

Judges 12

- Our study of Japhthah isn't quite finished
 - In chapter 11, we saw him defeat the Amorites only to be undone by his rash vow against the Lord
 - Japhthah learned a hard lesson
 - Making a vow doesn't force God to do anything differently than He was planning to do anyway
 - But it does bind us, and therefore it's a foolish negotiation
 - In Jephthah's case, he tried to bargain with God to win the battle
 - He neglected to notice that the Lord was already preparing to defeat Israel's enemy
 - All Jephthah had to do was go forward into the battle
 - Instead, he offered to sacrifice whoever walked out of his tent upon his return from battle
 - He assumed the person would be a servant, someone expendable
 - But as we saw, it turned out to be his daughter, a costly price to pay for opening his mouth
 - And reminder that this time in Israel is one of ignorance and fleshly living
 - Jephthah may have been a man of God but he was ignorant of God's word and unfamiliar with God's heart
 - He should have known that Leviticus 27 made a provision for difficult vows
 - He could have saved his daughter from death had he known the word and listened to the Spirit
- This is the central lesson of Jephthah's time as judge in Israel
 - The people of God have fallen so far away from where they began under Moses and Joshua, that even the judges are ignorant of God's word

- The people are blind and they are being led by the blind
- And under such circumstances, we know the sin of the people can only increase as well
- And this is what we find as we move into the final act of Jephthah's time as judge
 - The battle with the Amorites has ended
 - But the fight in Israel continues as Ephraim returns to contest with the judge

Judg. 12:1 Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you."

- We remember earlier that Gideon had a similar encounter with a disgruntled Ephraimites
 - Back in Gideon's time, the tribe was made upset that Gideon went to war against the Midianites
 - At that time, we said that the tribe of Ephraim was contending with Manasseh for the position of most prominent tribe
 - So the fact that Gideon took Manasseh into battle but didn't take Ephraim nearly caused a civil war between the tribes
 - Fortunately, Gideon was able to defuse the situation by reminding the leaders of Ephraim that they had the greatest honor in the battle
 - They killed the kings of Midian
 - Now once again we see the tribe of Ephraim with their knickers in a bunch over the way Jephthah went to battle without their tribe
 - It was a strange jealousy that motivated this tribe
 - It seems they took offense anytime another tribe found success
 - Here they are threatening violence against the house of Jephthah
 - Essentially, they are threatening to bring down his judgeship

- Like Gideon, Jephthah tries to negotiate his way out of the problem, but unlike Gideon, good things don't happen when he opens his mouth

[Judg. 12:2](#) Jephthah said to them, "I and my people were at great strife with the sons of Ammon; when I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand.

[Judg. 12:3](#) "When I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"

- Jephthah's response is simple...he says we were in trouble, I called you, you ignored my request, so we went without you
 - We must assume Jephthah's answer was truthful
 - We studied last week that he traveled through the Jordan river valley recruiting an army
 - That valley borders Manasseh, Gad, Benjamin and Ephraim
 - So we can safely assume he was seeking help from all these tribes
 - But Ephraim didn't respond
 - This seems to be the pattern for this tribe at this point in Israel's history
 - They were haughty
 - They fancied themselves the powerful, privileged tribe within the nation
 - They were aloof, refusing to give aid unless they saw some political advantage in doing so
 - But then if someone else appeared to gain an upper hand, they would respond with threats to bully the others into submission
 - The sin of Ephraim's pride is yet another result of Israel's collective ignorance of God and His word
 - And it will become the source of the next step down in Israel descent into self-destruction
 - There is a growing independence among Israel's tribes
 - The tribes are losing their sense of identity as a single nation of people

- Making possible these kind of conflicts, when one thinks itself superior to another
- And it's only a small step from here to thinking a tribe can exist without the other
- This pattern is not unique to Israel
 - In fact, the same pattern of sin and the dangers it creates are common in the people of God today in the Church
 - Paul teaches at length in his letters about the oneness of the body of Christ
 - We are not individuals serving the Lord
 - By design, we are one body brought together by one spirit
 - Just as the members of your physical body cannot operate apart from the whole, the same is true for the members of the body of Christ
 - Yet our pride and arrogance can lead us to repeat the sin of Ephraim
 - Not only do we begin to think ourselves superior to our brothers and sisters in the body
 - But even worse, we may begin to think we can live our spiritual lives without them
 - We cut free, determined to do our own thing
 - Or we attack others to make ourselves look and feel superior
 - These are common human emotions, but there is no place for them in the body of Christ
 - Guard against this sort of thinking or placing ourselves above others or dismissing the contributions of others
 - It's a recipe for civil war in the body
 - And it's completely false sense of self-importance
 - Who are any of us apart from Christ in us?
 - We are nothing apart from Christ, so how can we make claims to self-worth, especially if we do so at the expense of our brothers or sisters?

- Unfortunately, this was Ephraim's attitude among the tribes
 - And because the entire nation is operating without sound biblical counsel or godly leadership, the cycle of sin in Judges is about to reach a new low
 - A civil war will now begin
 - And it comes about because of Ephraim's haughtiness
 - And also because of Jephthah's incompetence as judge
 - After telling the Ephraimites they were at fault for missing the battle, Jephthah must have assumed they would follow through on their threats
 - So rather than wait to be attacked, Jephthah decides to take the battle to them

Judg. 12:4 Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and in the midst of Manasseh."

Judg. 12:5 The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. And it happened when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No,"

Judg. 12:6 then they would say to him, "Say now, 'Shibboleth.'" But he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it correctly. Then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. Thus there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim.

- This hasty judge gathers another force of men from Gilead and attacked the tribe of Ephraim
 - Here we have one son of Jacob attacking another son of Jacob...a new low
 - Jephthah raised the army by appealing to the Gileadites' anger over being caught in the middle between Ephraim and Manasseh
 - These two tribes had experienced tension and dissent for centuries
 - And the poor Gileadites were caught in the crossfire
 - So Jephthah says in v.4 you are in the midst of this conflict

- Why not put it to an end to it by joining me to defeat the Ephraimites?
- Apparently, the jealousy and arrogance of Ephraim hadn't won it any friends, so Jephthah knew what to say to gain his recruits
 - The battle takes place east of the Jordan
 - And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading up into the hill country of Ephraim
 - This meant that the Ephraimites couldn't return to their homes, since the fords were the only passage ways back up from the river valley
- At this point Jephthah has the Ephraimites cornered
 - But there was an additional challenge for Jephthah
 - How do you tell one Jew from another?
 - Once the Ephraimites learned that their path home was blocked, they simply blended into the Gilead countryside
 - They looked like the Gileadites, so how does Jephthah find his enemy among the crowd?
- Jephthah's men take advantage of the fact that the Ephraimites spoke with a unique accent
 - And there were certain words that Ephraimites could not pronounce without betraying their tribal origins
 - Once such word was shibboleth
 - This is the Hebrew expression that can mean either "ear or corn" or "flowing stream"
 - The Ephraimites pronounced it sibboleth, without the "sh" sound
 - We can imagine modern examples of this test
 - Eastern oriental cultures lack an "r" sound, so it's impossible for them to pronounce words with r's properly
 - Similarly, Nazis identified Russian Jews by the way they pronounced "kookoorooza," the Russian word for corn

- The Gileadites used this technique for identifying the fleeing Ephraimites at the border
 - And when one was found, he was killed on the spot
 - This went on for some time until 42,000 Ephraimites were killed
 - A serious loss in Israel's first, full blown civil war
- Why do we have this episode recorded in scripture? What is God telling us about this time in Israel?
 - Well, first we see the increasing deterioration of the culture of Israel in this time of judges
 - Men are not willing to be subjected to the word of God
 - And as one generation gives way to another, the people are increasingly violent, selfish, vain, prideful and ignorant of God's word
 - It seems this time would have inevitably led to Israel's self-destruction had God not intervened
- Secondly, the fact that language differences have become so pronounced is in itself a telling sign
 - One of the most powerful, destructive sociological forces is the divergence of language
 - When language changes, people separate
 - And as they separate, they become suspicious of one another
 - When you can't know what another is saying, you assume they are your adversary
 - This was the essential force that God used to separate the people at the tower of Babel
 - By assigning different languages, He ensured people would move away from one another in fear and suspicion
 - While we haven't reached the point of different languages in Israel, we are starting to see the emergence of dialects
 - The tribes have begun to think and act in independent ways
 - It's "us" against "them" as a result of isolating themselves

- As that isolation grew, the language each group spoke became distinct, as will happen
- Already, pronunciations have evolved to the point that it identifies different tribes
- This a very worrisome development
 - The people of Israel used to be one nation of people under the Covenant given to Moses
 - But they are quickly losing their national identity
 - In its place, tribal identities are gaining strength
 - If this trend is allowed to continue unchecked, the people of God will cease being a unified nation under one covenant
 - And soon, Israel would cease to exist
- There is nothing unique about this pattern
 - Any group can either remain bound together by common purpose, identity and language or splinter
 - And if it splinters, then eventually its members become enemies or at least competitors in some sense
 - This is the pattern in the church as well
 - Denominations, sects and other divisions within the body of Christ are just as damaging as this division was in Israel's day
 - Even if we stay out of the denomination disputes, we can still fall prey to divisional thinking in subtle ways
 - Anytime we start dividing up the members of the body into right and wrong, have and have not, tastes great and less filling, etc. we're damaging the body
 - We need to guard against that tendency
 - It's always one step short of going to war in some way
 - And it gets in the way of serving the Lord
- So what's next for Israel? If the period of Judges has resulted in this kind of deteriorating culture, what will save the nation?

- Isn't the Lord ruling His people? If so, how is it possible that He is allowing His people to walk up to the edge of oblivion?
 - Well fear not, the people of God will not self-destruct though they are headed that way
 - The Lord is still on the throne
 - He will correct the course of His people as He has done time and time again
- And we know how He will do that, don't we? In the cycle of Judges, rebellion begets God's judgment and judgment begets rescue
 - So the Lord is going to bring the nation into a period of judgment for the sins under this time of Jephthah
 - But first, Samuel recounts a series of judges that bridge the period of Jephthah until the next major Judge, Samson

Judg. 12:7 Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.

Judg. 12:8 Now Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel after him.

Judg. 12:9 He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters whom he gave in marriage outside the family, and he brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years.

Judg. 12:10 Then Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem.

Judg. 12:11 Now Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel after him; and he judged Israel ten years.

Judg. 12:12 Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

Judg. 12:13 Now Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel after him.

Judg. 12:14 He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys; and he judged Israel eight years.

Judg. 12:15 Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

- Jephthah judged for only six years and then he died
 - If Gideon's failure was a willingness to adopt idolatry, then Jephthah's failure was his ignorance of God's word
 - Both men's failures had severe consequences for the people of God

- That's been the central lesson of Judges, that men rule in imperfect ways in line with the sinfulness of their hearts
- And in direct relationship to their knowledge of God's word and willingness to obey
- In only six years, Jephthah lost his only child and brought the nation into civil way
 - Then after him, a series of lesser judges ruled for very brief periods
 - The first is Ibzan, known for his 30 sons and 30 daughters, a sign of wealth in that day
 - We can safely assume he had multiple wives as well, or else his wife deserves an award of some kind
 - The re-emergence of polygamy is not a good sign
- Following him came Elon, then Abdon who was also wealthy with many sons and donkeys
 - Each of these men had large families, which was indicative of living as virtual kings taking advantage of the people
 - Each ruled a short time
 - And none had accomplishments worth noting
 - We can safely assume why the Lord left in power a short time and didn't record their work
 - It seems they were more interested in gaining wealth than seeking the Lord's pleasure
 - This tradeoff has never been different
 - It's always serve the Lord, accomplish great things for Him and the Kingdom
 - Or serve ourselves, accomplish temporal things and watch them burn up in the end
 - It's not the kind of work or even the place we work that matters
 - It's the master we're serving

- If we serve the Lord by His word, we are working for eternal purposes
- That service can be in a church or an office or a school or a neighborhood or our home
- The Lord wants men and women to serve Him in all these place and many more
- He seeks followers
- Israel received judges so that God's people would have access to God's word and to men who could judge the people according to the word
 - But when God's people ignore the word
 - And God's leader are ignorant of it too
 - Then no one will be serving the Lord, since no one will know when and how to please Him
 - That's the Israel we find in the last half century of the time of Judges
 - Let's commit ourselves to never repeating that mistake in our own walk