

The Rejected Warrior by Jeff Strite

Judges 10:6-11:40

OPEN: How many of you have ever been rejected? Me too.

Rejection can be hard experience for anyone, but it's surprising to find that people we would consider famous have often been scorned by others.

- For example, have you ever heard of Harrison Ford? What movies has he been in? (Star Wars; Indiana Jones; and others). When he first started out, he was told by a number of movie executives that he didn't have what it took to be a star.
- Walt Disney was fired from the Kansas City Star in 1919. His editor said, he "lacked imagination and had no good ideas."
- Rudyard Kipling was the author of The Jungle Book, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, and Captains Courageous and other books. He was fired from the San Francisco Examiner in 1889. He was told by an editor, that he didn't know how to use the English language.
- Winston Churchill repeatedly ran for office and was defeated every time he did so until he finally became the Prime Minister of England at the age of 62, just before WWII.
- Oprah Winfrey was fired from a job as a TV Reporter because they said she was "unfit for TV".
- And the Beatles were rejected by several recording studio. One of those record labels famously said that "the Beatles have no future in show business".

But my favorite story has to do with Clint Eastwood and Burt Reynolds. They were close friends and they were both fired from Universal Studios on the same day. Reynolds recalled: "I was told I couldn't act, and Clint was told he walked too slow and his Adam's apple was too big. As we were walking to our cars, we were quiet. And finally I said, 'You're in trouble Clint. I can take acting lessons, but you can't get a new Adam's apple.'"

Being rejected is no fun.

I've been there, I've done that and I burned the t-shirt.

Rejection hurts.

It's painful.

It's an insult to who we are.

I don't like it!!!

The hero in our story today probably got hurt as badly as anybody could possibly be hurt. His name is Jephthah.

From what I'm reading, it seems his daddy had been a prominent member of society.

The only problem was – his momma wasn't.

She was a prostitute.

When his father died, the other sons cut him out of the will and kicked him out of town. It literally says they "drove him away."

In a single day he lost everything.

He'd lost his home, his family, and apparently he'd never had any respect.

Different people react to rejection in different ways.

- Some people just roll up in a ball and hide in the corner.
- Others take drugs or drown their sorrows down at the bar.
- Still others are like the people I told you about in the opening illustration. They dust themselves off, pick themselves up, and become overcomers.

But then, there's other people, who are rejected by others, and turn to God for their comfort.

For example, there was a man named Albert Peace. Albert was a man in love. His fiancée was all he had ever wanted in a woman and they planned to soon be married. Then he discovered he was going blind. And the woman he had loved and hoped to share his life with walked out on him. She could not stand the possibility of living her life with a man whom she knew she'd need to take care of for the rest of her life.

Albert was shattered.

But in the midst of his tragedy, losing the love of the woman he'd have given his life for, he turned to the one whose love he knew he'd never lose.

He knew God would not reject him. And in those dark moments he wrote a poem that soon became the words to a famous hymn:

"O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be."

For about 200 years, that song has brought comfort to 1000s of worshipers. Albert Peace turned to God in his sorrow. And I'm convinced that that's exactly what Jephthah did.

Now, why do I think Jephthah turned to God in his time of struggle?

Well, because he seems to know his Bible pretty well.

When he was "elected" to lead the army of Israel into war against Ammon he first tries to negotiate with the Ammonites. He doesn't really want to go to war. People die in war, and he hopes to talk the enemy out of bloodshed. "Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question:

"What do you have against us that you have attacked our country?" (Judges 11:12)

The Ammonites reply they lost land in a battle 300 years before and they want it back.

But Jephthah replies to them by retelling the history of Israel that was found in the Bible. Basically, he tells them that the Ammonites lost their land because their king went to war against the Israelites when all Israel wanted to do was pass through their land on the way to Palestine. Essentially Jephthah told the Ammonites: We won... you lost... you ain't getting it back!

Jephthah retells the story out of Scripture with 100% accuracy, and we find that he not only is able to quote his Bible but that he believes that the Bible is historically accurate. He trusts it. (Pick up a Bible) He believes that if it says something, God has spoken and the statements and the promises are reliable.

He is a man who takes his faith seriously

In fact Jephthah took his faith so seriously... that it got God's attention.

ILLUS: Hebrews 11 has often been called the chapter that lists the "Heroes of Faith." It tells of men like Abraham, Moses and David, and women like Sarah and Rahab.

There's only 16 people mentioned by name in Hebrews 11 (I counted them), and guess who's name is in that list?

That's right: Jephthah!

It says: "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, JEPHTHAH, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies." Hebrews 11:32-34

Jephthah is right up there with Gideon, and David and Samuel and the prophets. He's listed there because he was a man of faith. Jephthah was a man who impressed God enough to be listed in the Hall Of Heroes.

In fact, Jephthah so impressed God, that when he ultimately went to war against the Ammonites, we're told "Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah." Judges 11:29 Not everybody in Scripture had the Spirit of the LORD come upon them. They were special people.

Now that's cool! This man who'd been rejected by his family and his people was claimed by God. And, you know, that's often how God does things. God takes the rejects of life and turns them into tools that He can use to change the world.

That what it says in I Corinthians "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things— and the things that are not— to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." I Corinthians 1:27-29

Someone once observed that

Moses stuttered. David's armor didn't fit. Jacob was a liar.

Solomon was too rich. Abraham was too old. David was too young.

Naomi was a widow. Martha was a worrywart.

Jonah ran from God. Gideon and Thomas both doubted God.

Jeremiah was depressed. Elijah was burned out. And Timothy had ulcers.

Peter was afraid of death. And of course - Lazarus WAS dead.

Then... there's Jephthah. The son of a prostitute.

The whole point is this: God uses all kinds of people that others would overlook or reject. And that was part of the reason God chose Jephthah. He was rejected by others so God used him. And when God used him, He took hold of his life – Jephthah became a hero.

- A hero of faith.
- A man used by God to do mighty things.
- A man who stood tall in Scripture.

Jephthah was a man of faith and destiny.

(PAUSE)

But now... there's a problem in Jephthah's story. Some might call it "the elephant in the room." You know why certain things are called "an elephant in the room?" It's because there's something that everybody KNOWS is there but nobody wants to talk about. It's embarrassing, it's uncomfortable and you want to ignore it. But you can't. It's just too big to ignore.

There's something in this story about Jephthah that is "too BIG to ignore. Something that makes people embarrassed and uncomfortable. Do you have any idea what the elephant in the room is in the story of Jephthah?

That's right: it looks like he sacrificed his daughter to God. Theologians have struggled with this issue for centuries. Some of them say Jephthah DIDN'T sacrifice his daughter... others say he did. But NOBODY likes this part of the story.

We're told "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." Judges 11:30-31

And what happens? He wins the battle, returns home in victory, and "who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! 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! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break." Judges 11:34-35

Notice: Jephthah was totally surprised when his daughter came out of the house. I read a couple of commentators who believed that Jephthah was simply so influenced by the pagans around him that he seriously intended to make a human sacrifice to God. But that's not what this says. Jephthah is devastated by seeing his daughter come out of the house. So, what's going on here?

How many of you have cats and dogs in your home?

Not me. I have a ferret.

But back in the days of the Old Testament, such animals would probably not been a common sight in people's homes. However, if a person were a shepherd, they might have lambs in the flock that had lost their mothers. They could allow them to fend for

themselves in the field, or they could bring them into the house to mother them until they are able to survive on their own. There are some scholars who believe that is what Jephthah had intended at his own home.

After all, we've all had animals that, the moment the door is opened – out they run. He probably made his vow thoroughly expecting to see such an animal run out the open door when he'd come home.

But not this time.

This time, it was his only child.

He'd made a vow to God, and he was too much a man of honor to back down on it.

He allows his daughter time to grieve and then it says: After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite custom that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. Judges 11:39-40

Now, obviously we have a problem.

1st – vows were serious things to God.

Deuteronomy 23:21 says "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin."

Ecclesiastes says "It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, 'My vow was a mistake.' Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?" Ecclesiastes 5:5-6

But on the other hand – God hated human sacrifice.

Deuteronomy 12:28-31 says "Be careful to obey all these regulations I am giving you, so that it may always go well with you and your children after you, because you will be doing what is good and right in the eyes of the LORD your God. The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same."

You MUST NOT WORSHIP the LORD your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. (And chief among those detestable things) They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."

So, did Jephthah sacrifice his daughter or not?

Half of the scholars seem to say he did, and half believe he did not.

So did he, or didn't he?

Well, I'm going to tell you my opinion.

I might be wrong... but I doubt it.

And, in my opinion, I do NOT believe that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter.

Why?

Well, 1st - God honored Jephthah by including him in the chapter of the heroes of faith. And 2nd - God hates human sacrifice. God wasn't just annoyed by human sacrifice - it nauseated Him. It angered Him. He destroyed entire nations because they did things like this. God declared it to be an abomination.

Do you seriously think God would put a man who did such an evil thing into the elite cadre of believers that made up Hebrews 11's Hall of Heroes?

I don't think so.

3rd - the book of Judges NEVER condemns Jephthah for what he did.

Most scholars believe that the author of Judges was Samuel - the first and one of the greatest of the prophets of Israel. This was a man who stood for righteousness and would clearly have condemned human sacrifice. But there's not a single word of condemnation here.

In fact, the author of Judges is often quite clear about sin and God's judgment. He repeatedly cites the sins of Israel and the punishments He gives. In the case of Gideon, Judges 8:27 tells us "Gideon made (donated gold) into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah. And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house."

But there is NEVER any word of condemnation of Jephthah's actions.

4th - in the story of Abraham where God commanded that he sacrifice his only son Isaac, even Isaac knows something is up. They journey 3 days to the place of sacrifice, and Isaac looks around and sees the fire and the wood for the sacrifice, but he wonders where the sacrifice is. Abraham replies, God will supply the sacrifice. And He does... but not until the last moment, because God has something He wanted to teach us through that story. It's very possible God waited till the last moment in Jephthah's case as well for the very same reason.

5th - according to the Law of Moses, it was possible to "redeem" a sacrifice for a price, and its logical to believe that may have happened in the case of Jephthah's daughter (who would not have been an appropriate sacrifice)

6th - the text is a bit redundant. It keeps repeating she is a virgin and that she will never marry. That led one famous commentator (Adam Clarke) to believe she was pledged to "perpetual virginity in the service of the tabernacle" as opposed to being sacrificed.

And 7th - the text NEVER actually says Jephthah sacrificed his daughter. Later in Judges, there's a particularly gory description of a woman being cut into pieces (that I'm not going to go into, but you can read about it in Judges 19:29 ff).

But in this text, it's almost as if the story is deliberately vague. It hints that Jephthah might have sacrificed his daughter but it doesn't come right and give a detailed account of the supposed deed.

And I think there's a reason for that.

There's a lot of times in Scripture where God doesn't fill in the blanks for us. There are lots of details I'd like to know more about but God doesn't tell me anything about them, because they don't add to what He really wants us to see.

Those added details would only distract us.

And I think the same is true here.

I believe that the reason God isn't real detailed on whether Jephthah sacrificed his daughter is because it would distract us from what He really wants us to see.

For example: if God spelled out that Jephthah was let off from his vow, it would have given us an "excuse" to avoid fulfilling our promises to God when we found them inconvenient or uncomfortable.

God doesn't want us to think we can take our vows lightly. If we make a vow saying we're going to do something for God... we had better do it. But it is the nature of man to look for ways to wiggle out of keeping our word. And if we made a vow we're not comfortable with we might be tempted to use Jephthah as a way to slip out of our promises.

But I believe there's a bigger reason God made this vague.

God wants us to see that Jephthah was willing to sacrifice his only child for Him.

Can you imagine that a man would really sacrifice his only child?

The very idea is... unthinkable.

And yet I seem to recall another Scripture.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His ONLY begotten Son that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." John 3:16

God gave His ONLY Son. He sacrificed His ONLY child.

That's unthinkable.

ILLUS: Legend has it that during Marco Polo's celebrated trip to the Orient, he was taken before the great and fearsome ruler, Genghis Khan. Now what was Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant and adventurer, supposed to do before this mighty pagan conqueror? One false move could cost him his life. He decided to tell the story of Jesus as it is recorded in the gospels.

It is said that when Marco Polo related the events of Holy Week, and described Jesus' betrayal, his trial, his scourging and crucifixion, Genghis Khan became more and more agitated, more engrossed in the story, and more tense. When Marco Polo pronounced the words, "Then Jesus bowed his head and yielded up his spirit," Genghis Khan could no longer contain himself. He interrupted, bellowing, "What did the Christian's God do then? Did he send thousands of angels from heaven to smite and destroy those who killed his Son?"

Khan did not understand. The idea of God's Son dying at the hands of man infuriated him. But what DID God do when His Son was crucified?

Nothing. He had done the unthinkable. He offered His Son to die in our place.

And why did God do the unthinkable?

Because the alternative was even more unthinkable.

If Jesus didn't die on the cross for us then we all would have died in our sins... and gone to hell.

We would have been rejected by God because of our sins.

But Jesus chose to take our place.

He took our rejection on Himself... and died so we could live.