



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 12:1-15

To understand how Jephthah's narrative ends, and to learn about three other minor judges.

A Brutal End to a Brutal Story

Jephthah's narrative begins with great promise. Apart from the fact that he is born of a concubine, he is still described as a legitimate son of Gilead (Jg. 11:1). After being rejected by his family, he is eventually called into action by the elders of Gilead to lead their people (Jg. 11:8), and his leadership skills are impressive. He uses a combination of history and reason when dealing with the Ammonite king, and while not ultimately successful in avoiding war, he at least (seemingly) has a clear conscience in knowing that he did what he could to avoid it. Jephthah makes a Transjordanian tour to rally the Israelites to war, and apparently was rejected by the Ephraimites during this time (Jg. 12:2). Whether they were aware of his call to arms is unclear, and judging by their hostility towards him for not being included, they did not understand his proposition (Jg. 12:1). Nevertheless, he was successful in neutralizing the Ammonite threat because of the LORD's involvement (Jg. 11:32). Jephthah's story took a bad turn with a strange vow (Jg. 11:34-40). Beyond that, his conflict with Ephraim radically escalates. What began as a reason-based response to their anger (Jg. 12:2-3) turned into a full-blown almost racial war against them, leaving the reader somewhat uncomfortable moving into the next portion of the story. Jephthah is yet another clear example of how God can use even the most defective individuals to accomplish His purposes.

Conflict with Ephraim

Judges 12 begins with the men of Ephraim, "called to arms," complaining that Jephthah did not include them in the siege against the Ammonites. Their response feels very unreasonable: "Why did you cross over to fight

against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire.” It’s one thing to be upset that they were left out, but to immediately result in violence? Not wise (Prov. 3:29). Initially, Jephthah’s response seems pretty level-headed, but it quickly leads into violence. The men of Ephraim issue a sort of taunt to Jephthah and the Gileadites, saying, “You are fugitives (renegades) of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh” (Jg. 12:4). They are essentially saying that the Gileadites are not a legitimate tribe, and from an Israelite tribal sense, they aren’t wrong. Gilead is not a son of Jacob (Israel), and thus they are not in the same category as Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim and Manasseh have their family name from the offspring of Joseph and his Egyptian wife (Gen. 46:20) and both of them were blessed in Jacob’s final blessing (Gen. 48:20). Regardless, this taunt was offensive and not well-received.

The real horror of this portion of the story is seen in how the Gileadites identify Ephraimites in order to kill them. Judges 12:5-6 indicates that the Gileadites were stopping any of the men crossing the fords of the Jordan and asking them if they were an Ephraimite. The Ephraimites, seeking to get away from the slaughter, would presumably say *no* (Jg. 12:5), and then the Gileadites would ask them to say the word *Shibboleth*. Apparently, because of the Ephraimites’ regional dialect, they were unable to say the word *Shibboleth*, but instead pronounced it *Sibboleth*. This speech issue was enough for the Gileadites to identify the Ephraimites and kill them. This communicates a couple of important points. For one, these were not acts of war, but murder. There was no conflict. The Gileadites were singling out men who were trying to flee and killing them simply because of where they came from. Secondly, it shows a clear example of targeting someone because of ethnicity, particularly because of differences in speech.

Jephthah’s story ends abruptly: “Jephthah judged Israel for six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead” (Jg. 12:7). There are no mentions of peace or blessing on the people of Israel, perhaps because there really wasn’t peace, but simply a different kind of war. Jephthah ended the conflict with the Ammonites, but then engaged in a kind of civil war afterwards.

More Minor Judges

Verse 8 through 15 (the rest of chapter 12) introduce the reader to three more judges, and there is not much information given about any of them. Below is a brief breakdown of each of the judges mentioned.

IBZAN

Ibzan is identified as someone from Bethlehem (Jg. 12:8). The main detail given regarding Ibzan is the fact that he gave his thirty daughters to marry outside of his clan (Jg. 12:9), and that his thirty sons married women all of whom were foreigners. This inclination to intermarry should concern the reader, given the clear restrictions of such practices in other places (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-14; Jos. 23:12-13). These restrictions were in place in order to preserve the purity of faith and to prevent idolatry from creeping back in. Ibzan’s choices represent the furthering drift away from God’s law in Israel. Ibzan judged Israel for seven years.

ELON

Very little is known about Elon other than that he was from the tribe of Zebulun, and that he judged Israel for ten years, and was buried at Aijalon in Zebulun.

ABDON

Abdon is the final of the three mentioned, and again, not much is known about him. He is the son of a man named Hillel the Pirathonite, and the imagery of his forty sons and thirty grandsons riding donkeys presents a

number divisible by seven, indicating an ideal royal family. It should be noted, given the close proximity to the Ephraim-Gileadite conflict, that Abdon is buried in Ephraim.

These three judges mentioned do serve an important role. For all of the conflict and mess that Jephthah created, the reader is reminded by these three judges that there were periods after that of peace. That there is nothing worth noting in these accounts is not necessarily a bad thing.

What About Now?

One takeaway from Judges 12:1-15 is the reality that people have for a very long time used racial or ethnic markers as a way to identify and judge others. The Gileadites identify a phonetic divergence in the Ephraimite dialect, and use that to target and kill them. This kind of evil is not a new evil, but one that like all other evil practices is rooted in the sin nature in every human being. Another takeaway is that a quiet life is not a bad thing. If there is nothing to report, that means by extension that there is nothing bad to report, and that is in and of itself, a good thing. Some of the minor judges remind us that our lives need not be filled with major events in order for them to be impactful. God often uses the lowly and meek to do His work for more than the big and busy.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 12:1. Who was called to arms, and what were they upset about? What did they threaten to do to Jephthah as a result?

2. Read Judges 12:2-3. What did Jephthah say in response to him? What was the point of his argument?

Day Two

1. Read Judges 12:4. How did Jephthah respond?

2. Read Judges 12:5-6. What were the Gileadites doing to identify the men of Ephraim? What did they do with them after they had identified them?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 12:7. How long did Jephthah judge Israel for? Where was he buried after he died?

2. Read Judges 12:8-10. Who is the next judge described here? What is known about him?

Day Four

1. Read Judges 12:11-12. Who is the next judge described here? What is known about him?

2. Read Judges 12:13-15. Who is the next judge described here? What is known about him?

Week 10 Discussion: A Quiet Life

Jephthah's story is followed by three judges about which very little is known. It is not because they are not interesting characters, but more likely because there was no real drama while they judged. This is not a negative thing, but a positive thing in light of the other messier judges thus far (and after). It is a commendable thing to live a quiet and peaceful life (1 Th. 4:11; 1 Tim. 2:2). Talk as a group about ways you can achieve a life more consistent with peace and quiet than chaos.

1. Icebreaker: Is your life more peaceful, or more chaotic? Why?
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:11. How well are you achieving the kind of life he describes?
3. Read 1 Timothy 2:2. Why do you suppose Paul insists on a quiet life?
4. How can you encourage other people to find peace in the midst of chaos?
5. How has another believer helped you find peace in the midst of your own chaos?
6. How can the church help people find peaceful rhythms in their lives? Does the church ever (intentionally or unintentionally) create more chaos?

Takeaways:

1. Jephthah's story ended in violence.
2. Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon judged Israel in relatively quiet peace.

PRAYER REQUESTS: