

Judges 11A

- During the second half of the 19th century, life in the American west became an iconic representation of our nation's independent, self-sufficient image
 - Life in the West revealed Americans to be rugged, determined, and a bit lawless
 - The West was our frontier where laws were made by the sheriffs and broken by the outlaws
 - And sometimes it was hard to tell the difference between them
 - The white man was moving in and the native tribes were fighting for control of the land
 - It was the wild west
 - The final 60 years or so of the period of Judges could be compared to the American wild west
 - We've seen the judges from Gideon's family trying to rule by their wealth and status
 - And we've had outlaws like Abimelech and his band of worthless fellows fighting to take control
 - And we've had Ammonite natives fighting to displace the Israelites by raiding their camp
 - It's a time of cowboys and indians but few lawmen
- Last week we heard the people of Israel were under assault from two directions
 - On the western border, the Philistines were attacking the people
 - And on the eastern border, the Ammonites were raising Jewish towns
 - The Lord sent these two peoples against Israel because the people were caught in Canaanite culture
 - And were worshipping foreign gods
 - But now the time has come for the Lord to rescue His people
 - There's only one thing missing from our Western movie

- We need a hero to save the day
- As the Israelites declared at the end of chapter 10

Judg. 10:18 The people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”

- We need a man who fits the western stereotype
- A man who can unite the people
- We need a man who has the grit to fight the natives
- And not just any hero will do, of course
 - Our Western needs a man of grit
 - A man with a mysterious past
 - A hero who is one part sheriff, one part outlaw and one part Clint Eastwood
 - We need Jephthah...

Judg. 11:1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a valiant warrior, but he was the son of a harlot. And Gilead was the father of Jephthah.

Judg. 11:2 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.”

Judg. 11:3 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.

- Jephthah was born to a prominent family and lived in the region of Gilead
 - In fact, his father's name was Gilead, indicating he was a descendant of the original Gilead family
 - Gilead is the region directly to the east of the Jordan river north of the Dead Sea
 - This territory bordered the Ammonites and the Moabites
 - The Ammonites are the people challenging Israel for their land, both in Gilead and even west of the Jordan

- Jephthah's name means "he opens" which could refer to several meanings
 - But as we'll see in this story, his name refers prophetically to his tendency to open his mouth too much
 - Specifically, he's a man who depends on his rhetorical wisdom
 - But his mouth will get him into trouble as well
- Jephthah is also a man with a dark past
 - In v.1 we're told he was born to a harlot
 - Jephthah's father wasn't the most faithful sort
 - And at some point he had relationship with a prostitute
 - And the result of that liaison was Jephthah
 - As a result of his dishonorable origins, the rest of the Gilead family turned against their half-breed brother
 - So his brothers drove Jephthah out of the home
 - They claim he will have no inheritance in their family since he was the son of a prostitute
 - The inheritance of this family would have been the land of Gilead, or so their name suggests
 - But Jephthah was cut off from that inheritance
- As a result, he leaves the family estate and flees to the Jewish frontier
 - Jephthah lands in Tob, which was the northern most town in Gilead
 - The town was an outpost on the edge of civilization, a dusty, one-horse town
 - Jephthah turns his back on his family and rides off into the sunset, a man with a score to settle
 - But he doesn't go alone, because a band of "worthless" fellows joins Jephthah on his ride out of town
 - The term worthless in English isn't quite right
 - The word in Hebrew means empty or idle or foolish

- You can get a sense of who these men are when you consider what kind of man up and leaves his family and home to follow a disgraced man
 - These are men who are loners, outcasts, without much of a future themselves
 - Men for whom the prospect of adventure on the frontier was preferable to life on the farm
 - These men were the good, the bad, and the ugly...
- So our story begins with the people declaring that the one who can defeat the Ammonites will receive Ranch Gilead as a prize
 - Meanwhile, the most prominent family in the land has banished the bastard son who will ultimately return to free the town
 - It's the making of a great Western
 - And it's also a story that builds on common biblical themes
 - The Lord raises up the outcast to rescue His people
 - But let's not overlook the larger storyline of Judges
 - These are tough times
 - The people are living with little or no understanding of the Law of God
 - And they are prone to idol worship
 - The Judges cycle is still spinning, and it's been picking up speed
 - With each turn we've seen the fabric of Jewish society deteriorate in a new way
 - The sin of Israel is always best summarized by the phrase, "doing what was right in their own eyes"
 - But the details change over the course of the 300 years
 - In the early cycles, the tribes refused to push out the Canaanites from the land
 - Later we saw Jewish men retreating from their spiritual role as leaders in society
 - Then the people were taking to the foreign gods of Canaan

- And the leaders became weaker and began to act as despots with children seeking privilege
- And then the people began to murder one another over the land
- And the worship of false gods grew to include gods from the nations around Israel
- And that downward spiral of the people will accelerate once again with the selection of Jephthah
 - In one way more than any other...the people are no longer looking to the Lord to raise up a deliverer
 - We saw at the end of chapter 10 that the Lord said He would not rescue the people merely because they cried out
 - He wanted true repentance, not merely regret
 - So they put aside their gods, and then they waited
 - But then we hear nothing more from the Lord
 - We don't see Him calling a specific man to judge Israel
 - And the people aren't seeking the Lord to find that man
 - Instead, they call a king of their own choosing

Judg. 11:4 It came about after a while that the sons of Ammon fought against Israel.

Judg. 11:5 When the sons of Ammon fought against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob;

Judg. 11:6 and they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our chief that we may fight against the sons of Ammon."

Judg. 11:7 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?"

Judg. 11:8 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."

Judg. 11:9 So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back to fight against the sons of Ammon and the Lord gives them up to me, will I become your head?"

Judg. 11:10 The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The Lord is witness between us; surely we will do as you have said."

Judg. 11:11 Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah.

- The elders of the tribe of Gad in Gilead decide they need to call for help to defeat the Ammonites terrorizing the people
 - Interestingly, they decide to call Jephthah in Tob
 - What makes them think to call this man?
 - We must assume that his time spent on the frontier earned him a reputation as a fierce warrior and a man accustomed to difficult circumstances
 - So the elders decide this is the right kind of guy to lead them into battle
 - We might imagine Jephthah sitting in a chair on the porch of his house as a band of elders ride up in a cloud of dust
 - Jephthah is leaning back in his chair, with his boots up on the porch railing
 - His cowboy hat pitched down over his weather worn face
 - His band of worthless fellows gathered at either end of the street with their hands on their holsters
 - The elders approach hats in hand, asking Jephthah to return home to defend the ranch
 - Jephthah knows he holds all the cards, so he asks, aren't you the ones that drove me away, told me you hated me?
 - But now you're in a fix
 - You need a sheriff
 - It's a valid observation
 - Jephthah wants something in return for his services
 - He wants the ranch
- Putting aside the western motif for a moment, this isn't how the Lord raises up judges, is it?
 - The people aren't looking for a rescue from the Lord
 - This is the inevitable result of putting distance between yourself and the Lord

- Remember, we said that when we feel distant from the Lord, it wasn't the Lord Who moved
- But once we create that distance, then inevitably we begin to operate without His counsel or power
- Life becomes entirely fleshly, earthly, secular and temporal
- We seek see manmade solutions for manmade goals
- They've lost the perspective that their trials were designed by the Lord to draw the people closer to Him
 - They have put aside the pagan gods
 - But they've haven't returned to the true God
 - Like the Christian who feels convicted to set aside some particular sin or clean their life up in some way
 - But then they never take the essential step of strengthening their walk with the Lord
 - It does not good to set aside the sin if we don't turn that momentum into seeking a closer relationship with and dependence upon the Lord
- That's why we don't hear of the Lord's response to the people...He has nothing to respond to
 - Instead, we only watch the people building their path of rescue
 - But they are bargaining with money that isn't there own
 - They are offering Jephthah a monarchy that God hasn't permitted the people to offer
 - So as with the selection of Saul later, the people's demands will lead to severe outcomes
 - Nevertheless, the Lord is prepared to rescue the people through Jephthah just as He was willing to rule through Saul for a time
 - Jephthah makes his request to become the leader over the people of Gilead
 - And the elders agree

- Like with Abimelech earlier, the devil you know seems better than the one you don't
- In v.10 Jephthah mentions the name of the Lord for the first time
 - He says the Lord will judge between them on this matter
 - Meaning, the Lord will be their witness to this agreement
 - Jephthah invokes the name of the Lord more than any other judge in the book of Judges
 - But in keeping with his name, he's a man with the words but not the actions
 - He speaks of God but doesn't seem to listen or walk with the Lord
 - Notice at the end of the passage in v.11 we hear that Jephthah "spoke" these words before the Lord
 - Once again, his mouth is getting all the action
 - This is his chief weakness
 - And it's something we should all be careful to avoid too
 - Giving lip service to God, invoking His name out of culture or habit
 - But it's not enough to acknowledge His existence or power
 - We need to seek Him expecting Him to answer us with specific direction
- Our study this morning wraps up with the one with the open mouth doing what he does best...talking
 - The newly crowned king of Gilead sends a long note to his chief adversary trying to negotiate his way out of a battle

Judg. 11:12 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?"

Judg. 11:13 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."

Judg. 11:14 But Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the sons of Ammon,

[Judg. 11:15](#) 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.

[Judg. 11:16](#) 'For when they came up from Egypt, and Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh,

[Judg. 11:17](#) 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.

[Judg. 11:18](#) '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.

[Judg. 11:19](#) '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."

[Judg. 11:20](#) '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.

[Judg. 11:21](#) '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.

[Judg. 11:22](#) '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.

[Judg. 11:23](#) 'Since now the Lord, the God of Israel, drove out the Amorites from before His people Israel, are you then to possess it?

[Judg. 11:24](#) 'Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the Lord our God has driven out before us, we will possess it.

[Judg. 11:25](#) 'Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive with Israel, or did he ever fight against them?

[Judg. 11:26](#) '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?

[Judg. 11:27](#) '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.'"

- Jephthah sends a letter by the camel express to the Ammonites asking why they are attacking Gilead and trying to claim his land
 - The answer Jephthah receives is that Israel took this land away from the Ammonites
 - Now this statement is false
 - And Jephthah knows it's wrong

- So he sets out to explain the error to the king by recounting the history of Israel's time in the land
- First, he first reminds the king that when the people of Israel came up north from Midian, they sought permission to cross through the lands of Edom and Moab
 - But the people were denied entry
 - Their denial was more than merely a geopolitical move
 - Edom and Moab were the spiritual enemies of Israel
 - The Lord had declared that there would always be enmity between Israel and these people
 - So there was no possibility of the nations acting charitably toward Israel
 - No more than we might expect the devil to bury the hatchet and worship the Lord
 - Since Israel couldn't enter those lands, they walked around Edom and Moab and then turned westward toward the Jordan river valley to avoid the land of Ammon
 - When the nation came to the western part of Gilead, they encountered the king of the Amorites, Sihon at Heshbon
 - They defeated that king and took the land
 - Therefore, they hadn't taken anything from the Ammonites
 - Jephthah's argument is that since the Lord cleared the land for Israel, how can the Ammonites lay claim to it now?
 - Furthermore, the nation of Israel has occupied this territory for 300 years
 - If this land belongs to the Ammonites, why has Ammon not fought to regain the land during that 300 years?
 - The answer is obvious...the Ammonites have not legitimate claim to the land
 - They have only recently decided to take what was not theirs

- Jephthah asks the king to be reasonable and consider the facts, but what do we think of Jephthah's tactic?
 - How do you suppose an enemy king is going to respond to a lecture from his adversary?
 - This isn't a strategy likely to win the day
 - More important, it's naive and reflects Jephthah's spiritual immaturity
 - He has no appreciation of what's really going on here in God's purpose
 - We remember it was the Lord Who brought this enemy against the people as discipline
 - So this is a spiritual battle, not merely a political battle
 - And when the Lord led His people into a land filled with enemies, He didn't ask Israel to negotiate with these people
 - He told Israel to vanquish them
 - Jephthah has forgotten the teaching of the Law that told Israel that the child of promise will always be persecuted by the child of the bondwoman
 - The people of God will be opposed by the lost people of the world without exception
 - And that persecution cannot be ended by seeking common ground with the enemy
 - There is no common ground
 - As Paul says, light and darkness have nothing in common
 - So this attempt to negotiate away from a battle is foolish and unhelpful
 - But it shows us that this man is working in the flesh even as he speaks of the Lord
 - The nation has become a secular association of independent states or tribes
 - And though the Lord is still raising up judges, the people acknowledge the Lord's authority in words only

- Unsurprisingly, the king cares nothing for Jephthah's logic

Judg. 11:28 But the king of the sons of Ammon disregarded the message which Jephthah sent him.

- The word in Hebrew for disregarded is a simple word that means worthless, unproductive, unwise
 - And all three descriptions are appropriate in this case
 - Jephthah's attempt to find common ground with God's enemies was worthless, unproductive and unwise
- It was worthless because it won't work
 - Don't think we can negotiate to peace with a world that is spiritually incapable of approving of God or His people
 - We can't be a proper ambassador for Christ and expect to be well-received by a world that hates God and His Son
 - You can negotiate around that difference
 - So any attempt to do so is worthless
- Secondly, it's unproductive
 - We aren't producing fruit when we seek compromise
 - Instead we should seek to impress the truth of Christ on His enemies
 - By doing so, we may win their hearts and move them to our side where we can find agreement
 - Wasting time in trying to make friends with the world is not our mission
- Finally, it's unwise
 - When we seek agreement with those who do not and cannot share our values, we take a huge risk
 - We risk making compromises to our own stand in Christ in order to create "common" ground

- The common ground must come from our concessions because it's spiritually impossible for the unbeliever to lay claim to any part of our beliefs
- Like the apostles said to the unbelieving magician Simon in Acts 8, the unbeliever has no part or portion in matters of faith
- So Jephthah has invited his enemy to toast peace around the campfire
 - But the enemy sent no reply
 - There are only smoke signals on the horizon
 - Jephthah knew that war was inevitable
 - And that's the way the Lord wants this encounter to proceed
 - He's determined to relieve the people of Israel from their oppression of the Ammorites and later the Philistines
 - Jephthah is called by God to eliminate one enemy
 - Samson will eliminate the other
 - It's high noon at the OK Corral...