

JUDGES SESSION #14

The next judge of Israel is **Jephthah**. However, before we look at him we need to note that his story is *bracketed* by the mention of 5 minor judges:

Tola & Jair (in 10:1–5); and then following Jephthah's record we find brief comments about Ibzan, Elon & Abdon (in 12:8–15).

- at this point in the history of Israel, there is a strong **drift toward humanistic kingship** – and as James Jordan points out, these 'minor' judges highlight the ebb & flow of this drift
- In a sense, it goes back to Gideon. The people sought to make him a king and even though he refused, he demonstrated some of the lifestyle of a king which included fathering 70 sons.
- then **Abimelech** shows up and basically made himself a king
- **Tola**, the first of the minor judges, appears here by way of contrast: there are no regal manifestations mentioned in his brief record
- but the next minor judge, **Jair**, has 30 sons who ride on 30 donkeys (which is what kings rode on) and Jair puts these sons in charge of 30 cities, hinting at dynastic ambitions
- **Jephthah**, whom we will look at shortly, sought to establish a dynasty
- Then **Ibzan**, who had 30 sons and 30 daughters, sought to build up the importance of his family through marriage alliances
- **Elon**, the next minor judge, provides a note of contrast again, like Tola did, with no regal manifestations
- the final minor judge, **Abdon**, had 40 sons and 30 grandsons (for another total of "70" – like Gideon, but in Abdon's case extending his dynasty beyond his sons to his grandsons), and these 70 offspring rode on **70 donkeys**, giving the appearance of kings once again
- leaders in Israel by this time were now seeking special honors & privileges, engaging in polygamy, and acquiring the **trappings of kingship**
 - they were acting more like an **aristocracy** than servants of the Lord & His people
 - a wonderful contrast to this trend can be seen in **Boaz**, who also lived during the time of the judges and shows up as an unusual personality and instructive picture of Christ in the Book of Ruth

Before we get into Jephthah's record, have you noticed the great variety of characters we've seen already in the stories of the judges?

- #1 was **Othniel**, a prince of a guy and someone we could expect God to select for the role of judge
- thinking this is the kind of person all the judges should or would be, we got a big shock when **Ehud**, the left-handed assassin, came along, followed by a farmer with a Canaanite name and a pointed pole for a weapon
- a **woman** judge shows up, to our surprise, and she turns out to be one of the best of the bunch
- then along comes **Gideon**, fearful, hesitant, then showing courageous faith & obedience, only to falter badly after the battles were won
- ...it is abundantly clear that there is no divine 'template' or pattern for producing judges! – God calls a wide range of characters into his service...as He still does!

- and the next judge, **Jephthah**, is another such unexpected character
 - reminding us that our background, disadvantages, personality traits etc. are not determining factors at all when it comes to being called & used by God

[JEPHTHAH]

Let's begin our study of Jephthah by looking at...

A. THE **BACKGROUND** to his story

Judg 10:6-16

⁶ Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him. ⁷ So the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and He **sold them** into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the people of Ammon. ⁸ From that year they harassed and oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years — all the children of Israel who *were* on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, in Gilead. ⁹ Moreover the people of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight against Judah also, against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

¹⁰ And the children of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, "We have sinned against You, because we have both forsaken our God and served the Baals!"

¹¹ So the Lord said to the children of Israel, "*Did I not deliver you* from the Egyptians and from the Amorites and from the people of Ammon and from the Philistines? ¹² Also the Sidonians and Amalekites and Maonites* oppressed you; and you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hand. ¹³ Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more. ¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."

¹⁵ And the children of Israel said to the Lord, "We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray." ¹⁶ So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.

- the godly influence of Tola and Jair may have temporarily restrained ungodliness to some extent but now once again, Judges records another downward cycle of sin & disobedience, a cycle which intensifies as the Dark Ages roll on
- this time God delivered them up to the Philistines (on the west) and the Ammonites (on the east)
- and this time the oppression lasted 18 long years before the people called out to God!
- even after the terrible judgment & destruction we saw in Abimelech's story in the last session, resulting from the sinfulness of the people of Israel, they still persist in resisting God for 18 long years!

- in the process, verse 6 tells us that Israel served **7 gods**
 - but verses 11 & 12 point out an amazing truth directly related to this figure: God **delivered** them from various enemy nations **7 times!**
 - ...this is Israel's way of showing gratitude?!
 - and once again we find that the **lack of gratitude** for God's goodness leads God's people further into a downward spiral of distress
 - Paul reminds us as Christians to "*be thankful*" (Col. 3:15) and to give "*thanks to God the Father for everything*" (Eph. 5:20) – otherwise we too can begin sliding down that slimy slope
- and now, Israel cried out for help again
 - ...but maybe this cry is only one of **regret** – simply a concern about the *consequences*
 - as a result, God does *not* send help (13b – “therefore I will deliver you no more”)
- there is an important difference between *regret* and **repentance**
 - a Christian lady was visiting a thief who had been arrested and put in jail: “I hope you have repented of what you have done, so you will not make the same mistakes when you are released.” He said, “No ma’am, I sure won’t. Next time I pull a job, I’ll be sure to wear gloves.” – that’s **regret**, but certainly not repentance
- later – in verse 15 – we find that Israel did indeed turn to a degree of **repentance** with their confession, “We have sinned!” and in their actions of “putting away the foreign gods”
 - and our gracious God sends yet another deliverer: **Jephthah**
 - ... God does so, not because this is a deep thorough repentance, a genuine desire to change; but because of **God's own great love** for them (vs. **16b...** “His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.”) ... an amazing insight into the merciful character of our God!
- when you are tempted to think that *God doesn't love you any more*, because you are too much of a hopeless, helpless sinner, just remember Israel
 - we are too often too much like they were – and yet God's love persisted in reaching out to them ... and His unfailing love reaches out to you & to me just as well – a love that was strong enough to hold His Son Jesus on the cross is a love that will never let us go either!

The record of Judges gives us **5 stages** in the career of Jephthah:

1. **First** stage describes Jephthah as a **social outcast**

Judg 11:1-3

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he *was* the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah. ² Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you *are* the son of another woman."

- Jephthah doesn't have a good start – he is an illegitimate son, rejected by the rest of the family
 - he is alone, but he is not beyond God's grace
 - we are not "prisoners of our past"...
 - *God* is the great Determiner (not circumstances or childhood or any other factors)

The LifeGuide Bible Studies adds a comment here:

“Does God love us even when our own dysfunctions cause us to run from him? In the story of Jephthah, God uses this man with a broken and hurting past to illustrate what he will do to heal a broken, pain-driven world.”

2. His **Second** stage: he was an **outlaw**

Judg 11:3

Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out *raiding* with him.

- Jephthah and his gang of raiders look like something straight out of the Wild West!
 - but nevertheless this must have been a valuable time of **learning** for Jephthah:
 - a) he learned military **warfare** & strategy
 - ...which God later used for His glory
 - and you can be sure that God never wastes anything in our experience either
 - b) secondly, he learned **leadership**
 - c) and thirdly, he learned to **know God**
 - perhaps he was not spiritually mature, but as we see in his later conversations he was committed to God and knowledgeable about God's Word

3. His **Third** stage was a call to **leadership**

Judg 11:4-11

⁴It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel.

⁵And so it was, when the people of Ammon made war against Israel, that the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon."

⁷So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?"

⁸And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the people of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

⁹So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the Lord delivers them to me, shall I be your head?"

¹⁰And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The Lord will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words." ¹¹Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord in Mizpah.

- in yet another touch of **irony**, Jephthah's initial response to the men of Gilead ("Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?") echoes **God's** response to the people in 10:14 – Why come to me in your distress? Cry out to the gods you have chosen!
- notice this was not a position Jephthah sought – the leaders of Gilead had to approach *him* with their offer
 - ...in this stage of his career, Jephthah illustrates that it is **our job** to be faithful, responsible wherever we are; it is **God's job** to open doors of opportunity
- Jephthah is right in **not** seeking a leadership role for himself; however, when the offer comes we do see the dangerous beginnings of his **desire to be "chief"**

- when the Gilead delegation made their first offer it was simply that he might be their “*commander*” for a battle against Ammon (vs. 6)
- when Jephthah didn’t accept their offer right away, they improved the deal by saying he could also be their “*head* over all the inhabitants of Gilead” (vs. 8)
 - he picked up on that immediately and insisted that they confirm that clause in the contract – “shall I be your **head**?” (vs. 9)
- note this point because it becomes important later

4. the **Fourth** stage involved **negotiation**

Judg 11:12-13

Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon, saying, “What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land?”

And the king of the people of Ammon answered the messengers of Jephthah, “Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now therefore, restore those *lands* peaceably.”

- the following rather long passage gives us a back-and-forth encounter with the aggressive Ammonite king, in which Jephthah argued 3 main points supporting Israel’s stance that they would not give up their land for the expansionistic claims of Ammon:

a) check your **history**

...this “land was captured from the *Amorites*, not from the Ammonites” (vs. 21)

b) secondly, check your **theology**

...“the Lord God gave us this land” (vs. 24)

c) and thirdly, check your **logic**

...“we have held it now for 300 years; you can’t claim native rights to it now” (vs. 26)

- he clearly shows his faith in Jehovah and his knowledge of the Book of Numbers which gives the record of this history!

...our claims, as Christians, also rest solidly on **history & truth**

- as Peter wrote, “For we did not follow *cleverly devised tales* when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” (2 Pet 1:16 NAU)

- it’s impossible to ‘put God in a test tube’ or ‘prove’ the crucifixion & resurrection of Christ with scientific methods

- but that doesn’t mean Christian faith is simply a leap into the dark – our beliefs have a solid foundation in carefully recorded history and theological logic, as speakers like Josh McDowell, Ravi Zacharias and others have shown

5. And Jephthah’s **Fifth** stage was **victory** over Ammon

Judg 11:29-33

²⁹ Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced *toward* the people of Ammon. ³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, “If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, ³¹ then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I

return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

³² So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the Lord delivered them into his hands. ³³ And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith – twenty cities – and to Abel Keramim,* with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

- once again, a cooperative effort between God and His anointed judge – Jephthah in this case – brings deliverance for Israel; but notice that the emphasis remains strongly on **God's** role: *"the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah..."*
- regardless of Jephthah's abilities and experience, victory is ultimately won because God worked mightily in the situation
- and that truth applies in *our own lives* as well