WHATEVER THE LORD GIVES, WE WILL POSSESS

Judges 11:12-12:15

“Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you?

Likewise, **whatever** the Lord our God has given us,

we will possess." (11:24)

Today’s passage is a continuation of last week’s passage. Last week we learned that the Ammonites shattered, crushed and oppressed the people of Israel. This went on for 18 long and difficult years. To the point where the Israelites cried out to God for help. Then God raised Jephthah as judge; to deliver them from the Ammonites. Today’s passage is about judge Jephthah, and how he fought and deliver Israel from the Ammonites.

Look at verses 12 -13. The first thing Jephthah did after becoming the leader of Gilead, was to send messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: “What do you have against us that you have attacked our country?” The king of the Ammonites answered…, “When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably.” The king of the Ammonites wanted a very specific area of land in Israel. He described it as the land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. **(Map 1)** As you can see from the map, this is the area of land where the Israelite tribes of Gad and Reuben occupied. The king of the Ammonites claimed that this area of land was actually his land, and after coming up out of Egypt, that the Israelites wrongfully and unjustly took it away from him. So now, with a threat of ongoing war, he demanded that Israel give the land back to him peaceably. Otherwise, he would continue to attack their country.

Then how did Jephthah respond to this demand and threat? Look at verses 14-15. Jephthah sent back messengers to the Ammonite king, saying: This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. To prove this, Jephthah gave the king of the Ammonites a brief history lesson as to how Israel ended up possessing this area of land. **(Map 2)** He explained that 300 years earlier, when Israel came up out of Egypt, they went through the desert to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh. At that time, Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, ‘Give us permission to go through your country.’ [B]ut the king of Edom would not listen. Then Israel tried to travel through Moab. So they gain sent messengers to the king of Moab, saying, ‘*Give us permission to go through your country*.’ But he also refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh. “Next they traveled through the desert, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border. (Map 3) Look at verses 19-22. “Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, ‘Let us pass through your country to our own place.’ Sihon, however, did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He mustered all his men and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. “Then the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his men into Israel’s hands, and they defeated them. Israel took over all the land of the Amorites who lived in that country, capturing all of it from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the desert to the Jordan. In this way, Jephthah set the record straight with the king of the Ammonites. The king of the Ammonites claimed that when Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away [his] land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. However, look again at verse 22. When Israel arrived there, it was the Amorites, a completely different people from the Ammonites, who lived in that country. Therefore, Israel took over all the land of the Amorites, and not the Ammonites, as the king of the Ammonites said to Jephthah. Therefore, based on this history lesson, Jephthah was absolutely correct when he said to the king of the Ammonites that Israel did not take the land of the Ammonites. (15) Look at verse 23. “Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? Indeed, the king of the Ammonites had absolutely no right to take it over. But the same question can be asked of the Israelites. Even if Israel took the land from the Amorites – what right did they have to keep on possessing it? Put differently, on what basis could they claim to be legitimate possessors of the land?

Let us read today’s key verse together. Verse 24. Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. Neither the Ammonites or the Amorites (or any of the other surrounding nations) had a legitimate right to possess the land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Only Israel had the right. Because, the LORD, the God of Israel, had driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, and had given Israel the land. God is the Creator of the universe. He is the owner of everything. Therefore, He can absolutely give whatever He wants to anyone He chooses. On this occasion God gave the land of the Amorites to His people Israel. That is the end of the matter.

What then should Israel do, when God gave them the Amorite’s land? Look again at verse 24. As an obedient people, they had to take it from God. More than that, they had to possess it. For Israel to possess the land, they had to regard themselves as the owners of the land. Owners who cared for the land, protected the land, valued it and used it according to God’s good purpose. According to Jephthah, this was exactly what Israel did, from the moment God gave them the land until that very day the Ammonite king claimed it from him. And therefore, Israel would most definitely, not give it to the Ammonite king. For doing so, would be to abandon or give up what God had given His people. **Here we can learn a fundamental lesson as men and women of God. Everything that we have, and every situation that we face….even every responsibility that we carry is something that God has given to you and me. There is nothing in our lives that came to us by chance or our own will. Everything is given to us by God. Our backgrounds, our education, our studies, our degrees, jobs, family situation, financial situation, the responsibilities we carry at home, work and even in the ministry…..if I say everything I mean everything…..has been given to us by God. Just as God gave the land to the Israelites. Then as God’s children, what should we do with what God has given us? We must take it and possess it. Just like Israel took the land from God and possessed it. On so many occasions, we tend to regard the situations and things in our lives, even the positions we find ourselves in at school, family or the ministry, as trivial or unimportant. Yet these very things are very important, because they were given to us by God. And since the LORD is our God, and we are His children, our responsibility is to value and possess it with all our hearts. Amen! As Jephthah alluded to in verse 24, there is no people who would not take what their god gives them. Even the Ammonites would never have hesitated to take the land from the Amorites if Chemosh (if he was a real god) had given it to them. Likewise, and even more so, when the living and eternal God gives us who belong to Him something. We must take it and possess it with all our hearts. Amen!**

But what about the unfavorable things, positions or situations we find ourselves in? Look again at verse 24. Jephthah said: **whatever** the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. No matter what it is; whether good or bad, **whatever** the LORD our God has given us, we must possess. As you know, shepherdess Sarah and I have been praying for a baby for the last 7 years. However, with time running out quickly, the situation does not look favorable for us. So many times I wonder why God has not given us children. I mean, I know He can. It is just a matter of Him letting it happen. But after all these years, and after everything shp Sarah and I tried, we still have no children. To be honest, it is very painful and disappointing. To the point, where I stopped praying about or even thinking about it. In a way, I just ignore it. But through today’s passage I learned that this is not God’s way for me to handle the situation. The situation is given to me by God, and I must take ownership of it with all my heart, instead if regarding it as unimportant; even futile. God has given me this situation for a very good reason and purpose; and instead of ignoring it I must prayerfully digest and make sense of it. For surely, God loves me and has a good reason for not giving me and shepherdess a child – even after so many people have been praying for many years for us. Likewise, each one of you might face a situation or a responsibility that you do not want or do not like. You might even wish it away! But from today’s passage we learned that this is not the right attitude to have towards anything that God has given us. Whatever the LORD our God has given us, we must possess it. We must value it, treasure it, even love it like Jephthah and the Israelites loved the land that God gave them. At the moment, we may not understand why God has given us something that causes hardship or pain in our lives. For example, the fact God has not given me and shepherdess Sarah a child is difficult to understand and accept. Nevertheless, I must trust God and hold on to His goodness and love for me. And not only me, but each one of you. Then surely, God’s peace will reign in our hearts. Moreover, God will fulfil the very purpose for what He has so carefully and lovingly decided to give you and me. Amen!

The question is, however, what will happen if we reject or even abandon what God gives us? Let’s continue to learn from Jephthah. Jephthah’s messengers successfully delivered his detailed and very persuasive message to the king of the Ammonites. I am sure, if either you or I received that message from Jephthah, we would have agreed that the land belonged to the Israelites. And retreat to our own land. Look at verse 28. The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him. Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.

However, before attacking the Ammonites, Jephthah did something unexpectedly. Look at verses 30-31. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. What is the significance of making a vow? To make a vow is to make an earnest promise or pledge before God. It is to say: “If God does this for me then I will do this for Him.” To make such a vow before God is not a light matter. In the law, Moses wrote to the Israelites: “When you make a vow to the LORD your God, be prompt in fulfilling whatever you promised him. For the LORD your God demands that you promptly fulfill all your vows, or you will be guilty of sin. 22However, it is not a sin to refrain from making a vow. 23But once you have voluntarily made a vow, be careful to fulfill your promise to the LORD your God. (Numbers 23:21-23 CEV)

Jephthah made such a vow to God before the battle with the Ammonites. He pledged that if God give the Ammonites into his hands, [then] after the battle he would sacrifice as a burnt offering WHATEVER comes out the door of his house to meet him. But it was unnecessary and uncalled for to make such a rash vow to God before the battle. Especially since the Spirit of God already came upon Jephthah and led him to fight the Ammonites. Surely, based on Jephthah’s message to the Ammonite king, God already decided to give the Ammonites into Jephthah’s hands. Why then did Jephthah feel the need to make such a bold vow to God? It was because, through this vow, Jephthah wanted to manipulate God to only give him success. Not failure.

This was the complete opposite from what he told the king of the Ammonites. Jephthah said to the king that: whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. (24) Yet, personally, when push came to shove – Jephthah was not willing to take from God defeat, failure, humiliation and suffering. So he negotiated with God by making a vow; to be certain that God gives him only success. But God does not work like this. He did not want anything from Jephthah apart from his heart and devotion. Moreover, God already decided before Jephthah made the vow to give the Ammonites into Jephthah’s hands. That is why, when Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, the LORD gave them into his hands and subdued Ammon. Not because of Jephthah’s vow, but because God decided beforehand to give Jephthah success.

When Jephthah made his vow, he so foolishly told God that he would offer as burnt offering “WHATEVER” comes out the door of his house after the battle. The WHATEVER part of his vow was to press upon God Jephthah’s desperation to be victorious at all cost. God could take WHATEVER that comes out of his house, as this would surely have been a big enough repayment for God’s favor. Or so Jephthah thought. But God was not pleased with this. Because it showed that Jephthah was unwilling to humbly and simply **take whatever God gives him**; whether victory or failure. It also showed that victory over the Ammonites was more important to Jephthah than God Himself. Instead of honoring God by taking whatever God gives him, Jephthah treated God like a vending machine that was there to give him whatever HE wants.

Then how did God try to help Jephthah repent? Look at verses 34. When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was. God sent out his daughter, an only child to meet him after he returned from the battle. Except for her, Jephthah had neither son nor daughter. And she was the most precious and dearest in his life. God sent her out to meet Jephthah, so that he could realise his sin because of the vow. Then, God wanted him to repent and be released from his foolish vow. This was indeed possible and provided for in Moses’ law. In Leviticus 5:4-6 *God said that when someone realized he/she made a foolish vow, regardless of whether he meant well, he had to admit his guilt before God by confessing his sin. Then he was to bring to the LORD as the penalty for his sin a female from the flock, either a sheep or a goat. This was to be a sin offering with which the priest would have purified the person, making him right with the LORD*. And also release the person from keeping the foolish vow. This was exactly what God wanted Jephthah to do. God wanted Jephthah to admit his guilt before God by confessing his sin of pride and selfish-ambition before God. Then, God would surely have forgiven him and be reconciled with him. **However** Jephthah did not do any of this. Instead, when he saw his daughter, (look at verse 35) he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break.” Then after two months, Jephthah did to her as he had vowed and like a pagan offered her as a burnt offering to God. Something that God never wanted from Jephthah.

But why did Jephthah do as he had vowed; even at the expense of his precious daughter? It was because of Jephthah’s pride and selfish ambition before the Lord. Though He said that he would take and possess whatever God gives him, his reality was that he could only accept success from God, not failure and suffering. This pride and selfish ambition was so strong, that even when he realized that he sinned against God, he was unwilling to repent and give his heart back to God. So ultimately, the joy and grace of defeating the Ammonites – quickly turned into a tragedy because of the loss of his daughter. Moreover, his relationship with God was strained as a sense of deep pain and guilt no doubt flooded Jephthah’s heart. This is exactly what happens to anyone, who fails to take whatever God gives them. Though they may experience some degree of favour from God, ultimately their lives will be ruined by their sin of pride and selfish-ambition. Just like Jephthah.

**In conclusion:** In today’s passage, we have learned since the LORD is our God, we must humbly and sincerely possess WHATEVER He gives us. This does not seem like something difficult to do. However, when we look at Jephthah’s life, we can realise just how difficult it is. Based on the long message Jephthah sent the king of the Ammonites, one would expect that he would definitely take and possess WHATEVER the LORD His God has given him. Yet he failed to do so because his understanding remained only in his head, not his heart. His heart was full of pride and selfish ambition. This was so strong that it not only prevented Jephthah from possessing WHATEVER the LORD gave him. But it also prevented him from sincerely repenting before God. Then ultimately, his relationship and his life was broken before God. Today we must learn from Jephthah to not make the same mistake as him. When we find ourselves behaving like him, we must sincerely repent and give back our hearts and devotion to God. In this way, we will always be ready to possess WHATEVER the LORD gives us to live meaningful and joyful lives before the LORD; regardless of the situation we are in.