

GOD WITH US
Part 2: Conquest and Chaos
Joshua – Judges – Ruth

Message 8 – Judge Jephthah
Judges 9-12

Introduction

The cycle of Israel's sin continues, spiraling ever downward. Yet, the mercy of God continues to outpace the sin of His wayward people, as He comes to their rescue time and time again. In the story of Jephthah, we see how God took an underdog and used him to be the deliverer. We all love these "Cinderella stories" where some loser becomes the winner in the end. Such is the story of Jephthah – the outcast who became the champion. Everyone can gain much hope from the story of Judge Jephthah, because God can use any of us for His glory. The key is that we must choose, as Jephthah did, to allow God to overcome the shame of our past and write a new story that brings Him much honor and glory.

The chaos among Gideon's descendants: 9:1-57

Chapter 9 of Judges records the sad aftermath of Gideon's legacy. Gideon's son Abimelech, from his concubine in Shechem, rose up and had himself proclaimed king over Israel (9:1-6). To solidify his position, he ruthlessly killed the legitimate sons of Gideon - 69 of 70 sons executed in one day - with only Jotham the youngest surviving the brutal attack by hiding himself.

Quite often, people who are heroes in battle are not heroes in daily life. Gideon did great things for the kingdom of God; but sin in his personal life resulted in disastrous consequences for the generation that followed after him. Paul wrote to young Timothy: "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (1Timothy 4:16). Are you paying sufficient attention to your own personal walk with God? Are you engaging in the spiritual disciplines that strengthen your walk with God?

Jotham, the lone surviving son of Gideon, reproved the men of Shechem for turning their backs on his father and supporting

Abimelech. He pronounced a curse on the relationship between the men of Shechem and Abimelech. Ironically, he pronounced this curse from the top of Mt. Gerizim, which was the place where *the blessings were to be read* in the renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (see Deuteronomy 11:29)! The remainder of the story tells how this curse was actually fulfilled in the 3 years that Abimelech ruled over Israel (9:22). God sent an “evil spirit” to disrupt relations between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (9:23-25). From that point forward, there was nothing but ill will and murderous intent between these two parties. (Similarly, God sent an evil spirit to end the rule of king Saul [1Samuel 16:14]).

Why did God allow Abimelech to rule over Israel for 3 years? There was to be no “king” in Israel, but God Himself. Yet, God allowed this ruthless tyrant to rule Israel with an iron fist for 3 years. It is really impossible to comprehend the mind, will and timing of God. Yet, He is always in control and always allowing human affairs to play out according to His sovereign justice. When a difficult and trying situation lasts “too long” (in our eyes) we must have faith to believe that God is in perfect control of the people, circumstances and timing in ALL of it. He makes no mistakes.

A man named Gaal rose up against Abimelech, asking the men of Shechem to make him their ruler (9:26-29), which they did. Abimelech responded by attacking Gaal *and the inhabitants of Shechem*. He drove Gaal and his relatives out, and destroyed all the leaders of Shechem, burning the city to the ground (9:30-49). Finally, Abimelech himself was killed at Thebez when a woman threw a millstone from the top of a tower and crushed his skull. Thus, the evil spirit of animosity did its work and the curse of Jotham (the lone remaining son of Gideon) against Abimelech and the men of Shechem, was fulfilled.

Abimelech is a classic study in what you DON'T WANT in a leader. He began with selfish desires to rule. He then moved forward with ruthless, controlling strategies to get what he wanted. He murdered any and every opponent. He took upon himself a role reserved only for God. He exacted his own revenge against any who violated him. Finally, this proud man died in the most humiliating way. Instead of falling to a warrior's sword, he was crushed by a woman's grinding stone. “When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when a wicked man rules, people groan” (Proverbs 29:2). Be very careful who you appoint to rule over you. As goes the leader, so go the followers.

The Oppression of the Philistines & Ammonites: 10:1-10

For the next 45 years after Abimelech, two judges led Israel: Tola and Jair. Very little is said about either one, except that Jair's 30 sons rode on 30 donkeys and had 30 cities of their own. Apparently, Jair's personal glory, and the glory of his sons, was all that could be recited in memory of him.

Then, the Israelites turned away from God *again*. Another cycle of sin! But this time, their spiritual adultery was complete:

“Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him” (10:6).

In the past cycles of sin, Israel would tend to blend their worship of Yahweh with the worship of other deities (syncretism). This time, they abandoned Yahweh entirely and served an array of other “gods;” seemingly *every god but Yahweh!*

“The anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon” (10:7).

Under these oppressors, Israel was ***“shattered, crushed and greatly distressed” (10:8,9).***

Then the sons of Israel cried out to the Lord, saying, “We have sinned against You, for indeed, we have forsaken our God and served the Baals” (10:10).

How far does God have to go to get your attention? Israel had to be shattered, crushed and greatly distressed for 18 more years. Even then, they kept calling on all their other “gods” for help, to no avail. So much unnecessary suffering comes into our lives because we don't call upon God until we have exhausted every other option. As God sadly said through the prophet Hosea: “These people turn; but not upward” (Hosea 7:16). Who, or what do you keep turning to in your times of distress? Are you quick to turn to the Lord? “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth” (Palm 121:1,2).

God's dispute with Israel: 10:11-16

In this dispute with His people, God sounds very much like a lover who has been betrayed too many times, and is reluctant to move forward with yet another round of forgiveness and healing.

The Lord said to the sons of Israel, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the sons of Ammon, and the Philistines? Also when the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hands. Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods; therefore I will no longer deliver you. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress." The sons of Israel said to the Lord, "We have sinned, do to us whatever seems good to You; only please deliver us this day." So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord; and He could bear the misery of Israel no longer (10:11-16).

Yet, even here, we see God being moved to have compassion on His suffering people, after they called out to him in genuine repentance. Note that they didn't just "cry out" to God; but they also "put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord." They were not just paying lip service to repentance. This was true brokenness, and it moved God's heart.

God has emotions, and our love (or lack thereof) impacts His emotions. In the New Testament, we read that the Holy Spirit can be "grieved" within us when we fail to walk in God's ways (Ephesians 4:30). Here in Judges, God is a forsaken lover, ready to hand Israel over to her other lovers. Finally, after Israel repents deeply, God can bear her misery no longer. He moves to rescue His unfaithful bride. Do you ever stop to ponder how your actions are impacting God's heart? And do you ever stop to consider the incredible mercy and forbearance of God – how He just keeps coming back to you with His unending love and grace over and over and over again? His mercies are, indeed, "new EVERY morning" (Lamentations 3:23).

Jephthah called to deliver Israel: 10:17-11:11

As the oppressors gathered to further suppress Israel in Gilead, east of the Jordan River, the people began to ask:

"Who is the man who will begin to fight against the sons of Ammon? He shall become head over all the inhabitants of Gilead" (10:18).

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and a man named Gilead. Because he was an illegitimate child, and not an heir, his brothers drove him away from their homeland.

“So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob; and worthless fellows gathered themselves about Jephthah, and they went out with him” (11:3).

When the Ammonites attacked Gilead, the elders quickly turned to Jephthah and asked him to come be their deliverer and head.

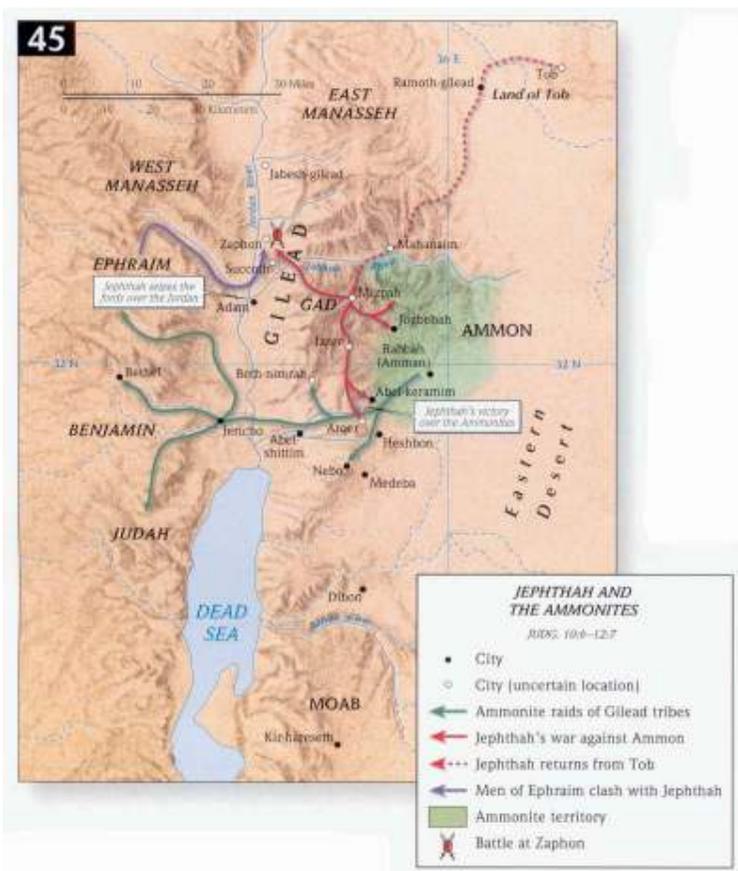
Then Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Did you not hate me and drive me from my father’s house? So why have you come to me now when you are in trouble” (11:7)?

Jephthah had to exercise forgiveness toward the very people who had rejected him. He had suffered much loss because of them; but now, he was willing to return and help them. Jesus said: “I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:44,45). Is there a past enemy who you need to forgive? Do they need your help now? Are you willing to return their hurt with your help?

He asked for reassurances that he would, in fact, become their head IF he delivered them in battle. They made a covenant with him before the Lord:

“Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and chief over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah” (11:11).

God continues to pick unlikely people to occupy center stage in His story: Tamar, Judah, Rahab, Gideon, Ruth, Bathsheba . . . Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, and he suffered much in life because of other people’s sins. Yet, God saw that he was a useful servant at this hour in Israel’s history. Perhaps your life has been marked by a series of unjust circumstances that have left you feeling unworthy and somewhat useless. Take heart from the story of Jephthah: God took a castaway (with a band of “worthless fellows” - 11:3) and turned him into the deliverer and leader of a nation, even giving him a mention in the great Hall of Fame of Faith (Hebrews 11:32). Give your life to God and let Him show you what you were REALLY made for. It’s definitely a bigger story than you could ever write for yourself!



Jephthah's attempt at a diplomatic solution: 11:12-28

Jephthah gave immediate evidence that he was more than just a hothead looking for a fight. He entered into skilled diplomatic efforts with the enemy with the hope of avoiding war. This is, in fact, the premier example in the Old Testament of a leader composing a diplomatic letter in the attempt to avoid war.

Jephthah embodied an important principle: Try to walk the peace-path, before you resort to the war-path. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:18). "Pursue peace with all men" (Hebrews 12:4). Perhaps you are embroiled in some dispute. Have you exhausted every possible peace-path, before resorting to war? Ask God if there is something that you can still do to resolve the situation in a peaceful manner. Maybe His Spirit will whisper a tactful strategy that you have not thought of to this point.

In his diplomatic letter, Jephthah recounted Israel's movement in the trans-Jordan area, under Moses, prior to entering the Promised Land. He indicated that Israel was forced into war against the Amorites (who formerly occupied the territory now in question) when Sihon their king attacked Moses/Israel. Most importantly, Jephthah argued that it was THE LORD who gave Sihon, and his land, into Israel's hands. He further argued that the Ammonites *never* had any legitimate claim to this territory (now Gilead, part of Israel). Jephthah concluded by asking the Ammonites to be content with the land that *their god*, Chemosh, had given to them; while permitting Israel to remain in the land that *their God*, Yahweh, had given to them.

“Since now the Lord, the God of Israel, drove out the Amorites from before His people Israel, are you then to possess it? Do you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the Lord our God has driven out before us, we will possess it” (11:23,24).

I will never forget the day that I sat with a developer who was demanding that we sell them the Gloria Deus Field on which Oak Pointe Church now sits. The developer owned ALL the land surrounding us, and wanted our 27 acres to finish their mile-square development. I told the developer the entire story of how God had given us a field named “Gloria Deus” (God’s glory), and that we were destined to be on this very spot, decades before our church was even conceived. After years of wrangling, threatening and maneuvering, the developer finally gave up the fight, saying: “It’s over. Build your church.” To God be all the glory for selecting this very piece of land long ago, and preserving it as a spot from which His glory continues to shine out to the region!

In spite of his efforts, the leaders of Ammon rejected Jephthah's letter and moved forward in their preparations to attack Gilead and take this territory into their own hands.

Jephthah's vow before battle: 11:29-33

As with every judge, Jephthah's work as deliverer began when the Spirit of the Lord fell upon him:

“Now the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, so that he passed through Gilead and Manasseh; then he passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he went on to the sons of Ammon” (11:29).

Very little attention is given to the details of Jephthah's many battles. He overpowered 20 Ammonite cities and completely subdued the enemy. Instead, significant attention is given to the *vow that Jephthah made prior to his battles*:

Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and (or) I will offer it up as a burnt offering" (11:30,31).

It is unclear whether or not Jephthah took time to ponder *what* or *who* might come out of the door of his house upon his victorious return. He seems to have been more concerned about gaining the victory, rather than carefully considering the possible implications of his vow. This would turn out to be a very costly and tragic mistake for Jephthah and for his very unfortunate only child.

Scripture warns against making hasty vows. "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2). Jesus echoed this in His teaching: "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil" (Matthew 5:33-37). We should be people who are so trustworthy that our simple word – Yes or no – is enough for others to believe us. And we should NEVER make rash, poorly thought out vows, as Jephthah did.

The cost of Jephthah's vow: 11:34-40

"When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had no son or daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the Lord, and I cannot take it back." So she said to him, "My

father, you have given your word to the Lord; do to me as you have said, since the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the sons of Ammon.” She said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me; let me alone two months, that I may go to the mountains and weep because of my virginity, I and my companions.” Then he said, “Go.” So he sent her away for two months; and she left with her companions, and wept on the mountains because of her virginity. At the end of two months she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man. Thus it became a custom in Israel, that the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year” (11:34-40).

There has been a long debate over whether Jephthah actually offered his daughter as a *burnt offering* (11:31), or if he offered her to the Lord as a *perpetual servant* in the Lord’s sanctuary (resulting in her never getting married, and being a perpetual virgin). It is very unlikely that the Lord, who was so opposed to child sacrifice, would have looked kindly upon Jephthah offering his daughter as a burnt offering. It is much more likely that, as a result of her father’s rash vow, she was forced to become a perpetual virgin in the service of the Lord in His sanctuary. This explains why she asked for permission to go to the mountains for 2 months to mourn *her virginity*. (Note: The Hebrew connective particle in v.31 can be translated “and” or “or.”)

It could easily be argued that Jephthah’s daughter is the real hero in this whole story. When her father came back from the war, she joyfully ran out to greet him and welcome him home. In return, she was wrongly blamed by her father for “brining him low” and “troubling him.” Still, she honored God and her father by encouraging him to fulfill his vow (at her great expense). She remained respectful to her father by asking his permission to go to the mountains with her friends for a period of mourning. Finally, she submitted to his vow and entered into a life of perpetual virginity and service to the Lord, forsaking the right to marry and raise a family. In the end, it was Jephthah’s daughter who was memorialized annually with a 4-day religious observance by all the women in Israel.

So often, our lives are seriously impacted by the actions of other people. Like Jephthah's daughter, we may suffer great loss due to the rash actions of another. Or, we may simply inherit a liability, as Jephthah himself did (being born to a prostitute and driven away by his brothers). Yet, the most important thing is for us to cling to God and look for His direction as we seek to respond to these life-altering hurts, however they come to us. In the end, we really only have two options: We can become bitter toward people, toward life and, ultimately toward God for what has happened to us. We can spend the rest of our days living as victims with an "if only" mindset. Or, we can turn to God and say, as Joseph did: "God meant this (evil) for good, to bring about this present result" (Genesis 50:20). The legacy of Jephthah's daughter was powerful, causing women in Israel to retune their hearts toward God 4 days each year . . . all because she responded to life's great hurts with faith in her God, rather than with anger toward the flawed father whose rash vow permanently changed the course of her life.

Jephthah's war with the tribe of Ephraim: 12:1-6

The tribe of Ephraim had previously complained to Gideon about being left out of a war. Now, they accuse Jephthah, similarly, of dishonoring them by not including them in the action. This time, however, their words are more threatening:

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" (12:1).

Once again, Jephthah engaged in diplomacy, stating that he *had* asked for their help in the battle (12:2,3). The two sides could not reconcile their differences. War erupted between the tribe of Ephraim and the men of Gilead. As a result, 42,000 men of Ephraim were killed . . . by their own Israelite brothers!

Jephthah's death and successors: 12:7-15

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

Israel enjoyed 31 years of peace under Jephthah (6yrs) and his three successors: Ibzan (7yrs) Elon (10yrs) and Abdon (8yrs). While other judges are noted for how many children they had, Jephthah the great warrior is remembered for having but one daughter, whom he sacrificed to the Lord!