

Power and Victory
Judges 11:1-11, 29-36; 12:1-7

So, why did the Palm Sunday crowd sing Jesus' praise, calling Him the Son of David and insisting that He was coming in the name of the Lord? After all, as the events of Good Friday made perfectly clear, they had no personal devotion to Jesus. No, they were only interested in what they thought He could give them: healing from their sicknesses and freedom from Roman tyranny. They hailed him as their king, but for purely selfish reasons.

In the same way, the people of Gilead had already made their opinion of Jephthah clear: because his mother was a prostitute, there was no place for him in polite society. But if he could use his military skills to help them overcome their Ammonite enemies, well, they were willing to give him the authority he would need to do the job.

And can we be honest? Don't we put our trust in worldly leaders for similar reasons? We crave safety and security, peace and prosperity. And so we vote for the politicians who promise us those things, even if their personal lives are less than admirable, and even if they can't really explain exactly how they are going to accomplish everything in their party's platform. All too often, we hold our noses and cast our votes, not out of disinterested patriotism, but just so that we can get what we want.

And sometimes our leaders do deliver on their promises. Jephthah certainly did. Yes, when he led his army into battle with the Ammonites, they achieved a tremendous victory. 11:33 tells us that they struck the Ammonites with a great slaughter, conquering twenty of their cities. Yes, it looked like the gamble the elders of Gilead took on Jephthah had paid off.

And the same thing is often true for us. Sometimes politicians do keep their promises, giving us the lower taxes or the more lavish benefits that we crave. In fact, many of the other things in which we are tempted to place our faith can provide some pleasure or satisfaction, at least in the short term: the extramarital affair is exciting and fun, the drink or drugs provide escape from loneliness or despair, the money allows us to take trips or buy things that we have always desired.

Yes, Jephthah brought the people of Gilead the victory that they craved – but at a high cost. For it turns out that he was a deeply flawed man. Instead of placing complete confidence in God, he thought he had to bargain with God in the same way that so many contemporary worshippers of false gods did. You see, in those days, people thought that if you wanted more crops, you'd give some of them to your god so that he would be obligated to give you more. If you wanted your livestock to be more fertile, you'd sacrifice a sheep or a goat. And if you wanted more children, well, you'd do the same thing.

Just so, Jephthah thought that, in order to get the military victory that he and his people so desperately wanted, he would have to give up something valuable to him. And so he promised to sacrifice whatever, or whoever, first came out of his house to meet him on his successful return from battle.

But it wasn't his faithful dog or one of his servants that rushed to greet him. It was his daughter, his only child. Jephthah's attempt to manipulate God, to force God's hand ended up having tragic results for his family, in the same way that we compromise our marriages, our careers and our health when we turn away from Christ and look to drink or drugs or pornography or infidelity to solve our problems.

And yes, the people of Israel got the victory they wanted when they all followed Jephthah into battle. But their loyalty to him also ended up tearing the whole country apart. For once he defeated the Ammonites in battle, Jephthah lost all patience with any of his own countrymen who dared to question his absolute authority. So, when the men of Ephraim who lived on the west side of the Jordan River complained about not being able to share in the spoils of war, Jephthah turned his army against their own kinsmen. And during the ensuing civil war, 42,000 Israelite soldiers died. Yes, the men of Gilead had looked to Jephthah to solve their problems, but he and they got a lot more than they bargained for.

In the same way, the Palm Sunday crowd were initially convinced that Jesus was going to save them from poverty and oppression by doing miracles for them. But when He disappointed them on Good Friday, when He allowed the Romans to arrest Him, His people rejected Him. They turned their trust away from their One True King and looked for the kinds of military saviors they wanted: men like Barabbas, men like Jephthah. And yes, they eventually got the revolution they wanted – but just forty years after they crucified Jesus, they ended up being destroyed by the very Romans they hated so much.

But all of this was so unnecessary. After all, chapter 11 verse 29 makes clear that it was the Spirit of the Lord that gave Jephthah the ability to gather such a mighty army. And verse 32 explains that it was the Lord Who gave the Ammonites into Jephthah's hand. You see, Jephthah didn't need to make a rash vow that destroyed his family, and he certainly didn't need to lead his people in a civil war against their own kinsmen. No, God had heard the prayers of His people and He was determined to save them: Jephthah was only the instrument God chose to use to accomplish His good and perfect will.

Just so, Jesus really was the Son of David, the Messiah the Lord had promised to His people so many years before. Jesus really did come into Jerusalem in the name of the Lord, to save His people from enemies that are much worse than even the most savage of human tyrants: from sin and death. And Jesus came to give us that victory at the price of His own body and blood, dying to pay the penalty that all our sins deserve, and rising again so that we might have new life, victorious life, abundant life today.

And so we don't need to bargain with God. We don't need to try to earn our salvation through our good works. By the blood of His cross, Jesus has done everything that is necessary to restore us to a right relationship with God. He has taken all our sin upon Himself and clothed us in His righteousness. That's the amazing truth we celebrate whenever we come to this table: Jesus has washed all who trust in Him clean of our sin.

But Jesus also makes it unnecessary for us to look to drink or drugs, to pornography or infidelity, to military strongmen or powerful politicians to solve all our problems. No, Jesus hasn't promised to correct all the desperate circumstances of our lives. No matter what the health-and-wealth preachers say, Jesus doesn't promise to make any of us powerful or wealthy in this world. No, all the material blessings He promises us are found on this table – a bite of bread and a sip of juice, nothing that will really assuage our physical hunger or thirst.

But in another way, Jesus offers us the same kind of victory that Jephthah achieved, and the same kind of victory the Palm Sunday crowd craved – and for the same reason. For the reason Jephthah had such a great success over the Lord's enemies was not because he tried to bargain with God, but because He was filled with the Spirit of the Lord. And all who come to Christ in faith, all who submit

ourselves completely to His will are filled with that same Spirit, the Spirit Who gives us victory over the power of sin in this life.

So, will we turn away from all the other things we think will satisfy our desires? Will we turn to Christ alone, trusting Him as our Savior and bowing before Him as our King? And will we allow Him to give us the power we need to achieve the victory He wants us to have – in His way and in His time?