

# Coach House Church BEACONS

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## HISTORY

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Think back to when you were at school. Maybe that's a long time ago or maybe fairly recently. Which lessons did you like and which lessons did you really want to get out of? I know that I didn't especially like the history class. There was a lot of detail to learn, and it involved writing long and boring essays. I dropped the subject as soon as I could but as I grew older and started visiting historical sites it became apparent that history wasn't quite so boring after all. In fact I have come to realise that what you know about the past often dictates how you respond to situations today. Your opinion on things happening around the world will ultimately depend on how much you know about the history behind the events.

In the New Testament book called Hebrews the author writes about people in Israel's past who showed great faith. He writes in depth about Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Moses and Jacob, and then at the end of the section mentions a few others who showed great faith. Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel. OK so I thought I knew my bible quite well, I know who David is, he's the one with Goliath, I know who Samson is, he's the one with the dodgy haircut, but Jephthah? Who on earth is Jephthah? I guess if he is listed with all these other famous people then he must be important. Maybe we need to find out a little more about Jephthah.

Jephthah's story appears in the book of Judges. It's a good one, he gets 3 whole chapters. Despite this he isn't well known and I think this probably stems from the fact that his story is a bit complicated and he makes a bad mistake.

In order to fully appreciate the story we need to consider it in the context of its time. During the period covered by the book of Judges there is this repeating

theme. It goes like this: The people have a nice life, they turn away from God, God lets their enemies oppress them, they cry out to God, God rescues them, everyone is happy and the cycle starts again. At the start of this story the enemy was a people group called the Ammonites and they were camped in Gilead, in other words they had already invaded Israel. Gilead was on the east side of the river Jordan, in the territory that had been allocated to the tribe of Gad. Let's read the introduction to Jephthah from chapter 11 of Judges to find out a bit about who he was. "Now Jephthah of Gilead was a great warrior. He was the son of Gilead, but his mother was a prostitute. Gilead's wife also had several sons and when these half brothers grew up they chased Jephthah off the land....So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Soon he had a band of worthless rebels following him"

Later, when the Ammonites invaded, the people of Gilead decided to bring Jephthah back to lead them against this enemy. Just think about this for a moment, in the good times they didn't want Jephthah around, because he was different, but in bad times they suddenly realised they had need of his skills. Are there people that we don't have much time for, people who we marginalise, just think for a moment - one day we might need them.

So let's consider the main point of this story. As I said it covers 3 chapters so I will just summarise it as best I can.

Jephthah had been hired as a warrior and was expected to go and fight, but as he went out to meet the king of Ammon, he decided to try diplomacy first. Better to settle a matter by talking rather than brute force. We should note that this approach was fully in accordance with the law of Moses as stated in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 20. The first sign of the depth of Jephthah's knowledge. So Jephthah sent a messenger ahead to find out what the problem was.

The king of Ammon, in short, replied, accusing the Israelites of stealing their territory when they left Egypt. Now it is at this point that Jephthah gives the king of Ammon a history lesson. Jephthah points out that the land in question had actually belonged to the Amorites at that time and not the Ammonites. I know, it's a bit confusing that they sound so similar. It is important to know that at that time the Amorites had gone to the extent of challenging the Israelites in battle. The reason, basically it was just because they didn't want the Israelites crossing their land on their way to the promised land. Jephthah also pointed out to the king of Ammon that it was God himself who had given Israel the victory, and therefore it was God

himself who had given them that land. Ammon had never had any part in that land and hence had no rightful claim over it now. You see Jephthah knew he was in the right because he knew both the history and the Law. The king of Ammon could not confuse Jephthah by presenting a perverted version of history because Jephthah had taken the time and effort to learn the truth. Jephthah's response was based on the trust that he had in God and God's word and it was this faith for which he was commended by the writer to the Hebrews. Obviously the king of Ammon did not agree with Jephthah and so a battle ensued. The bible records the result - "Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites and the Lord gave him victory. He crushed the Ammonites"

But this was not the end of the matter as another tribe of Israel decided to get involved. The Ephraimites quickly arrived on the scene, but instead of congratulating Jephthah and helping to secure the borders they decide to threaten Jephthah for not calling them out sooner. In fact they threatened to burn down his house with him in it. Not a very nice way to treat someone who has just eliminated one of their common enemies. But once again Jephthah shows his knowledge of history. Jephthah knew that the Ephraimites had pulled a similar stunt some years before after Gideon had defeated the Midianites.

On that occasion Gideon used diplomacy to defuse the situation but Jephthah was not so forgiving. He defeated the Ephraimites and then went on to kill any Ephraimite that had got away and were caught trying to make their way home.

Jephthah was just a man sent by God, like all the other judges, to rescue the people of Israel. The heroes of the Old Testament are not just there as historical characters but to point towards someone who would come later. Someone who would not just come to save the people of Israel but to bring salvation to all people. That person was Jesus Christ and He had all the good bits from the Old Testament heroes and none of the bad bits. The judges were all flawed in some way but each showed some small part of Jesus's characteristics. And we can see that throughout his ministry Jesus also made full use of his knowledge of history and the law of Moses.

This story is essentially about whether Israel had occupied a certain territory lawfully or not, and about whether any other peoples had any right to be there.

Now does this scenario sound familiar today?

Modern day Israel faces the same problem that Jephthah had. Its enemies want to take territory away from Israel and often try promote this by advancing a flawed version of history. When we see this flawed version of history repeated on mainstream news or on other internet outlets we can find it all too easy to fall for

the arguments they are making. We can find ourselves believing that they are right and that Israel are somehow in the wrong. To avoid falling into this trap we need to learn the history, such that we understand why the situation in Israel exists as it does today, then we won't be misled by popular opinion. We need to remember that the Israel of today occupies the same land that God gave to Israel after defeating the Amorites. Some of the land Israel occupies today was gained in exactly the same way as it was then. In 1967 and 1973 it was Israel's enemies that started a war. These conflicts followed exactly the same pattern as the conflict with the Amorites, with, unsurprisingly, exactly the same result. Land was conceded to Israel, not because Israel deliberately went out to take it, but because the enemies were not content to let Israel live in peace.

So now we know who Jephthah was, and yes, he fully deserves his place on that list of faithful heroes of old.

Jephthah was considered faithful because he trusted God and took time to understand history. My prayer for you today is that you will take time to learn the history and also that you will be considered faithful. Amen.



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