

January 22, 2017
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Judges
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2017 David J. Whitcomb

To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Judges 12.

1. Why are there conflicts among God's people?
2. What is the best way to respond if someone insults us?
3. How easy is it for you to respond correctly to slights and insults?
4. Why is Jephthah included in the list of people who expressed faith in God (Hebrews 11)?
5. Do you think your name should be included in the extended list of people who express faith in God?

CONFLICTS WITH OTHER OF GOD'S PEOPLE **Judges 12**

The story of the judges is actually a long era in which God worked with His people in a particular way to help them learn a particular lesson. The Judges were deliverers, like saviors, who saved God's people from their oppressors and enemies when they cried out to God for help. They were in the line of people like Moses who God used to deliver His new nation from bondage in Egypt. They were like Joshua who God used to deliver over the land He had promised to give to Abraham's posterity.

But there is a perennial problem sitting on the surface of the stories about the judges. It is the same problem that plagued Moses'

leadership and Joshua's leadership. It doesn't take a theologian to discover that even though God had greatly gifted Moses to lead and even though God performed astonishing miracles to prove that the people should love and obey Him, they didn't. With the exception of a few short-lived revivals, the people as a whole were rebels the entire forty years Moses led them in the wilderness.

Joshua did not fair much better. God chose him to lead the conquest of the Promised Land. God delivered some pretty miraculous victories against the enemy. But too much of the land was left unclaimed. Too many of the pagans stayed in the land and influenced God's people with their paganism. That there was incomplete submission to God is obvious in Joshua's last speech to the people. Coming to the end of his career he challenged the people, *"And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD"* (Joshua 24:15).

Moses did not deliver the people from their besetting sins. Joshua fared no better. That brings us to this period of about 275 years we call the time of the judges. Overall, this period of nearly three centuries in Israel's history can be characterized by this assessment: *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* (Judges 17:6; 21:25). The history of that time was an endless cycle of God's people becoming like their pagan neighbors, practicing their sins; God raising up an enemy to oppress them; God's people crying out for help to God; God graciously raising up a savior to deliver the people; a time of peace leading back to the people falling into sin again. Those saviors could not deliver God's people from their sinful tendencies.

But maybe there was hope. Remember that when the writer of this book assessed that time as the days when everyone did what was right in his own eyes, he also said it was a day when there was no king in Israel. The next phase in God's work with Israel would be the period of kings. This era lasted over 600 years, during which time there were good kings and bad kings. In the early years of that period, the kingdom split which resulted in bickering, fighting, and even civil

war between the two groups of God's people. Obviously, the kings were not able to deliver the people from their sins.

During a large portion of the kings' period in history (about 400 years), God sent the prophets—preachers who warned that the peoples' sins were going to lead to serious consequences. There was an occasional revival in response to the preachers' messages. But as a whole, even the prophets did not deliver the people from their sins. What Israel, and us, and the world needed was the Savior who could deliver from sin once and for all. We need the Deliverer named "Jesus for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Jephthah and his peers didn't know about Jesus. They were left in their sins that caused each man to do what was right in his own eyes. The various people groups did whatever came natural. The result was a civil war. They proved the truthfulness of James' assessment: "*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?*" (James 4:1).

Sadly, the picture we see of the citizens of Israel, God's people, from the tribe of Ephraim, fighting with God's people in Gilead, part of the tribe of Manasseh, is repeated over and over in the visible church today. Individuals and church factions are engaged in civil war so often that it appears to pagan world that this is the norm. And they conclude, "Why would anyone want to do that?" Let's learn from Jephthah what not to do. Allow him and his peers to teach us how not to live.

The Argument (vv.1-3).

The problem, from one people group's point of view is that Jephthah didn't call the Ephraimites to help. So? Well it was obviously a big deal to the people in Ephraim because their first response was a call to arms. *The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon (v.1a)*. What was their problem? It goes back a long way.

When Jacob blessed his twelve sons, he gave Joseph a double blessing. As a result, a half a millennium later there were the tribes of Asher, Naphtali, Judah, and so forth, making up the nation of Israel. But there was no tribe of Joseph. That is because Joseph received a

double blessing through his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. By God's design, Ephraim and Manasseh (representing Joseph's two sons) were the leading tribes of northern Israel. The tribe of Judah was always the leading tribe in southern Israel.

The result was that the men of Ephraim always seem to have an edge about them. They conveyed the idea that they were to be in charge because they were the leading tribe of northern Israel. However, the people of Manasseh never seemed to convey the same pride. Maybe that is because half of Manasseh was located on the western side of the Jordan and half of the tribe was on the eastern side. A natural boundary like that can hinder communication and cooperation. Jephthah was from Gilead which was located in the eastern part of Manasseh.

But setting aside small issues of geography, there is a larger, glaring spiritual issue here. That the leaders of Ephraim always considered themselves to be in charge presents a problem for the rest of the tribes. God warns us that interpersonal relationships will suffer in the church also when someone begins to think too highly of himself or herself. Having taught us that we are to sacrifice ourselves to God, which is our spiritual service, Paul said, *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned (Romans 12:3)*.

From nearly the founding days of the visible church, she has suffered "Romans 12:3 problems." That was the issue in Corinth. People thought too highly of themselves and everyone wanted the "chief" positions. That was the problem for Ananias and Sapphira. They wanted to be somebody. That was Simon the magician's problem. That problem pops up in nearly all of the letters Jesus wrote to the seven churches in Asia. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see that the same spirit is responsible for planting hundreds of new churches across America today. Someone has pointed out that within five years of a new church plant, the church will lose 75% of its charter members. Someone else has pointed out that the reason for this is that most churches are established by Christians who are disgruntled with their current church. Those are generally people with a "Romans 12:3 problem."

And so the narcissistic Ephraimites gathered their army together and crossed the Jordan River near the town of Zaphon to confront Jephthah. There they expressed the second response which was to level a serious accusation and threat. They said to Jephthah, “*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*” (v.1b).

Throughout the judges’ period, the deliverers God raised up had various kinds of interaction with these people from Ephraim. First we read that the people of Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived among them (1:29). That they failed to obey God’s command never seemed to bother them. They were able to overlook their own glaring inconsistencies as they tried to put lesser people in their place. Though Ehud was from Benjamin, he was able to rally the people of Ephraim to defeat the Moabites (3:17).

Gideon had a confrontation with the Ephraimites because they thought he had slighted them. *Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight with Midian?” And they accused him fiercely (Judges 8:1).* When they confronted Gideon about this so-called problem, he appealed to their pride by reminding them that they were a superior people. Gideon’s pandering satisfied the proud people.

Jephthah was a negotiator, but he didn’t try to pamper people who offended him. He was willing to go to war against these relatives because the leaders of Ephraim threatened to burn down Jephthah’s house. We can’t be sure they chose those words intentionally, but we can be sure those words were loaded for Jephthah. He had just marred his “house” for life by “burning” his only child.

Loaded words are bound to stir up anger. Generally they are intended to accomplish just that. That is why God instructs His people to choose their words carefully. His rule is: *Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person (Colossians 4:6).* Wisdom says, *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver (Proverbs 25:11).* To that end David prayed as we should, *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Psalms 19:14).* In light of the wording they chose, we are not surprised that Jephthah took Ephraim’s threat personally.

In his defense, Jephthah claimed he did call the Ephraimites to help. *And Jephthah said to them, “I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand” (v.2).* It appears that someone was not telling the truth in this conflict. Are we surprised? Ephraim claimed Jephthah never asked for help. Jephthah claims he did. But there is no record in chapter eleven of Jephthah calling for their help. The evidence shows that he recruited in Gilead and Manasseh (11:29) but not in Ephraim.

This is a common problem in interpersonal conflict in the church. That is why evidence is an important issue. That is why God’s law required two or three witnesses to verify an accusation. Evidence doesn’t always solve the problem, but it goes a long way toward establishing truth. Hearsay and gossip should be avoided like the plague. “Fake news” is not a modern invention. It has been going around in the Church for centuries. Anyone can start a story about almost anyone doing almost anything resulting in great damage not only to the victim but to the Body of Christ.

Sometimes the problem is miscommunication or misunderstanding. If we are not sure what we heard, we should ask for clarification. Maybe Jephthah thought he had issued a call through a messenger. But the messenger never delivered the message.

Whatever the misunderstanding was, this accusation was quite serious to the judge who took his own life into his hands. He retorted to his accusers, *“And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?” (v.3).*

It is interesting to contrast this response to Jephthah’s response to the Ammonites. When the king of Ammon accused Israel of taking their land, Jephthah explained how they were in the right because God had given them the disputed land. Having claimed innocence, Jephthah left the outcome of the battle in God’s hands. *“I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon” (Judges 11:27).* In that case, Jephthah left the matter with the LORD and then went about doing what the LORD sent him to do (destroy the adversary).

This time, however, he claimed to be in the right, even though there is some doubt about that. This time he made no appeal to God. This case seemed to be a personal battle, a fight that involved people from Gilead to defend Jephthah's reputation. So how should God's people respond to personal insult? Why not just take the false accusation? That is the question Paul asked the Christian at Corinth who were not very adept at taking insults. *To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? (1 Corinthians 6:7).*

And maybe most obvious in this response, Jephthah identified himself repeatedly as a Gileadite when he was supposed to be leading all of Israel, all of God's people. That is what sectarianism looks like. Sectarianism is alive and well among the people of God. Do you really think Presbyterians, Methodists, Bible church, and everyone else who is different from us can possibly be saved? Why do we want to fight and disagree over non-essentials? Jephthah showed us why. **The Solution (vv.4-7).**

The solution to the problem can be described as bite and devour (vv.4-6). Jephthah reminded us that unrighteous people fight about accusations. *Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh" (v.4). "You fugitives!"* Oh, now we see what the real problem was. The Ephraimites saw the people in Gilead as unfaithful, people who had broken off from them. It looks a bit like two feuding churches only to discover that years before there had been a split that resulted in one church becoming two.

Or it looks like Christians who just don't like each other. Why don't they? What is the root problem? Is it jealousy, envy, wanting the possessions, position, or popularity enjoyed by another? Is it racial or ethnic bias? Whatever the root is, fighting and bickering is not the solution to the problem. Paul warned Christians, *But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another (Galatians 5:15).* The first step is to identify the source of the problem. James helps us out on that matter. *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your*

passions are at war within you? (James 4:1). No doubt the source of the conflict is in my soul.

Sinful human nature is why unrighteous people fight about ethnic distinctions. That was the issue in Jephthah's situation. It came to the surface when his people captured the escape route. *And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites (v.5a).* Remember that the people of Ephraim accused the people from Gilead, led by Jephthah, of being fugitives, break-aways. Surprisingly, the little band of Gilead were able to capture the only place where the Ephraimites could cross the river to get home. And here they wreaked vengeance on the insulters based on a distinction.

The distinction was obvious in common speech. *And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right (vv.5b-6a).* For whatever reason, the people who lived on the west side of Jordan pronounced Shibboleth different than the people who lived on the east side of the river. This is a regional, ethnic difference.

We are very familiar with this kind of thing. For example, where I grew up, a person would call the woman "Aunt Bea." But now I have a relative who grew up in New England who refers to the woman as "Auuunt Bea." But I also have friends from the hills of North Carolina who call her "Ain't Bea." And we all say, "So what? That's not a problem." Maybe. But I have a friend who grew up in the north who says, "I have a hard time trusting a preacher who has a southern accent." That is ethnic and regional bias.

The result based on the bias was devastating. *Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell (v.6b).* Because this was civil war, the ethnic distinction resulted in massive slaughter. The number seems almost unbelievable. If we compare it with what we consider to be horrible losses in battle, it isn't even close. For example, through the entire War of Independence 6,800 American soldiers died. The bloodiest battle of the War Between the States was Gettysburg with a total of 7,058 killed on both sides. Just over 4,000 allies were killed in the D-Day invasion. To kill 42,000 relatives over a personal insult seems ridiculous to us. Personal conflicts can lead to horrible ends.

Finally, Jephthah died. *Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead (v.7).* He was the judge over all of Israel. All of Israel was the people of God. All of Israel never seemed to be able to accept that God planned for Jephthah to lead them. Though he was supposed to lead Israel, Jephthah would always be a Gileadite! That proved to be divisive.

He was a complex man. On his best days he demonstrated faith in God. For example, to the elders of Gilead Jephthah said, “If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head” (Judges 11:9). *And Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah” (Judges 11:11).* To the king of Ammon he explained God’s work: “*So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them?” (Judges 11:23).* He explained, “*I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon” (Judges 11:27).* Did he have faith in God? It would appear so.

But then at other times he demonstrated the worst of human weaknesses. The text really does indicate that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as a burned offering (11:31,39). He went to war against God’s people because they offended him. And yet, God included him in the examples of faith in Hebrews. *And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – (Hebrews 11:32).* There is his name listed by God right along with Gideon who created idolatry, Samson who was a profligate, David who committed adultery and murder. Oh, and a verse earlier we find the name of Rahab the prostitute who lied about hiding the spies (v.31). Then there is Moses who robbed God of his glory and was barred from entering the promised land, and Jacob the liar and trickster, and Abraham who lied about his wife and had sex with her servant, and Noah who got drunk.

This rogues’ gallery reminds us that the only beings in the Bible who are perfect are God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. We also need to stop to remember that the only beings who thought they were perfect were the Pharisees. The best of us are no better than sinners saved by God’s grace. How desperately we need

God’s grace and influence in our lives to keep from going to war with each other over personal effrontery. God help us to be good negotiators with fellow humans in order to avoid conflict. God help us to never negotiate with Him, but to rest in His infinite wisdom and follow Him faithfully and without doubting.

Lesser Known Deliverers (vv.8-15).

Ibzan had a large family. *After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons (vv.8-9a).* On one hand, he seemed to demonstrate Solomon’s wisdom. *Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate (Psalms 127:4-5).* He was certainly a contrast to Jephthah who foolishly sacrificed his only child. On the other hand, the statement presupposes a multitude of wives. And maybe Ibzan was all about building political alliances instead of trusting God.

He judged and he died. *And he judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem (vv.9b-10).* See that there is no mention of an oppressor or of the people’s sin in his time.

Then there was Elon. He judged for ten years (v.11) and there is also no mention of an oppressor or of the people’s sin. He, like all the judges, died and he was buried in Aijalon in Zebulun (v.12).

Finally, in this list of “also rans” is Abdon. He, like Izan, had a large family. *After him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys (vv.13-14a).* His sons like Jair’s sons (10:4) rode on donkeys. Actually this was a show of ostentation and pride. Like his peers, Abdon judged and died. He judged God’s people for eight years (v.14b), and there is no mention of an oppressor or of the people’s sin. Several of the judges pushed the boundary toward kingship such as Jair, Gideon, Ibzon, Abdon. They collected wives, made alliances with pagans, gave their children to marry pagans and acquired gold contrary to God’s warnings about kings (Deuteronomy 17:14-17). Abdon was buried among the Amalekites (v.15b) which reminds us

that pagan people groups that God commanded to be annihilated were allowed to live in the land.

If nothing else is accomplished, the stories about the kings remind us that God works with imperfect people. Rather than be impressed with the judges, we ought to be impressed with God. It is indeed as one of my former teachers used to say, “When I think of what God has to work with, I am amazed that God gets anything done.” It is only through the work of the Perfect Deliverer, Jesus Christ, that we are able to accomplish anything that will bring God glory.