did you notice the way Jephthah emphasised the Lord in all his negotiations with the leaders of Israel ? It was the Lord who would give the victory (11:9) not Jephthah, and the agreement between him and the elders must be ratified before the Lord. (10:11 Heb 11:32) You see, Jephthah did not see this a political opportunity for himself but as an occasion for serving the Lord. My Live enthusiastically for the Lord in the present, and He will concern Himself with your future.

As a young man, Charles Spurgeon was pondering his future, especially in relation to his education. He says that as he was walking one night, running the alternatives through his mind, he heard God say to him, "*Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!*" "*At the moment,*" he said "*I realised I would never go to Cambridge, and I would never amount to anything more than preaching to a congregation of two hundred people.*" From that moment Spurgeon committed himself to the doing God's will whatever the cost. Six months later, as a young man only nineteen years old, he was preaching to thousands of people every Sunday in the city of London. That happened because he was willing to allow the Lord to open the doors in his life

and to be faithful where he was then. Are you being faithful to God in the present ? Then He will look after your future ! Mind you it would have been so easy for Jephthah to say, "*When I needed your help, you would not give it, I will treat you the way you treated me.*" Tit for tat. Is that not how some believers act ? A leader is required in the church and you thought you could do it but you were passed by, and you have been holding a grudge ever since. "*You passed me by the last time, I won't do it now. Do you think you can pick me up and let me down just when you like. Find someone else.*" Is that your attitude ? It was not Jephthah's ! He refused to be embittered. He consented to go ! There was dialogue with (a) (b) (c)

(d) With the Opposers of His Country: Jephthah is Resisted:

Look at (10:12) That's the last thing we might have expected Jephthah to do. From his background, we might expect him to strike first and to ask questions later. Yet before he drew up battle lines Jephthah sent messengers to Ammon asking the obvious question, "*What's the problem? Why are you invading us and fighting against our land?*" The reply came back, "*Because Israel took away my land, at the time of Joshua, so return it peacefully now.*" Jephthah's reply was simple but powerful. This was a man with a firm grasp of the truth. He told the King:

* Check your History: We did not take the land from the Ammonites but from the Amorites: (11:15-22)

* Check your Theology: The Lord gave us this land and

we cannot surrender it now. (11:23-25)

* Check your Logic: For 300 years we have held the land and you have done nothing to recapture it. Its too late for land claims now.

My The interesting thing here is that Jephthah's answer was grounded on historical facts. He stood firmly on fact ! Is this not where a Christian stands ? The early church did not set their world aflame by expressing opinions or exchanging experiences, but by insisting on the truth of who the Lord Jesus is and what He did. They did not rely on subjective experience but objective truth. They proclaimed the unshakeable facts of Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is this not our calling ? Is that not how we defeat the enemy ? Not on the ground of feelings, but on the ground of fact ! Look at (11:32) (1) (2)

(3) AN EPILOGUE THAT SADDENS

Do you recall Harry Ironside's prayer ? “ *O God keep me from becoming a foolish old man.* ” Its good to start well, better to go on well, best to finish well.” Now what is it that makes the concluding part of Jephthah's story so sad ? Well, for one thing

(a) *THE VOW THAT HE WAS MADE WAS NEEDLESS:*

1. This Vow is RECORDED:

(11:30-31) Was Jephthah vowing to make a human sacrifice ? Three facts seem to indicate this.

1. Animals were not kept indoors:
2. It would be a mockery to vow to God whatever animal happened out the door.
3. Every time the word “ *burnt offering,* ” is used in the Old Testament it refers to a blood sacrifice.

Do you see what Jephthah was saying ? “ *Win my battle Lord and I'll do this.* ” Have you ever said the same thing ? “ *Lord, you get me out of this tight spot, and I'll give the rest of my life to you as missionary, preacher ?* ” “ *I'll give more money to the work of the Lord.* ” Have you ever bargained with God like that ? 1.

2. This Vow is REJECTED:

In the Scriptures ! That is this vow contradicted the clear teaching of the Scriptures ! Now remember a vow was a promise to God to acknowledge publicly an answer to prayer. Do you recall Moses instructions about vows ? (Deut 23:21-23) A vow was purely a voluntary act, but once a vow was made, a man was committed before God. For that very reason, God warned against making rash or thoughtless vows. If you are going to make a commitment to God do it carefully and thoughtfully. (Prov 20:25 Eccl 5:4-5) Now why would Jephthah vow to offer a human sacrifice to God ?

The Scriptures clearly prohibited such a thing. (Lev 18:21 20:2-5 Deut 12:31 18:10) Now many Bible scholars are convinced that Jephthah could never have sacrificed his daughter, they take the view that he offered his daughter as a living sacrifice in perpetual

virginity.

Whatever view you take, here's the question. How often do you make pledges to God that you do not honour? How often have you been moved under the ministry of the Word and you say to the Lord, "*I want t do this or that for Your glory!*" Has it ended there? What about the vows that you have made as an elder, deacon, member of this church? Have you been honest with God in this matter? Have you said, "*I have opened my mouth unto the Lord and I cannot go back.*" (11:35)

(b) THE VICTORY THAT HE HAD WAS RUTHLESS:

Now in (Ch 12) Ephraim is at again. Do you recall it was Ephraim who tackled Gideon when he had defeated the Midianites? (8:1) Do you see them here? Look at:

1. The ATTITUDE of Ephraim:

(12:1) They were an arrogant, critical, envious group. They were always ready to fight with their brothers but never against the enemy. Is it not sad that there are so many Ephraimites within the church? Christians who are willing to let others confront the world with the gospel, others to get involved in local church activity, others to shoulder the burden. But these people reserve the right to criticise from the sidelines, and condemn what others do. I am reminded of the man who came up to D.L.Moody and said, "*Mr. Moody, I don't like the*

way you preach the gospel." "*You know,*" Mr.Moody said, "*I'm always willing to learn. Tell me about the method you use.*" "*I guess I don't really have one,*" the man said. "*I'll tell you what,*" said Moody. "*I like the way I do it better than the way you don't do it.*" My Are you an armchair general? Has Satan so tricked you that you are fighting with your brethren rather than the real enemy? 1.

2. The ACTION of Jephthah:

Look at (12:4-7) Now this battle with Ephraim was not Jephthah's fault. They richly deserved to be taught a lesson. But in the midst of that lesson, Jephthah once again showed his ignorance of God's will and God's way! Do you see the problem? Jephthah treated fellow Israelites as if they were Ammonites. He had experienced the grace of God in his own life but he did not practice it in relation to others. Martin Luther led God's people into the truth of justification by faith alone, and the authority of God's Word, but he also turned in fury on some Anabaptists who wanted to practice God's Word.

There is an old cliché that says, "*Ignorance is bliss.*" In fact, ignorance can be extremely dangerous if it is spiritual ignorance. Jephthah had a zeal for God but he was ignorant of God's Word and way! The result was disaster! The last time Dr. Ironside lectured at Dallas Theological Seminary he was almost blind. His wife would read the text of Isaiah and then he would expound it. Now Ironside had been a lifelong student of the Word and one of the great Bible teachers of his

day.

He had been a great reader of all kinds of books but during that last series of lectures he held up his Bible and said “ *Men I wish I had read other books less and this Book more.* ” My God’s cure for spiritual ignorance is His Word. There is no substitute. Look it up, let it in and live it out. (1 Sam 21:9)