

JEPHTHAH

Judges 11

The lesson should be prefaced by a reminder of Joshua's conquest of the whole land and its division among the tribes. Then should follow a statement of the conditions which prevailed during the period of the Judges, emphasizing the reason why the enemies in the land gained in strength. In the lesson for the day, Jephthah's rash vow may be compared with Joshua's hasty acceptance of the Gibeonites. Teachers of all classes should study the Adult notes as a preparation for answering questions which may be asked concerning Jephthah's daughter.

Doctrinal Points

We cannot safely bargain with the Lord.

The spiritual sense of the Word is sometimes the very opposite of the apparent meaning in the letter.

True faith involves willingness to give up anything of our own when it is required of us by the Lord.

Charity always involves obedience.

Notes for Parents

The book of Judges contains many interesting stories. Up to this time the children of Israel have had a series of outstanding leaders—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Joshua—each one recognized by all the people as their divinely appointed head. But after Joshua's death, when they had come into possession of their long-desired homes in the Holy Land, each family settled down to build and plant for itself, and they became overconfident. Of this period it is said: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." (21:25) We may hear people today say, "If I do what I think is right, that is all that can be expected of me." This sounds good, but it overlooks the fact

that people often think things are right which are actually wrong, and that we all need constant study of the Lord's truth to keep us in the right way.

The Israelites forgot the warning Moses had given them that they must be especially careful when they were prosperous not to forget the Lord. We all need the same warning. When we think we can rely on ourselves for guidance, the evils that are in us rise up and get the upper hand as the enemies of Israel did. We can be saved only by the Lord's help. He is always ready to show us the right way and to help us overcome our temptations if we ask Him. But we must be willing, as Jephthah was, to go all the way and really give up our own desires when we find that it is required of us.



Primary

The lesson drawn from the general character of the period of the Judges is an easy one to present, Jephthah's vow and its result can be discussed with the class. The faithfulness of Jephthah and his daughter to a promise made to the Lord should be stressed.

The Lord gave Joshua victory over all the enemies in the Holy Land, and then the whole country was marked out into sections. The tribes—all but the tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh—cast lots to see which part of the land they should have. Those two and a half tribes had already been given land on the other side of the Jordan River.

After that each tribe took possession of its land and settled down in comfort. And they did just what Moses had told them to be sure not to do: they forgot all about the Lord. They even began to worship the gods of their enemies. So of course their enemies became strong again. And every time their enemies attacked them, they expected the Lord to help them. The Lord did help them over and over again. Each time He raised up some strong leader and gave him the victory. These leaders were called Judges.

Wouldn't you think the Israelites would have learned to be sensible and obey the Lord? Are you ever naughty? Doesn't being

naughty always get you into trouble? And then you expect your mother to forgive you, don't you? And she does. And then are you always good after that? You see, we are very much like the children of Israel, aren't we?

One time the enemy was making trouble on the other side of the Jordan. This enemy was the Ammonites. When the Israelites turned to the Lord for help, He raised up a man named Jephthah, who lived on that other side of the Jordan to be their leader.

What rash vow did Jephthah make?

What did he have to give up as a result?

When Jephthah made his vow, he did not think that he was going to have to give up his only daughter, whom he loved. But he kept his promise, and his daughter helped him keep it. We should keep our promises, and we should never try to make anyone else break a promise either.



Junior

For this class the Bible references are important, as they impress upon the children the historical sequence of the Word. Map work is important this time also, and another connection can be made through the home of Jephthah and the settlement of the two and a half tribes in that region. The moral lessons to be stressed are summed up at the end of the Junior notes.

Look up Deuteronomy 6:10-15 and read the warning the Lord had given Israel which they should have then remembered. But Israel was very prone to forget the Lord except when they were in trouble. Aren't we likely to do the same thing? When everything is going well with us, we become self-satisfied and self-confident. Then the Lord has to let trouble come to us to show us how weak we really are and how much we need Him.

After Joshua and all the people who had fought to conquer the land had died, the Israelites let themselves mingle with the people they thought they had overcome and even intermarried with them, which they had been strictly commanded not to do. Presently they were worshipping the gods of the land instead of their own

God, who had done so much for them. When we have overcome a bad habit, we have to keep it under control or we may find that we have slipped back into it.

Whenever their enemies began to attack and oppress them, the Israelites remembered the Lord and cried to Him for help, and each time He raised up someone to deliver them. These leaders were called Judges. They did not rule the whole country or lead all the people, but they overcame a particular enemy in a particular place. The book of Judges tells about them. You may remember the stories of Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Eli, and Samuel.

What was the name of the Judge in our chapter for today?

Where did he live?

What enemy was attacking Israel?

Look at a map to see where the Ammonites lived and where Gilead is.

What rash vow did Jephthah make?

What did he find he had to sacrifice?

Did his daughter try to make him break his vow?

What favor did she ask?

To what custom did this lead?

We must remember that human sacrifices were very common among the idolatrous people of those days. It was apparently not against Jephthah's conscience to sacrifice his daughter, just as it was not against Abraham's conscience to sacrifice Isaac. What seems a crime to us did not seem a crime to them. This does not mean that it was right, but that they did not know it was wrong. We all do many wrong things ignorantly from good motives, and the Lord forgives us. Jephthah and his daughter both believed that they were doing right, and the Lord could have said to Jephthah what He said to Abraham in Genesis 22:16-17.

We may learn three lessons from this story. One is that we should think carefully before we make a promise. The second is that we should do our best to keep our promises and should also help other people to keep theirs. And the third is that when we promise to obey the Lord we must be prepared to be asked to give up some things which may seem very dear to us.



Intermediate

Probably the most interesting lesson for the Intermediates is the correspondence of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, but the class should also have a clear idea of the meaning of the period of the Judges.

The Judges were men raised up one after another by the Lord to lead the people against their enemies after the original conquest of the Holy Land was over.

You remember that the conquest of the Holy Land pictures in our lives the period of regeneration, the time when we have learned to enjoy living an orderly outward life and are beginning our real battle against the inherited evils in our hearts. Under Joshua the Israelites conquered the land and brought their enemies under control. Then the land was divided by lot among the tribes and each tribe was supposed to complete the conquest within its own territory. But only in the southernmost part of the land—especially in the region around Hebron, which had been given to Caleb and his descendants—did the people fulfill this duty. Most of the tribes were too anxious to settle down, build their homes, plant their fields, and begin to enjoy their new land.

This is very much what we all do. When we think we have our bad tendencies pretty well under control, we become overconfident of our own goodness and fall into the habit of excusing our little weaknesses. The Israelites began to mingle with the people of the land and even to intermarry with them, which they had been strictly charged not to do. Joshua had died and so had “all the elders who outlived Joshua.” So we sometimes forget all our former eagerness to overcome our evils. Finally the Israelites actually began to worship the gods of the land. We find it more and more easy to think and act as the people around us in the world do.

Then the enemies began to gain strength and to attack, and in places they gained the upper hand over the Israelites and oppressed them. So our evils, which we imagined we had overcome, crop up again, and suddenly we find that we are in the grip of some old temptation. “Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distresses,” as we read in Psalm 107.

When they were in trouble, they always remembered the Lord, just as we do. The Judge whom the Lord each time raised up pictures some particular truth from the Word called up out of our memory to lead us in the fight against the particular temptation which is upon us.

Most of the enemies were within the land itself, but after a while even one of the enemies on the other side of the Jordan gained strength and tried to reconquer that country. The tribes of Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh had been given their inheritance on the east side of the Jordan. This was a country which had been taken from the Amorites before the crossing of the Jordan. It included the rich mountainous pasture land of Gilead. The country east of the Jordan represents our outward conduct, and the enemies there are the temptations which come to us from our worldly environment. After we reach the Holy Land of regenerate living, we sometimes feel that we have put behind us all need of watching our external conduct to keep it in order, and this is never true. As long as we live we shall be tempted to say and do things which are not right. The attack by the Ammonites pictures such a temptation.

Swedenborg tells us that the Ammonites represent the “falsification of truth.” This means the temptation, once we have acknowledged some truth of the Word, to twist this truth to suit our convenience, as some people, for example, acknowledge the truth that we should worship the Lord on the sabbath day, and then say, “I can worship the Lord better on the golf links than in church.” This is an external type of temptation, and the Lord brings to our mind to meet it some simple statement from the letter of the Word, such as the statement about the Lord in Luke 4:16: “. . . as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day.” Such a truth is pictured by Jephthah the Gileadite, for Gilead represents good in the external life.

Then we have the story of Jephthah’s rash vow. It reminds us of Jacob’s promise to serve the Lord if the Lord would prosper him. We should not pray to the Lord in the spirit of bargaining. We should recognize that whatever the Lord permits to happen to

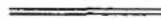
us is permitted in love and with a view to our good. So what happened to Jephthah was permitted in order to teach us what genuine service of the Lord requires: the readiness to give up our own desires.

This is one of the cases in which the spiritual sense of the Word is almost the opposite of the literal sense. In the letter we have what is to us a horrible instance of human sacrifice apparently required of Jephthah by the Lord. We must remember, of course, that with the people about Jephthah human sacrifices were not at all uncommon, and Jephthah had no feeling that they were wrong. Both he and his daughter undoubtedly thought of human sacrifices as the sign of supreme devotion to God, just as Abraham did when he thought he was required to sacrifice Isaac. And the Lord permitted the sacrifice, as He permits us to do many wrong things which we believe to be right. The Lord “looketh upon the heart.”

But in the internal sense we have a different picture. Daughters represent affections, and Jephthah’s only daughter pictures the only affection he had up to that time—the affection for success because of the feeling of satisfaction it gave him. This he was required to give up, and we remember that burnt offerings made to the Lord represent acknowledgment that all the good qualities we seem to have are not really ours but the Lord’s. The two months allowed for Jephthah’s daughter to go “up and down upon the mountains” picture the time it takes for the thought of this sacrifice of our self-satisfaction to work itself out in our minds so that we are completely ready to make it. And the custom to which it gave rise among the daughters of Israel pictures the effect in our lives ever afterward of having once made this offering to the Lord. So the story of Jephthah really teaches us a beautiful lesson which we all need.

Basic Correspondences

- a Judge = some particular truth from the Word
- Gilead = good on the external plane of life



Senior

The lessons of particular importance for the Seniors in this story are the danger of overconfidence and the need of recognizing that without the Lord we can do nothing. The Seniors are approaching the time when they will go out into the world “on their own,” and should be impressed with the necessity of being always watchful against the weakening of the good principles they have adopted as *theirs*.

Our lesson for today is the strange and to us forbidding story of Jephthah and his daughter. The book of Judges presents a sort of interlude between the period of the development of the Jewish nation and the period of its history as the recognized possessor of the Holy Land. It is a stage through which all of us pass—not a very creditable stage, but one which teaches us a great deal about ourselves and about our need of the Lord.

In our lives the conquest of the Holy Land represents the beginning of regeneration, that state in which with the Lord’s help we are eagerly trying to find and overcome weaknesses and evils which are within us by heredity. Under Joshua the Israelites did conquer the land. Then it was divided by lot among the tribes, and each tribe was told to enter upon its inheritance and to complete the conquest of the enemies within its own borders. This pictures a time when we feel that we have really won the victory over our weaknesses and can begin to enjoy the fruits of this victory. We know that we are not perfect, that there will be further temptations, but we feel confident of our ability to meet them. And in this confidence is our danger.

In the first chapter of Judges we learn that in the south the tribes of Judah and Simeon actually did complete their conquest. This means that at heart we wish to be wholly good. But the chapter goes on to say that none of the other tribes won a full victory. Each left certain enemies unconquered. Then we read that as long as Joshua lived and the elders who outlived Joshua, the people continued to serve the Lord; but after that they forgot the Lord and began to mingle with the people of the land and to intermarry with them and finally to worship their gods. This is a picture of

how our first enthusiasm for the truly spiritual life is liable to cool as we go about our everyday occupations. We begin to do as others do, then to think as they think, and finally to seek our own advantage instead of serving the Lord and the neighbor as we started out to do.

Then we find suddenly that the evils within us which we thought we had overcome are not only still there, but have gained strength and are threatening to control us again. One after another the enemies in the different parts of the Holy Land rose up and harassed the Israelites. Each time, when they were hard pressed, the Israelites turned to the Lord for help, and each time He raised up a Judge in the particular part of the land where the trouble was, to lead the men of that land against the enemy. These Judges represent particular truths from the Word which the Lord, when we ask Him for help, brings up out of our memory to show us how to fight particular temptations.

We think of the Holy Land as the strip of country which lies between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. But the Jordan valley on the east side of the river was also a part of the Holy Land in its wider sense; it was the rich country which Lot had chosen to live in when he separated from Abram. It represents the natural plane of our lives with all its good and pleasant things, and with its many temptations also. When the Israelites were nearing the Holy Land under Moses, they bypassed the lands of Edom and of Moab and Ammon, but took this rich valley from the Amorites by conquering their king Sihon and also Og, the giant king of Bashan. At that time the tribes of Reuben and Gad asked if they might have their inheritance in that valley instead of in the land west of Jordan, and their request was granted on condition that their fighting men would first go over with the others and help conquer the Holy Land proper.

Half of the tribe of Manasseh was also settled in this “cross-Jordan” country. The richest part of this land was the part called *Gilead*, which, Swedenborg tells us, represents “the first good, which is that of the senses of the body.” There are many people

who want to be good men and women, obeying the Lord and being kind to the neighbor, who nevertheless do not care for any higher kind of enjoyment than the enjoyment of the good things of the world. They are the people who after death are completely happy in the “natural” heavens, knowing that there are higher heavens above them, but not wishing to go higher themselves.

The scene of the story of Jephthah is laid in this land of Gilead. Jephthah was a Gileadite. The Judge just before him, Jair, was also a Gileadite. We are told very little about Jair and nothing about any wars or conquests in the twenty-two years of his judgeship, but as he and Jephthah were the only two Judges who did not come from the Holy Land proper, we may assume that trouble was brewing in Gilead before Jephthah’s call and that Jair’s judgeship served as a preparation for meeting it when it broke out.

After our regeneration begins, most of our enemies are our hereditary evils, the tribes in the Holy Land proper. But we never reach the point when we do not still need to be on our guard also against a resurgence of our external temptations. The enemies in our story today are the Ammonites. Ammon was one of the two sons of Lot, and represents those who, because they are in merely natural good, are easily led astray and falsify the truth. It is not hard to see what the uprising of the Ammonites is in us. When we fall into the habit of thinking of good in terms of merely earthly comfort and happiness, we interpret everything in the Word in its application to such things. Swedenborg points out that the person who is in merely natural good gives his benefactions to the good and to the evil alike, not stopping to think that when he gives to the evil, he is encouraging evil. He says in one place, “To do good to the evil is to do evil to the good.” (AC 3820²)

Jephthah as Judge stands for some simple truth from the letter of the Word raised up in our minds to contradict this false interpretation of truth—in our example it might be such a phrase as that in Luke 6:34: “for sinners also lend to sinners.” Like Jacob, Jephthah has an idea that he can bargain with the Lord, as his rash vow shows. He thinks of doing good in terms of self-merit and rewards.

This is, as we have seen before, where we often begin, but when we have once crossed the Jordan, we should have put this idea behind us. Through the story of Jephthah we are taught that what we must give up is our natural affection for thinking ourselves good. This affection is Jephthah's daughter. The picture of this only daughter coming out of his house with timbrels and dances to meet him when he returns victorious reminds us immediately of the self-congratulation with which we hail our own spiritual as well as natural victories. But the regenerating man, when he feels this emotion, immediately recognizes it as the thing he must give up. We remember that the burnt sacrifice was the symbol of the acknowledgment that whatever goodness we have is not our own, but the Lord's working in and through us. So we must overcome our natural reluctance—pictured by the two months' mourning on the mountains—and make the sacrifice.

Adult

Probably the best line of discussion is that of the constant pressure of the world about us and the ease with which we sometimes are led astray. The mistakes into which we may be led by thinking of *good* in terms of merely external benefactions is an important point also. The whole problem of Jephthah's daughter is interesting both in the letter and in the internal sense. The teacher will find various approaches to it in the notes for the other classes.

The period of the Judges is that time in our lives when we have set our outward conduct in order and made enough headway against our deeper temptations so that we feel that we are well established in spiritual living. Our tendency then is to relax our vigilance, to yield a little here and there to the thought and practice of the world about us. We do not realize how easy it is to slip back gradually into evils once we have begun to compromise. After the Israelites had conquered and divided the land and settled down every man under his own vine and fig tree, they stopped fighting the enemies around them and began to mingle with them instead. So they grew weaker and their enemies grew stronger. One after another they rose up and tried to throw off the yoke which

Israel under Joshua had imposed upon them. The Judges whom the Lord raised up to meet these enemies were local leaders—Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and others. They represent particular truths from the Word which the Lord calls up from our memories when we are tempted, realize our own weakness, and turn to Him for help.

Most of the enemies and most of the Judges were in the Holy Land proper, but in our lesson for today the enemy comes from the cross-Jordan country. The Judge is from that country also, and the fighting is done there. This would indicate that the temptation pictured is an external one, and one which may be met and overcome by means of the simple truths of the letter of the Word. As we learn in Jephthah's message to the king of the children of Ammon, the Israelites took this land from the Amorites (see also Numbers 21:21-24), who represent evil in general. Between this country and the desert, on the southeastern and eastern borders of Reuben and Gad, lived the Moabites and the Ammonites, the descendants of Lot (Genesis 19). We remember that when Abraham and Lot came up out of Egypt to settle in the land, Lot, who represents the sensuous or, as Swedenborg puts it in AC 1547, "the external man and his pleasures which are of sensuous things," chose the Jordan valley as his home, and this led him into serious dangers. Like Lot, the sensuous plane of our minds stands in a precarious position. It is closely related to the higher planes and is a necessary part of us, but it is always attracted by external beauties and pleasures and is easily led astray through them. Moab and Ammon, the incestuous sons of Lot, represent departures from the true order of the sensuous, the adulteration of good and truth on the sensuous plane. In AC 2468 Swedenborg speaks of them as denoting "those who are in an external worship which appears in a manner holy, but who are not in internal worship; and who readily learn as being goods and truths the things that belong to external worship, but reject and despise those of internal worship." He makes the further enlightening statement that "such worship and such religion fall to the lot of those who are in natural good, but despise others in comparison with themselves."

In our story they are now attacking Gilead. Gilead is the name given to a considerable portion of the more mountainous country east of the Jordan and parallel to it, from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, the inheritance of the tribe of Gad. Gad, we are told, represents in a good sense the “good of life,” or good conduct springing from love to the Lord and based upon true doctrine (AE 435). In AC 4117³ it is said that Gilead signifies “the first good, which is that of the senses of the body; for it is the good or the pleasure of these into which the man who is being regenerated is first of all initiated.” In AE 654⁴⁴ we are told that Gilead signifies, among other things, “reasonings from the sense of the letter of the Word.” Thus in the chapter we are studying we have a picture of the outward life of the man who is regenerating, his conduct, his pleasures, and his worship all open to view and constantly subject to attack and especially subject to the temptation to compromise with evil, that “adulteration of truth” represented by the sons of Ammon (SS 18³).

This temptation takes countless forms, but in substance it is perhaps this: So long as I support the church, attend worship regularly, give to the poor, etc., I’m a pretty good sort of person; standards of morality and of taste change; things that would have shocked people fifty years ago are perfectly all right now; one can’t be prudish and have a good time; if I don’t get ahead of the other fellow in business, he’ll get ahead of me; why, doesn’t even the Bible say, “Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness”? We argue with ourselves and with others in this way and presently we find that we have lost the power to judge clearly as to what is really right and wrong in conduct—we are helpless before the Ammonites. The man who is raised up as Judge in our story is not even a legitimate son of Gilead, but is one who has been cast out by his brethren and has gone to live apart. Swedenborg gives us no interpretation for Jephthah. The name itself means “an opposer” or “one who opens.” We can think of him perhaps as representing some simple truth which has come to us through our sense experiences in their contact with false and

worldly standards which the Lord can disentangle from the network of worldly reasonings into which we have fallen and can make the instrument of our deliverance.

Jephthah's oath pictures a recognition of what victory over the Ammonites involves. When we are fighting the temptation to compromise with worldly standards of conduct, we cannot hope for victory unless we are willing to give up particular indulgences which the Lord shows us to be wrong. Jephthah vowed to sacrifice as a burnt offering to the Lord "whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon." Jephthah, the mighty man of valor, performed his vow, even though it cost the life of his only daughter. When we enter the conflict with the Ammonites genuinely, it often seems as though the one sacrifice required of us is the thing dearest of all to our hearts. The same lesson in a less external conflict is taught in the story of Abraham's temptation to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). The fact that Abraham's sacrifice was prevented and Jephthah's was not* suggests that Jephthah's daughter pictures an affection of self-love, which should be given up—although of course the burnt offering itself is in the internal sense an act not of destruction but of consecration through love to the Lord.

The moral question involved in the letter of the story of Jephthah is paramount in most non-New Church commentaries. Did Jephthah do right in keeping a rash vow? The first and most obvious comment is that we should not make rash promises. The Lord says: "But I say unto you, Swear not at all . . . But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." (Matthew 5:32, 37) In AE 608 Swedenborg tells us that "Oaths are made by those who are not interior, but exterior men," and that the angels regard an oath as abhorrent, since it insults the integrity of one's motives. A promise is a serious thing, not to be lightly made and not to be lightly broken. But if

*Samuel Noble argued against this conclusion. See his *Plenary Inspiration*, pp. 475ff. and Appendix VI. See also his *Sermons on Judges*, sermons 18-20. —Ed.

one has been made which proves to be a foolish one, we have the problem of choosing, not between right and wrong, but between two evils; and it is right to choose the lesser. If keeping the promise involves only inconvenience to ourselves, it will perhaps serve us as a lesson and keep us from trouble later. But if it involves danger, injury, or even inconvenience to others, we may do less harm if we acknowledge our folly frankly and accept the blame and the loss of confidence resulting from a broken promise. Parents should not form the habit of constantly exacting promises from their children, and they should not allow their children to enter into pledges which they do not fully understand and whose consequences they cannot possibly foresee.

[*Note:* There is only one passing mention of Jephthah in all the writings—AE 811²⁹—which probably accounts for the omission of the usual quotation from Swedenborg at the end of this lesson.]

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What happened after Joshua and the elders died? *people forgot the Lord*
J. How did the Lord help the people whenever they turned to Him again?
raised Judges
P. Which Judge is our lesson about today? *Jephthah*
P. Where was his home? *across the Jordan*
P. What enemy was attacking Israel? *Ammon*
J. What did Jephthah vow? *to sacrifice first who greeted him*
P. What was the first thing that came out of his house when he returned?
daughter
P. Did his daughter try to make him break his vow? *no*
J. What favor did she ask? *two months' time*
J. To what custom did this lead? *annual four-day lament*
I. What do the Judges represent? *particular truths to meet needs*
I. What does the land of Gilead represent? *enjoyment of world*
S. What is pictured by the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter? *giving up affection for thinking ourselves to be good*