



Jephthah's Daughter

"And it was a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year." Judges 11:39, 40

After the death of Joshua the Israelites lived several hundred years prior to their first king, Saul, without regular rulers or central authority. During this time God raised up valiant leaders, called judges, who acted as defenders of their fellow-countrymen in times of crisis and oppression.

Jephthah emerged as a defender of Israel when the Ammonites laid claim to Israel's territory between the Arnon and Jabbok rivers. When the dispute led to war the Gileadites, whose geography placed them on the front line of the clash, turned to Jephthah, one of their own, to lead them.

Jephthah received the news of this distinction with little enthusiasm. He had been exiled by his own people. Now in time of crisis when they needed his military talents they ran to him for help. He would only give them his help, therefore, if they agreed to his conditions: "If ye bring me home again to fight against the children of Ammon, and the Lord deliver them before me, shall I be your head?" The elders of Gilead solemnly promised to meet his demand.

Before leading his people into battle Jephthah vowed to God that, "If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me . . . shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." In the ensuing battle Jephthah routed the Ammonites.

After the victory Jephthah "came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him." When he saw her he rent his garments in anguish. His own daughter, his only child, he must sacrifice in fulfillment of his vow! Learning the cause of his anguish his daughter—a model of religious devotion and filial love—insisted that the vow must be fulfilled. She sought only to be allowed to go into seclusion for two months to prepare herself for her ordeal. Then she returned to her father "who did with her according to his vow."

Some scholars hold that her fate was not death but perpetual virginity — a fate perhaps just as sad for women in Old Testament times, when childbearing had such special significance. Whatever her fate, we can only marvel at her religious dedication and enduring love for her father despite the imprudence of his vow. With total disregard of the cost to herself she displayed these spiritual qualities in the highest degree, and has won for herself lasting remembrance among the great women of the Bible.

