

JEPHTHAH WITH THE EPHRAIMITES, THREE MINOR JUDGES

Judges 12

Chapter 12 continues the story of the judge Jephthah that we began in chapter 10 and 11. Quickly let me review for you where we have been. In chapter 10 the cycle of sin that we have seen over and over again in the book of Judges sinks to its lowest point. The Israelites have turned to worship every false god in the land, rather than the Lord. When they cry out to God because their enemies, the Ammonites, are oppressing them, God initially tells them **"No, I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."**

Yet when they again cried out, **"We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray."** And they put away their idols and served the Lord, the Lord could no longer endure their misery.

But rather than waiting for God to deliver them, the Israelites began looking around for someone to save them. They picked Jephthah, the rejected son of Gilead. After Jephthah's attempted diplomacy with the Ammonites fails, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him and they defeat their enemies.

But before he goes to battle, Jephthah made an unnecessary and foolish vow to offer to God as a burnt offering whatever came out of his house after he returned. His heart was broken as his only daughter is the one who meets him when he returns home. The wound cuts deep into his heart as his daughter will not marry and he will have no one to carry on his family.

Then we come to chapter 12 and the end of Jephthah's story. Here we find the wounded warrior Jephthah lashes out in his pain to hurt others as well. The story of Jephthah is the story of a deeply wounded man. It does not end well, not least because of the way he deals with—or doesn't deal with—his emotional wounds. How our stories end will turn at least in part on how we deal with our wounds.

A. Jephthah and the Ephraimites conflict.

1. (Judges 12:1) The men of the tribe of Ephraim are angry with Jephthah.

Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!"

The tribe of Ephraim felt slighted by Jephthah, and were angry that they did not have a central and prestigious role in the victorious battle over the Ammonites. Here we see Victory eclipsed by disharmony.

There is a tendency within all of us to not want to do a job unless we receive credit. It is evident that the people of the tribe of Ephraim were more concerned with getting the credit than with seeing a job done. This seems to be a consistent problem with the people of the tribe of Ephraim; they gave a similar response to Gideon in 8:1.

Being a real servant of Jesus Christ means that we serve without concern for credit, knowing that it is up to Jesus to give any reward.

The people of Ephraim also backed up their anger with a threat. They threatened to burn down Jephthah's house with him in it.

It's hard not to see some comparisons in our modern Christian churches. I know we don't fight each other with swords, like they did—we fight each other with words. I feel like I've met Ephraimites before. Ephraimites in churches who want to say, "Why don't I get a place of more prominence? How come my gifts are being utilized here? I'm going to go find a new church, no one appreciates me here."

And when I hear that I usually respond like Gideon. I usually say something like, "Oh no, you're important. You're doing a good job. We appreciate you."

I don't think I've ever responded like Jephthah, "Fine, let's take it outside. Put up or shut up!"

I'm not saying that's what's happening here exactly. But I think you do see here the price of pride, the cost of disunity, and the consequences of finding yourself more important than you are. That's why Philippians 2:3 remind us as people who have the tendency to selfishness, **"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself."** Think of others better than yourself. Paul adds in verse 4, **"Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."**

That kind of thinking is not Ephraimite. It is Christ-like. So Paul goes on to say, **"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."**

That is what it looks like to be a Christ-follower. Humbling yourself. Putting others needs, interests, and glory above your own. But not the Ephraimites, they were too full of themselves, and it will cost them dearly. They pick a fight this time with the wrong person. Jephthah is in no mood for their foolishness.

2. (Judges 12:2-3) Jephthah responds to the people of the tribe of Ephraim.

And Jephthah said to them, "My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands. So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the Lord delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"

Jephthah's argument is clear. God won a great victory through him while the Ephraimites stood by, though they had the opportunity to help. The people of Ephraim come off here as chronic complainers. When they had a chance to step out boldly for God they did not do it. Yet when the work was done and God was glorified, they complained that they didn't get to participate.

The Ephraimites and the Gileadites are about to go to war and kill each other. And that's not how God wants His family to act.

3. (Judges 12:4-6) The Gileadites overwhelm the people of the tribe of Ephraim.

Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites."

Jephthah attacks and defeats the Ephraimites because of their accusation that the Gileadites, who hailed from east of the Jordan, were renegades from western tribes. For Jephthah, who was driven from Gilead because he was the son of a prostitute and then was brought back for his military prowess, there's fightin' words. We might imagine that Jephthah has been slighted those kinds of slurs his entire life.

Apparently the men of Ephraim were better at talking than fighting, because the men of Gilead seemed to conquer them easily.

5 The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No,"

6 then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites.

The word **shibboleth** means either "ear of grain" or "flowing stream." With this word the people from the tribe of Ephraim were easily identified by their dialect. They had a hard time pronouncing the "h" in **Shibboleth** and said *Sibboleth* instead, therefore giving themselves away.

Today, there are certain true shibboleths in a person's vocabulary. In Judges 12:6, you could know something about a person by how they said **Shibboleth**. Today when someone talks about Jesus, you can listen to what they say and learn something about them. You can listen as they speak about the Bible, and you know something about them. It is also true that as much as our dialect gives us away, so does our everyday speech. Others should be able to tell that we are Christians by the way we talk.

The vengeance and disunity of this thing is terrible. The sum of the battle from the initial rebellion and prideful fall of the Ephraimites to this awful game of Bible password, was 42,000. Forty two thousand Israelites have been killed by Israelites. Israelites square off against Israelites, an awful harbinger of things to come, not only in the book of Judges but also in the later history of Israel. So much compromise, so much disunity, so much pride, so much showmanship—so much sin!

So Jephthah's story comes full circle. When he appeared in the narrative, he was driven from his home and forced into the life of a renegade. At the end, he kills thousands of men for calling him a renegade. And so we have victory eclipsed by disunity, verses 1-6.

4. (Judges 12:7) The remainder of Jephthah's time as a judge.

And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in among the cities of Gilead.

Now before we can meet the next great judge in this book, Samson, whom we will read about in chapters 13-16, we see three minor judges at the end of chapter 12. Here, compromise is overshadowed by grace, verses 8-15.

We have seen the compromise. We've seen it in Jephthah. We've seen it in the Ephraimites. We've seen it in the Gileadites willing to take revenge on their brothers. What a disaster. Now God continues to save His people, even though they certainly did not deserve it.

B. Three minor judges.

We see the judgeship of three judges you may not have even heard of. And even though we don't know much about them, the Holy Spirit chose to briefly highlight them for how God used them to judge during this dark time in Israel's history. Maybe the lack of details about these men reminds us that God is really the main character in the book of Judges. God is still working. God is still raising up judges to help Israel.

1. (Judges 12:8-10) The judge Ibzan.

8 After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel.

9 He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage, and brought in thirty daughters from elsewhere for his sons. He judged Israel seven years.

10 Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.

2. (Judges 12:11-12) The judge Elon.

11 After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years.

12 And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the country of Zebulun.

3. (Judges 12:13-15) The judge Abdon.

13 After him, Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel.

14 He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys. He judged Israel eight years.

15 Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mountains of the Amalekites.

In spite of their continued compromise, sin and infighting, God keeps on raising up judges to save them. What grace!

But listen to the punctuation in this passage: verse 7, **"Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried."** Verse 10, **"Then Ibzan died and was buried."** Verse 12, **"And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried."** Verse 15, **"Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried."** Judges 12 points out man's unavoidable mortality. Every judge, no matter how faithful or how full of folly, every judge would meet their end. None of them would protect God's people forever. So we hear it repeated, like the beat of a drum, "And he died, and he died, and he died."

Sandra Wilson, in her book *Hurt People Hurt People*, writes, "All of us must answer this question: Will we continue to run the assigned laps in a wretched relay of intergenerational pain—that ongoing cycle of hurting, hating, and hurting again? Or will we stop running, break the cycle, and start a new cycle of healing and helping?"

Jephthah, spurned by his immediate family, ran the assigned laps in the wretched relay, passing the baton of pain off both to his daughter and his fellow Israelites.

Jesus, who ran a different sort of race, shows us a new way. He was a victim, for though he was innocent, he was crucified and abused mercilessly. The only sinless man suffered for the sins of the entire world. Jesus, however, refused to see himself as a victim: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). He did not deflect any of the pain he suffered onto others; instead, all of it died with him.

In fact, he gave back good for evil, blessing for curse, and prayer for persecution: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

And He died. But God raised Him from the dead. So that we would have a savior who lives forever, a savior who gives true life. He forgives our sins and heals our wounds. Finally, then, Jesus converts wounds into ministry. He often gives you a passion for those who have been wounded like you. Every wound, then, conceals a ministry. The place where you hurt the most may be the place you have the most to offer. The church, after all, is not a hospital; spiritually speaking, it's a military outpost with an infirmary. Jesus binds up our wounds not that we might serve ourselves but that we might serve a greater purpose. Jephthah saw himself as a victim and deflected his pain on to others, but Jesus heals us and sends us out, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bless even those who have wounded us.

Come to Jesus today.