



Did Jephthah sacrifice his own daughter? If so, how could he still be granted access to the Kingdom of God?

The account referred to can be found in Judges 11:30-31, 34-40. We read:

"And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.'... When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah [after having defeated the Ammonites], there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it.' So she said to him, 'My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth... let me alone for two months, that I... bewail my virginity...' And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite."

Before addressing whether Jephthah actually sacrificed his own daughter, let us point out that Jephthah will be resurrected, as an immortal spirit being, at the time of Christ's return, to enter the Kingdom of God, as Hebrews 11:32, 39-40 clearly implies. This fact alone does not answer the question, however, whether or not Jephthah

committed the abominable act of killing his own daughter -- we understand that EVERY sin can and will be forgiven by God upon true repentance.

Commentaries are divided as to the question whether Jephthah sacrificed his daughter. The Ryrie Study Bible explains:

"Some understand that Jephthah's daughter was only dedicated to the service of God in a life of celibacy and not actually slain. Others hold that she was killed according to Canaanite practices which Jephthah had embraced."

Rienecker, *Lexicon of the Bible*, points out:

"The question of Jephthah's vow is not clearly resolved. He had vowed to offer to the LORD as burnt offering what (or possibly, according to the Hebrew, who) would meet him upon his victorious return (Judges 11: 30, 31). That was his only daughter. After granting her two months to bemoan her virginity, he did what he had vowed (verse 39). This seems to indicate, in combination with his grief (verse 35), that the burnt offering was actually completed. On the other hand, the law of the Israelites did not allow human sacrifices, but it permitted to redeem a person who had been dedicated to the LORD (Leviticus 27:1-8). Some have concluded that Jephthah, who is mentioned with approval in 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32, was able to circumvent the literal fulfillment of his vow. Some have speculated that a celibate, withdrawn life (Judges 11:39) could also show complete dedication to the LORD, as a burnt offering would have shown. The right conclusion is difficult, as the Holy Scriptures only report, without expressly judging either the vow itself or its fulfillment."

The Nelson Study Bible seems to prefer the understanding that Jephthah did not actually kill his daughter. The following is stated in support of that view:

"Some have interpreted Jephthah's vow 'whatever comes out of the doors' as a clear intention to offer a human sacrifice. His surprise then is not that he had to sacrifice a human being, but that the

unfortunate person was his daughter. The phrase 'to meet me' seems to refer more appropriately to a human than to an animal... Undoubtedly, Jephthah knew that human sacrifice was strictly forbidden in Israel (Lev. 18:21; 20:2; Deut. 12:31; 18:10; Jer. 19:5; Ezek. 20:30, 31; 23:37, 39), but his foolishness and lack of faith impelled him to make a reckless vow in order to try to manipulate God (11:39).

"... But did Jephthah have to follow through on his vow? Ordinarily the answer would be yes. Vows were made only to God, and they were solemn pledges that had to be kept. People were not forced to take them, but if they did, they had to be honored (Deut. 23:21-23; Ps. 15:4; Eccl. 5:4, 5). But Jephthah had vowed something sinful in itself if his intent was to make a human sacrifice in the literal sense.

"... The text does not explicitly say that he killed his daughter, only that 'he carried out his vow.' When the verse goes on to say that 'she knew no man,' some take this to mean that she was 'sacrificed' by being dedicated to a life of perpetual virginity. Several arguments can be made for this interpretation. First, human sacrifice was contrary to the Law of Moses... Second, the great respect that Jephthah had for God surely would have prevented him from making such a perverse offering. Third, the fact that Jephthah permitted his daughter to bewail her virginity... for two months fits an explanation of perpetual virginity better than human sacrifice. Fourth, the indication that his daughter 'knew no man' also seems to be a detail that would support the idea of celibacy. Fifth, the Bible provides evidence that such devoted service for women did exist at the central sanctuary (Ex. 38:8; I Sam. 2:22; Luke 2:36, 37). In ancient Israelite society, the father had the power to prohibit a daughter to marry. Sixth, the conjunction in Jephthah's pivotal statement in v. 31, that whatever or whoever came out of the door 'shall be the LORD's, AND I will offer it up as a burnt offering' could be translated OR. Thus, if a person came out first, he would dedicate that person to the LORD, OR if an animal came out first, he would offer the animal as a burnt offering."

However, several problems exist with that

interpretation. To begin with, it is possible that Jephthah had strictly an animal in mind, when he made his vow, as Jephthah's words (in Judges 11:31) can be translated from the Hebrew, as follows: "Whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me..., I will offer IT up for a burnt offering" (compare Authorized Version). It was common at that time for houses to have enclosed courtyards where animals were kept.

In any event, whatever Jephthah's original intent, the earliest Christian and Jewish commentators all seem to have accepted the story at face value; that is, that Jephthah killed his daughter. It appears that the medieval Jewish commentator David Kimchi was the first to suggest that rather than having sacrificed his daughter, Jephthah merely kept her a perpetual virgin. The New Bible Commentary: Revised explains:

"It has sometimes been inferred... that Jephthah commuted his daughter's fate from burnt-offering to perpetual virginity, but this is hardly warranted by the narrative. The plain and restrained statement that he 'did with her according to his vow' (v. 39) is best taken as implying her actual sacrifice. Although human sacrifice was strictly forbidden to Israelites, we need not be surprised at a man of Jephthah's half-Canaanite antecedents following Canaanite usage in this matter. The author of Judges does not approve of his action; he may well have regarded it as a symptom of the state of affairs at a time when 'every man did what was right in his own eyes' (cf. 17:6; 21:25). The closest biblical parallel is Mesha's sacrifice of his eldest son (2 Ki 3:27)."

The commentary of Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, Commentary on the Whole Bible, agrees with this conclusion. So do Matthew Henry's Commentary; The Broadman's Bible Commentary; Unger's Bible Handbook; Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible; and, apparently, Halley's Bible Handbook.

It has also been the long-held understanding of the Church of God that Jephthah did in fact sacrifice his only daughter. It is stated in "The Bible Story": "Though some commentators have thought Jephthah kept his daughter a perpetual virgin, the

Jews and most commentators have understood this tragic story as explained in the Authorized Version of the Bible. Jephthah learned a mighty lesson. He discovered, through this tragedy, the real lesson of faith -- that one does not have to vow to God in order to have Him perform what He has promised. What God expects is that we learn to trust Him in everything. When Jephthah finally learned that lesson, he became an outstanding example of faith. Paul even referred to him in Hebrews 11:32 as one of the outstanding examples of faith in the Old Testament."

An older letter from the Letter Answering Department of the Worldwide Church of God added: "Jephthah made a very rash and foolish vow. He further compounded his error by keeping his vow (Judg. 11:39). That, no doubt, was greatly displeasing to God. Nevertheless, Jephthah is mentioned among the faithful listed in Hebrew 11 (see verse 32). This leads us to conclude that -- like other servants of God -- he ultimately realized the error of his own ways, repented, and received God's forgiveness."

In conclusion, it appears that Jephthah, following faulty human reasoning, sacrificed his own daughter. Upon his repentance, God forgave him, and Jephthah will be resurrected to immortal life, when Jesus Christ returns. This fact should give us great comfort and hope. Whatever sins we might have committed in our lives, God will forgive, when we genuinely and sincerely repent of them.