



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 10:1-11:28

To learn about the negative effects of Gideon's poor choices.

Remember Who You Are

I am a child of the 90's through and through. I was technically born in the mid-80's, but the 90's is occupies the bulk of the parts of my childhood that I can actually remember. One of the things I remember vividly was the release of the 1994 Disney movie, *The Lion King*. It was iconic for so many reasons (hello, Elton John), but one scene that I remember so well was when Rafiki confronts a now-grown Simba. After a little back-and-forth, Simba is led to some water where he sees his reflection quickly turn to the reflection of his deceased father, Mufasa. It is there that Mufasa reminds Simba of his identity: "You have forgotten who you are, and so forgotten me." Time in the wilderness away from his people led Simba to live in an identity that was not truly his. His actions did not reflect those of a lion, nor a king.

In Judges 11, we are introduced to another judge named Jephthah, and he, "judged Israel for six years" (Jg. 12:7). While he does deal swiftly with the enemies of God's people who had been oppressing them, what we find in Jephthah is quite disturbing; he has forgotten what it means to be an Israelite. While he is able to recall some of the Israelite history well, his actions indicate that he relates to God more like a Canaanite than an Israelite. The trouble with Jephthah's story is that it isn't just Jephthah who has forgotten who he is; it's all of Israel.

The Next Two Judges

Chapter 10 begins immediately following the events with Abimelech and we are suddenly introduced to two more judges. Below is a brief breakdown of each of them.

TOLA

Verse 1 reads, “After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, and he lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. “ This is an extraordinarily brief description, but there are a few details here that help us understand Tola a little better. First, Tola’s description as a judge is curious. That he, “arose to save Israel,” is congruent with some of the previous judges as well, but noticeably missing is Yahweh’s call to him. There is no mention of God at all, in fact. Tola’s name is also significant. He is a descendant of the tribe of Issachar, and the name Tola was the name of one of Issachar’s son (Gen. 46:13). His name also indicates some level of military prowess. The Tolaites were those known as powerful warriors during the reign of King David (1 Chr. 7:1).

There is also no reference to any specific enemies that Tola is saving Israel from, which begs the question of who the enemy was during this time? Tola breaks onto the scene as a judge immediately following the chaotic end of Abimelech’s reign of power, and so perhaps Tola’s duties as a judge involved cleaning up the chaos left in Abimelech’s wake and reestablishing order among the people of God. It is speculative, but warrants some credibility given the context. Verse 2 concludes, “And he judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died and was buried at Shamir.” His reign for 23 years with no mention of any complications indicates that Tola’s tenure as a judge was pretty straightforward.

JAIR

Jair’s narrative, like Tola’s, is brief, however, there are some important details worth mentioning. While Tola’s significance seems to be drawn from his lineage, Jair’s significance seems to come from his progeny: “And he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they had thirty cities, called Havvoth-jair to this day, which are in the land of Gilead.” It’s unclear what the significance of this is, but there are a couple of possible meanings. The word for donkey in Hebrew indicates these were ridden animals, not pack mules. Perhaps the imagery is meant to indicate a time of peace in the land. It also seems that in Jair’s rule, he divided his territory up and made each one of his 30 sons a representative over that portion of the land. Whatever the case, Jair ruled for 22 years with apparently no real issues.

The other significant detail regarding Jair is that he is a Gileadite. This is important for a couple of reasons. For one, his story will be followed by Jephthah, who is also from Gilead. Gilead was positioned geographically between several important places for the context of Judges: Bashan was to the north, and on the south, Moab and Ammon (Gen. 31:21; Deut. 3:12-17). Jair’s connection to Gilead makes him a convenient transition point to Jephthah.

The Context of Jephthah

Jephthah is introduced in the beginning of chapter 11 after Israel once again falls into idolatry and rebellion and is judged by God. Their choice of idols are also important for how Jephthah’s story will unfold: “The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him” (Jg. 10:6). The presence of the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Philistines in this passage indicate who will be at odds with Israel. God, in His act of

judgement, allows the Philistines and the Ammonites to oppress Israel. Judges 10:8 says, “For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in *the land of the Amorites*, which is in *Gilead*.” The land of the Amorites is an important detail for Jephthah’s story, because it is connected to Gilead, where both Jair and Jephthah are from. Verse 17 sets up the final context for our introduction to Jephthah: “Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah.” With the Ammonites now on the doorstep of Gilead, conflict is no longer a matter of if, but when. Verse 18 ends the chapter by preparing us for another judge: “And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, ‘Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.’” That judge will be Jephthah.

The Call of Jephthah

Jephthah is called to be the leader of Gilead in a strange manner. For one, it is the people of Gilead and crucially not God who calls him. Verse 1 gives us two other notable details regarding Jephthah that play into this story: “Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute.” He is both strong, but also illegitimate. Because he was illegitimate, he was booted from the land and verse 3 tells us: “Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.” He is presented as this sort of mob boss living in the mountains, able to fight, but ousted from his social setting. However, the imminence of war from the Ammonites forces the elders of the city to beg Jephthah to come back and fight for them, to which he agrees. Jephthah’s engagement with the king of Ammon demonstrates his efficacy as a political leader. The map to the right pictures a much later topography after the return of Judah from exile, but it is a helpful image because it shows Gilead very clearly with the Moabite and Ammonite occupation in close proximity. The dispute with the Ammonite king regards this portion of land. The king argues that the land was taken from them, and that in order for there to be peace it must be given back. It is here that Jephthah lays out several different kinds of arguments. Below is a brief breakdown of each of them.



REASON

Jephthah’s response shows high-level reasoning that was not common for his time. He appeals to history (see Numbers 20 and 21 for the background), and shows that Israel did not take the land from the Ammonites, but from the Amorites. The kings of Bashan and Sihon were both destroyed in battle and the result left Israel in the land to possess it. The Amorites had previously taken the land from the Ammonites, but that is not an issue for Israel as Jephthah argues: “So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan” (Jg. 11:21b-22).

THE MOABITE ARGUMENT

Jephthah also appeals to, “Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab” (Jg. 10:25). Balak never once insisted on attempting to take the land back, and given his stature has a historical leader, Jephthah is essentially saying, “If he didn’t try and take the land from us, who do you think you are that you should?”

TIME

The final argument is an argument for time. Jephthah says in verse 26, “While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time? In other words, “Why now after all of this time?”

Jephthah is diplomatically demonstrating why the Ammonites have no just cause for war against them, but it doesn’t matter: “But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him” (Jg. 11:28). This leads into next week’s study where we will see the conclusion to this conflict, and some strange behaviors from Jephthah that indicate a sad reality regarding not only him, but all of Israel.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the value of understanding biblical history. While ultimately not effective in changing the outcome, Jephthah does position himself as morally superior to the Ammonite king on account of knowing and appealing to history in order to demonstrate the unjust cause for war. Jephthah does a masterful job of explaining why the Ammonite siege is not warranted. Another takeaway is the value of diplomacy in general. Jephthah was a, “mighty warrior” (Jg. 11:1), and yet we see him not immediately rushing to fight. He appeals to a more peace-oriented approach. Anytime we can appeal to reason over conflict, we should.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 10:1-2. In your own words, describe Tola and what makes him significant.

2. Read Judges 10:3-5. In your own words, describe Jair and what makes him significant.

Day Two

1. Read Judges 10:6-9. What did Israel do to kindle the anger of the LORD? What specific idols did they bow down to? Who did God allow to attack Israel as a result?

2. Read Judges 10:10-16. How did the people respond to God's judgment? What did God say to them? What did the people of Israel do in response to God's words?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 10:17-18. Where did the Ammonites camp? How did the men of Gilead respond? What did they say?

2. Read Judges 11:1-11. Who is Jephthah? Who is his father and mother? What happens to him because of his mother? Why do the people of Gilead call him to come back?
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Day Four

1. Read Judges 11:12-17. What did Jephthah say to the king of the Ammonites? How did the Ammonite king respond? What did Jephthah appeal to first in his argumentation?
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2. Read Judges 11:18-28. What other two types of arguments did Jephthah make? How did the Ammonite king respond?
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Week 8 Discussion: Tact Matters

Jephthah, being a mighty warrior, surprisingly takes a more diplomatic approach to dealing with the Ammonite king. While it doesn't change the ultimate outcome, it does position Jephthah in a kind of moral high ground because it demonstrates his intention was not to fight. Tact matters to us today as well. Talk as a group about the value of diplomacy, and how it can serve as a positive witness for Christians in a contentious environment.

1. Icebreaker: Do you consider yourself a tactful or diplomatic individual? Why or why not?
2. Who is the most diplomatic person you know? What makes them so diplomatic?
3. How have you seen a lack of tactfulness work against the Christian witness? Give examples.
4. Have you ever been disarmed by someone else's diplomatic abilities? Share your experience with the group.
5. Read Romans 12:18. What does it mean to live peaceably with others?
6. How can the church train Christians to become more diplomatic in their defense of the faith?

Takeaways:

1. Tola and Jair judge Israel for a combined total of over 50 years immediately following the events with Abimelech.
2. Jephthah is called by the men of Gilead to come and contend with the king of the Ammonites who is about to wage war against them.

PRAYER REQUESTS: