

Introduction

Imagine living in a world that has completely lost its mind when it comes to human sexuality. Any notion of God’s original intent is completely lost and forgotten. The abuses that come with such ignorance are not merely tolerated; they’re celebrated. Violence is part of life. Nations stockpile terrible weapons and when the time is right they invade other nations solely to claim their resources for themselves. Greed and corruption are seen as necessary parts of leadership. Those who would have power and authority must know how to wield it and greed and corruption are just part of how the game is played. No one in power speaks of what is good and right—only what is expedient, what will maintain a grip on power.

Imagine living in a world where entire people groups are hated and despised. While diversity in religion is said to be valued and tolerated, religious animosity is a significant reason for war and its subsequent suffering. Despite such a world being truly pluralistic, animosities still run deep.

Imagine living in a world in which unwanted children are sacrificed for convenience and even prosperity. Women must be careful where they walk—especially at night, but also during the day. Men are in danger from attack, from those who would seek to enforce their turf, to claim power and authority over it, though no such power and authority has been granted. Those who carry a *bigger* stick cannot be stopped and so they claim power for themselves. Violence and chaos is characteristic of most cities.

Imagine living in a world with no love between citizens and neighbors. “You do you, boo” is the order of the day. “Live your life and imma live mine” is how entire communities “function”. And don’t dare *try* to tell me how to live my life: *only God can judge me*.

It shouldn’t be hard to imagine living in such a world. It is the world of the Ancient Near East and we’ve been immersed in it since September. It is the world of the judges in Israel. As we do with our nation, so often when we look back over history we tend to think of former days as *the good old days*, but the truth is they’re just *the same old days* as today. Only the calendar has changed and the technology holding it all up.

We’re in Judges 10 and 11 this morning.

Jdgs 10:17 Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. ¹⁸ 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.”

^{11:1} Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. ² And Gilead’s wife also bore him sons. And when his wife’s sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father’s house, for you are the son of another woman.” ³ Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the

land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.

⁴ After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. ⁵ And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ And they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites." ⁷ But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?" ⁸ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." ⁹ Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head." ¹⁰ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say." ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

¹² Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" ¹³ And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." ¹⁴ Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites ¹⁵ and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, ¹⁶ but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. ¹⁷ Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let us pass through your land,' but the king of Edom would not listen. And they sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh.

¹⁸ "Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab. ¹⁹ Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, 'Please let us pass through your land to our country,' ²⁰ but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory, so Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. ²¹ And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. ²² And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. ²³ So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? ²⁴ Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess. ²⁵ Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever contend against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them?

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? ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.

Judges 10:17–11:28

One Another

Last week we saw that Tola and Jair were judges who brought about a bit of stability in Israel. Rather than rescue from foreign oppressors, they brought some justice and peace to the people after Abimelech. The people, however, began to serve all sorts of gods. They weren't satisfied serving the one true God who had given them the land and who made them his people and who was dwelling among them. Instead, they turned to the various iterations of Baal and of Ashtoreth and the gods of Syria and the gods of Sidon and the gods of Moab and the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines.

Then the Ammonites called their army together to invade the land of Israel. Israel cried out to the Lord who asked them directly why they were crying out to him. He had rescued them countless times. Every time they had been oppressed, he had rescued them, and every time he rescued them, they went and did the very thing that led to their distress: they worshiped false gods.

The Lord told them to look to those gods for rescue. They clearly want to worship them; they should go and ask those gods for help. In chapter 10 we read “they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord”. We're left wondering how sincere their repentance was, given the pattern they had followed so closely.

We come to verse 17 in chapter 10. The Ammonites are getting ready for battle. They have encamped in Gilead, which is in East Manasseh's territory, just north of Gad and Reuben's territories. They're planning to invade south, into Gad and Reuben. They had already attacked Ephraim and Benjamin and Judah across the Jordan. Now they're planning a full-scale invasion, with the aim of taking over the territory belonging to Gad and Reuben.

The people of Israel assembled an army at Mizpah. There was more than one Mizpah; this is the one in Gilead. The language of verse 18 is reminiscent of how the book of Judges began. You may recall that back in chapter 1 verse 1 Joshua has died, yet there is still much land for them to possess. The process of purifying the land of its idolatry was ongoing. We read this:

Jdgs 1:1 After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the LORD,
“Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?”

Judges 1:1

What a great start! After the loss of their leader the people inquired of the Lord, just as they were supposed to. In our text both Tola and Jair have died. Israel is led by tribal leaders and clan leaders and village elders. They, too, are supposed to lead by inquiring of the Lord. Verse 18.

Jdgs 10:18 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.”

Judges 10:18

Rather than seek wisdom and direction from the Lord, they asked each other. This is the proverbial blind leading the blind. Notice also they don’t merely ask who should lead them into battle. They know they must offer something of incredible value—they must offer *headship* over them. The word implies something like a king. After the battle has been decided and the people are safe, the one who will lead them will remain in charge over them, receiving honor and wealth and all the trappings of being king, but without the title.

Complete Breakdown

The author then provides a flashback. He has to introduce Jephthah. Jephthah was a Gileadite—a native to that region. He was a mighty warrior. That is, he understood warfare and was skilled in it. There’s a caveat: but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was his father. We read this and we’re not all that surprised. Abimelech was the son of a concubine. We don’t know if his mother was an Israelite or a Canaanite, but that doesn’t matter. The fact that Jephthah was the son of a prostitute reveals just how far Israel has strayed as a people from the life God called them to live.

From the beginning God insisted that sexual relations were between a husband and a wife. All other sexual relations are illicit. There should be no sexual activity outside of that between a husband and a wife. This means the very existence of a prostitute reveals something has gone very wrong. It is more than sexual immorality, however.

No woman chooses this path for herself. No one grows up dreaming of this life. In the ancient world in particular, such a life was forced upon a woman if she had no family or husband to provide for her. Whether she were an Israelite or a Canaanite has no bearing on Israel’s responsibility toward her. The law of Moses said repeatedly that God loves the fatherless and the widow, the sojourner and the poor. He cares for them and provides for them and seeks justice for them.

Israel was supposed to pursue justice for the fatherless and the widow! Prostitutes in the ancient world were almost certainly widows and orphans, for they had no one to take care of them. There are exceptions, of course. Rahab comes to mind. But even if a woman were to choose this life, Israel was to be like God, and this should have rendered such an industry impossible.

Israel was to love the sojourner, the foreigner with no rights. Israel was to protect those most vulnerable in society. Surely that describes a prostitute in the ancient world! This requirement to care for and protect the vulnerable is throughout the law of Moses. God repeatedly instructs Israel about this and warns them against abusing the vulnerable.

Think of all the poverty-alleviation that was built into God’s commands for Israel. There was the regular cancellation of debt. Farmers were forbidden from harvesting an entire field; they were to leave the edges and the corners and such for those in need. As the workers harvested they would cut and bundle grain into piles called sheaves. After a field was cut—

leaving the edges, of course!—they would then collect all the sheaves. What if they forgot a sheaf?

Deut 24:19 “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Deuteronomy 24:19

God built into the economy of Israel *poverty alleviation*, which means no woman should ever be forced into such a life merely to survive. When we read that Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, this says so much more than his father Gilead was immoral. The social fabric of Israel had completely broken down such that a woman—again, whether she were a Canaanite or an Israelite doesn't matter—a woman found herself in such a business.

The point being made about Jephthah being the son of a prostitute is less about this particular woman's life choices and more about Israel's national rejection of God as king. The author's point isn't about this woman being a prostitute but about the utter breakdown among God's people that enables the world of prostitution in the land God claimed for himself. This means that Israel's suffering under the hand of the Ammonites was the result of their own sin. They had bowed down to the Baals and the Ashtaroah, to the various gods of the nations around them. Further, they had completely abandoned the ways of YHWH God of Israel, and the resulting chaos of sin was everywhere in the land, causing great harm to all. It should be no great surprise the leaders in Gilead asked one another for a leader; they had, despite their earlier “repentance”, completely forgotten their God.

Successful Negotiations

Gilead was married. His wife bore him sons and daughters. The author says in this brief flashback that when these boys grew up, they drove Jephthah out of the house. This is interesting, for ordinarily the son of a prostitute would not live with the father and his family. It seems apparent that Gilead formally adopted Jephthah into his household and granted him an inheritance. It seems Gilead has died so his brothers drove him out. They couldn't simply deny him his inheritance so they had to take him to court.

For this they would have sued him before the leaders and elders. When it says they drove him out of their father's house and told him he would have no inheritance, they have legal authority to do so for the elders must have agreed with them that the son of a prostitute should have no inheritance among them. It's quite likely any one of those elders could have been his father as well, showing just how far they had fallen.

In verse 3 we read Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Worthless fellows joined him. This is the same word for Abimelech's hired men, except in Abimelech's case, they were more than worthless; they were also reckless. Jephthah is smarter than that, so he merely gathered worthless men—men with low standards. They weren't foolish, however, for Jephthah was a mighty warrior. You can't go to war with men who are utterly unreliable. Immoral, maybe, but not unreliable. They have to be hard working and brave to be part of his small army.

Having introduced Jephthah the author returns to the issue in verse 4. The Ammonites gathered for war against Israel. The elders of Gilead knew they needed a capable military leader but instead of inquiring of the Lord, they relied on their own wisdom and decided to ask Jephthah to lead them. Remember: they drove him away at his brothers' request!

In verse 5 the elders of Gilead made him an offer: come and be our military leader and help us fight against the Ammonites. We need to recognize something. In the beginning of our text they said they would make the man who led them in battle their head—that's the word "rosh". Here they offer to make Jephthah their leader—their "qatzin". The words "head" and "leader" sound like different words for the same thing but to be their head means he would be in charge after the war as well. To be their leader, their "qatzin", means he would be their military commander so when the war was over, he could go back to, you know, *the land of Tob*.

He knows what's up, though. In verse 7 he reminds them of their involvement in his life. "Aren't you the guys who hated me and agreed with my brothers and stole my inheritance and drove me out of the only life I ever knew? And now you're gonna ask for my help because you're in trouble?"

I really appreciate their response. They say, "Yeah, that's...that's what we're doing." But then they bump up their offer. If he will fight for them, he will be their head—their "rosh", not just their "qatzin". Jephthah pushes harder on this and negotiates with them by invoking the name of the Lord. If he fights for them and if the Lord gives him victory, then he will, in fact, be their head—their "rosh", their ruler for life.

By bringing YHWH God of Israel into the agreement, he's aiming to make this an unbreakable agreement, one they cannot renege on. They agree, also in the Lord's name. Verse 11 says he went with them and they "made him *head* and *leader* over them".

Jephthah knew he was negotiating from a position of strength. When you negotiate with someone who is desperate, they're more likely to agree to whatever terms you throw at them. What other choice do they have? They have to agree to his terms.

The text says he returned with them to Mizpah—where Israel's army was assembled. There he "spoke all his words before the Lord". This was like an oath of office. He made an oath to be their head and their leader, but was it really before the Lord? Daniel Block isn't so sure.

It is difficult not to conclude that, like Jephthah's reference to Yahweh in v. 9 and the elder's appeal to him in v. 10, the entire ceremony represents a glib and calculated effort to manipulate Yahweh. In reality the witness Jephthah is concerned about is not Yahweh, but the army of Gilead, camped at Mizpah.

Daniel I. Block, NAC

Failed Negotiations

Jephthah is now feeling pretty confident in his ability to negotiate. He seems to think that because he was so very convincing—ignoring the desperation of those with whom he was negotiating—he can negotiate with the Ammonites as well. In verse 12 he sends a messenger to the king of Ammon asking why he's coming against him. Notice his language: "What

do you have against *me*, that you have come to fight against *my land*?” He knows he’s the leader and the head of Gilead now.

The king of Ammon claims Israel stole land from him. The tribe of Gad and the tribe of Reuben occupy land that he claims belongs to the Ammonites, and he wants it back. The Arnon River is the southern border of Reuben, and the northern border of Moab. Jephthah’s response is to point out that Israel didn’t take land from Moab or from Ammon, therefore there is nothing to *return*.

He explains that when Israel was wandering in the wilderness they requested permission to travel through Edom and through Moab, but neither king would give them permission. They promised to not touch a fruit tree, yet they were denied and they did not enter either nation’s territory. Then they asked permission to travel through the land of the Amorites. The land between the Arnon River to the south and the Jabbok River to the north was the land of the Amorites. Sihon was king of the Amorites and Sihon not only refused access for Israel, he foolishly chose to challenge the God of Israel in battle and was soundly defeated. Thus Israel defeated the Amorites and the land of the Amorites—not the Moabites and not the Edomites and certainly not the Ammonites—the land of the Amorites belonged to Israel. This is where Reuben and Gad chose to remain.

In verse 23 Jephthah rightly claims it was YHWH, the God of Israel, who defeated the Amorites and gave their territory to Israel. He then challenges the Ammonites: will you try to take the land from YHWH? In verse 24 he asks, “Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess?”

He’s being very shrewd here. Remember that Moab was defeated by Ehud. Ehud didn’t conquer the land of Moab; he pushed the Moabites out of Israel. This defeat weakened Moab. The political shrewdness is seen in him claiming Chemosh was the god of the Ammonites. It also reveals his terrible theology.

Chemosh was the god of *Moab*. He’s strongly suggesting that the king of the Ammonites has power over Moab, not Israel, and therefore Chemosh is their god. Chemosh is the one rejecting Moab and favoring Ammon. The Ammonites worshiped Milkom and Molech. He claims they have control over Moab because Chemosh, the god of Moab, gave them control over Moab. In other words, he’s saying the only way Ammon can have control of Moab is if the god of that particular land—the land of Moab—gave them power over it. While he seems to know Israel’s history, he doesn’t know the law of Moses.

Deut 2:19 And when you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession.

Deuteronomy 2:19

God specifically told the people to not go through Ammon’s territory. This would include taking any Ammonite land! Notice *who* gave the land to the Ammonites, and it ain’t Chemosh! The Lord, the God of Israel placed the Ammonites in that land. Jephthah, despite his knowledge of history, seems to miss this significant point.

Then he makes another logical argument. In verse 26 he says in all the time Israel has owned that land, which he inaccurately claims to be 300 years, if it was, in fact, Ammonite

land, why didn't he take it sooner? What took you so long? Imagine Canada contacting Washington DC and saying, "Hey, you took South Canada from us! We want our UP back!" Why would they make such a claim *now*?

He sums up his argument by saying he has done nothing wrong; therefore the king of Ammon is in the wrong for attacking his people. Then he invokes YHWH again: "YHWH, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon."

Application

We've seen in both the book of Joshua and now the book of Judges that the conquest of the land of Canaan was not about genocide, about the wholesale slaughter of people groups. It wasn't really about killing. It was about removing idolatry from the land. If any people groups living in the land insisted on holding on to their idolatry, they were to be met in battle, but the aim of that battle was not their deaths, but the destruction of their altars and their carved images and such. Israel was to cleanse the land of idolatry.

In this we see God's missionary purpose. His purpose was always the blessing of all nations. All the way back in Genesis 12 God promised to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham and his offspring. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, a mixed multitude joined with them. They became part of the people of Israel and received that blessing. When God led them to the land we see that many non-Israelites were part of Israel, from Moses' own wife to his brother's grandson Phinehas, who became Israel's high priest. When they entered the land we see that even Canaanites were counted among God's people. Caleb, the spy from the tribe of Judah, was a Canaanite. Rahab was a Canaanite; she married the son of Judah's tribal chief. Othniel—Israel's first judge!—was a Canaanite. Because of their faith in the God of Israel they were counted among God's people.

This was always God's plan. By blessing his people with material prosperity and good health and even great fertility, the nations would see the power of YHWH God of Israel and would be inclined to worship him. The problem is Israel kept interrupting that plan by worshiping the gods of the nations around them. Rather than enticing the nations to worship their God and become part of Israel, Israel worshiped their gods and became just like them—they became, essentially, *Canaanites*. They were Israelites in name only.

God could have revealed himself to the nations directly. He could have appeared to them as he did to Abraham. He could have sent them a Moses, a person called and gifted to proclaim God's word to them directly. He could have done this, but he chose to use a nation. Israel was to serve a missionary role to the Ancient Near Eastern nations surrounding them.

Israel was an Ancient Near Eastern people. God communicated to them in a way that Ancient Near Eastern people could understand. This is why he gave them the Torah—the law of Moses. Any Ancient Near Eastern person would have readily recognized what it was: a description of Israel's true King. They would have known what the God of Israel was like because of what his laws were like. God is fair and just; this is why the laws required fairness and justice. God loved the widow and the orphan and the sojourner. This is why the law of Moses required the people love the widow and the orphan and the sojourner. This is why Israel had to provide for them.

The law of Moses was not meant to be merely a written document that other nations would study. Rather, the people of Israel would, by living in accordance with the character

of God, show the nations what God is like. They were to be Ancient Near Eastern people who lived in their Ancient Near Eastern culture and who showed other Ancient Near Eastern people what their lives would be like if they, too, worshiped the God of Ancient Near Eastern Israel.

When we read the description of life in Israel in our text, we see such a gross breakdown of life among them that it is clear they were not showing the nations what life under God's authority was like. Instead, they were merely a reflection of the nations. The nations were supposed to see what they would look like following YHWH God of Israel. All they saw, however, was their own reflection. They could not see the reflection of God in his people for his people refused to look like him.

God's method for carrying out his plan has not changed. His plan is still to bless all nations on earth through Abraham's offspring. Those offspring are no longer found among a people who share DNA. Instead, Abraham's offspring are those who trust in Christ, as Paul explains in Galatians. Abraham's offspring are those who share Abraham's faith. This means you and I are called to live in such a way that we point people to the power of God revealed in Christ.

In the early church a letter was written to an unbeliever who had inquired about the Christian faith. This is rather surprising because the early church did not have any real strategy for evangelism. They didn't write about it. They didn't have any grand scheme for how to "win the lost". Instead, they focused on faithfully following Jesus in their cultural contexts. The letter to Diognetus explains:

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life. ... But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries, but only as nonresidents; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.

Epistle to Diognetus 5:1-2, 4-9

Tim Keller *kellerized* this by saying that when non-Christians look at your life, they should see what they would look like if they were Christians. Non-Christians should be able to see how different—and how similar!—their lives would be if they followed Christ. Where Israel went wrong was instead of showing the nations what they would look like if they followed YHWH God of Israel, they instead mirrored the nations.

When you go to work, your way of life should say to those around you, "This is what you would look like if you were a Christian who sells insurance for a living." Our lives should reflect the truth of who Jesus is. If you're retired, your life should show other retired people what they would look like if they followed Jesus.

Our lives should show what others would look like if they used social media as a Christian. This is what you would look like if you were dating as a Christian dates. This is what you would look like if you were a Christian who enjoys woodworking. This is what you would look like if you were a Christian who cheered for a college football team. This is what you would look like if you were a Christian who works in a factory. This is how you would love your wife if you were also a Christian. This is what you would look like if you were a Christian engaged in conversations about politics. This is what you would look like if you submitted to the Lordship of Christ in every area of your life.

Too often Christians think our role is to “change the culture”. It’s more true that our “role” is to be changed ourselves, to be transformed within our culture. We don’t need a new culture; we need our culture to reflect the glory of God in the face of Christ, and this begins with Christians reflecting that glory.

Our culture has no problem telling us how we should live our lives; our response to this shouldn’t be to *tell* the world how the world should live. Our calling is to *show* the world how to live. The single-most effective strategy for proclaiming the gospel to the world is living as if the gospel were true.