

## Introduction

Some of you know my wife and I don't take typical sorts of vacations. We're never going to that place in Florida, for example. It may be a small world after all, but *it ain't that small*. Not only would we never go to that place, we probably wouldn't even head to Florida. What is there to do in *Florida*? We go to the beach a couple times a *decade*! Well, this time last year we were in Mexico with extended family and we did, in fact, swim in the Gulf of Michigan. As much as I might like to go camping and connect with "nature", all Dawnae hears is "dirt and bugs", and since I'm rather fond of her, there isn't a lot of "dirt and bugs" in her life.

Instead, we're far more likely to get away for a weekend to visit a museum or a zoo. We love historical places, too. On our honeymoon we visited Abraham Lincoln's tomb. We've visited Fort Sumter, where the Civil War began. We've visited Bennett's Place, where the Civil War truly ended. We've visited Chickamauga Battlefield, where the Civil War turned decisively. It was in direct response to the loss there that the Union troops went to Chattanooga and captured the central hub of the Confederates' supply lines.

We hiked up to Starved Rock in Illinois. (What a sad story that is! Hint: it wasn't the rock that starved!) We've visited Old Joliet Prison, the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, the National Zoo, Gettysburg, everyone's all-time favorite—the Postal Museum. We've ascended 27,498 steps up to Castle Rock in the UP. My wife loves finding these strange, out-of-the-way places to visit. Did I mention the US Postal Museum? It has an entire section *on postage stamps*.

With the exception of zoos, if it showcases a bunch of old stuff, we'll probably enjoy it. My favorite place we've ever visited was Israel. There is, of course, so much history there. Even in Washington DC some of the most amazing places to visit were tombs. One does not need to visit many historical places to realize that to visit an historical place is to visit graves. Graves always reveal what gets remembered when a person dies. You often see this on tombstones.

My life's mantra has been simple and straightforward. My kids have heard this a billion times: "I do what I can with what I have". I want that on my tombstone: "He did what he could with what he had". I suspect a hundred years from now people would wonder just how incompetent and inconsequential that guy was!

This morning we're taking a look at the end of the Jephthah cycle. We'll see the final recorded act from his life, and then a brief look at the summation of his life. Finally, we will try to see what Jephthah's struggles might mean for us today. We're in Judges 12.

<sup>Jdgs 12:1</sup> The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and 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."

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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?" <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. 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," <sup>6</sup> they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell.

<sup>7</sup> Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead.

Judges 12:1–7

## Insult

The book of Judges is a series of repeating patterns. Israel sins; God hands them over to an oppressor; Israel cries out to the Lord; the Lord raises up a judge to deliver them; the land has peace for a time. This pattern isn't firm, however. There are increasingly chaotic elements added to the pattern that result in great suffering for Israel.

Abimelech, for example, was not raised up by the Lord. Instead, he seized power by brutally murdering his 70 brothers and oppressed Israel with his chaotic reign. When he was killed there was no declaration of rest for the land.

Jephthah was also not raised up by the Lord. The people of Manasseh appointed him their ruler because they were being oppressed by the Ammonites. Rather than cry out to the Lord for deliverance, they took matters into their own hands and appointed a man who was unworthy of leadership. While Scripture is clear that he had at least a mustard seed-sized faith, his syncretism—his blend of worship of YHWH God of Israel with the gods of the nations around them—disqualified him from any real leadership role. We saw the resulting chaos of his syncretism when he offered his own daughter as a burnt offering in exchange for power and control.

Last week we saw Jephthah defeated the Ammonites. The battle is simply declared to have happened and Jephthah and his army—empowered by the Spirit of God—have overwhelming victory. Though God's Spirit was upon Jephthah, God remains utterly silent through the entire episode. Havilah Dharamraj explains:

The deafening silence of God suggests that he has left his people to destroy themselves. The familiar formula that rounds off a judge's reign—that the land had peace—has been missing since Gideon. With Abimelech and Jephthah, the stories end with war rather than peace.

Havilah Dharamraj, South Asia Bible Commentary

The war is over, though, isn't it? Jephthah defeated the Ammonites and destroyed 20 cities—fortresses, further preventing more attacks from Ammon. The response of the people should have been gratitude. Remember that the book of Judges is not in strict chronological order. Also remember what is happening during the Jephthah cycle: the people of Israel have been worshiping the Baals and the Ashtaroah, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. The result?

Jdgs 10:7 So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites,<sup>8</sup> and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead.<sup>9</sup> And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.

Judges 10:7–9

Israel is being harassed on two sides—the Philistines to the west and the Ammonites to the east. While the tribes closest to these territories would have been affected the most, the Ammonites were sending armies into the land to further oppress the people. Jephthah is appointed the leader of Manasseh when the Ammonites finally assemble a large army to truly invade the land. God gives Jephthah victory over the Ammonites, which protects the tribes on the other side of the Jordan. There is no declaration of peace or of rest, however.

In verse 1 the men of Ephraim are called to arms. That is, they assemble an army. Surely they're going to head west to fight the enemy, *the Philistines*, right? No, they cross the Jordan to the east and arrive at the city of Zaphon, where Jephthah happens to be, and they're not there to say thanks.

They immediately ask him why he squared up with the Ammonites and didn't invite them. They feel personally affronted that Jephthah would round up an army to fight the Ammonites but didn't ask them to join him (though he claims he did!). Notice how quickly it escalates, however: "We will burn your house over you with fire." They went straight from this guy rescuing them from the Ammonites to a Facebook post!

Remember who Jephthah is. He was the son of a prostitute, which would have carried a deep sense of shame. He was adopted by his father, which means he was brought into his father's house with his father's wife and his father's other sons and daughters—so-called *legitimate* sons and daughters. He was given an inheritance along with his brothers. Then, when his father died, his brothers forced him out of their father's estate and sued him to take away his inheritance. His own people agreed with the brothers and he lost his inheritance—even more, he lost anything that might resemble a family.

He was forced to flee and forge his own path. Jephthah grew up with a deep sense of shame. Surely this shame followed him throughout his life. Surely he felt alone and unloved. Surely he longed for respect and admiration. He wanted to *belong*. Then he was presented with an opportunity to be somebody so he seized that opportunity, negotiating his way to be both the military leader of Gilead and their governor for the rest of his life. To show how committed he was to defeating the Ammonites, he made a vow that he would—if necessary—sacrifice his only daughter to the cause.

Empowered by God’s Spirit, he went to war with the Ammonites and had overwhelming victory. He drove them back to their own territory and destroyed 20 fortresses along the edge of their land, thus preventing them from regrouping and re-invading Israel. Upon returning home his only daughter then greeted him as the conquering hero. He chose to keep his foolish vow and offered his daughter as a burnt offering.

When the men of Ephraim confront him at Zaphon, they’re ready for war: war with Jephthah. Do you see how personal their insult is? Remember, Jephthah had options. He could have paid the price required by Leviticus 27 and could have avoided fulfilling his vow to offer his daughter as a burnt offering. He could have simply thrown himself on the mercy of God and refused to kill his daughter, taking the curse of his sin upon himself. Rather than do the right thing, he killed his daughter and offered her as a burnt offering.

The men of Ephraim know this. This is why they threaten to kill *him* and *burn* his house down over him. “Oh, we hear you like burnt offerings. We’re gonna make *you into one*.” Rather than offer their gratitude, they offer him insult. Jephthah has been dealing with his trauma his entire life, and then he added to it with his own foolish and selfish ambition. Ephraim shows up with an army and adds fuel to that fire.

## Pride

We saw when Gideon defeated the Midianites with just 300 men, the Ephraimites were angry, demanding to know why Gideon didn’t ask them to join his “army”. On the way to demand this of him, they had captured Zebah and Zalmunna, two princes of Midian. Gideon showed great diplomacy by pointing out their success in capturing these two princes were greater than any success he had achieved. This defused the situation. Rather than reply with wisdom, Jephthah defends himself. He feels their personal attack and he allows his deep sense of shame and his struggle to be somebody control him and his response. Notice how many times he refers to himself in his reply in verses 2–3.

Jdgs 12:2 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. <sup>3</sup> 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*?”

Judges 12:2–3

I matter! I have meaning! I have purpose! I have done something great! Why don’t you love me? Here we see Jephthah’s pride. At first glance this may not appear to be pride because when we think about pride we tend to think of one who brags. We think pride is thinking too much of yourself—and it is. We’ve all known people who assumed they were the best at everything, that they were smarter and more clever and more capable and more skilled at whatever. Pride means a big ego.

That’s one side of pride. Pride is certainly thinking too much of yourself, but that isn’t what Jephthah is doing. Jephthah doesn’t think he’s all that great. His struggle is in the other direction. He doesn’t think he’s much at all. Jephthah *knows* he’s no one special. He even consistently gives *the Lord* credit for victory. He told the men of Ephraim the Lord

gave Ammon into his hand. It wasn't that he was such a great warrior; it's that the Lord is powerful and the Lord gave them into his hand.

Jephthah's pride is not thinking too much of himself. His pride is seen in thinking of himself too much. Jephthah doesn't think he's great, but he thinks of himself too much. His concerns, his problems, his struggles are always the most important issue. He struggles to find meaning and purpose. He must insert himself into every conversation—not because he's so great but because he needs to be important. He needs *to feel* he matters to others.

Just as we all know those who think they're the greatest at everything, we also know those who are always bemoaning their lot in life. These are the “Woe is me” people. There are those who think they are the greatest, but pride can also manifest itself in being the worst. Everything always goes wrong for me. I'm the most incompetent. Life is never fair to me. I never get anything good. No one likes me. No one reaches out to me. No one invites me over. No one ever gives me anything. No one ever thinks that I'm [fill-in-the-blank]. Rather than thinking too much of themselves, they think of themselves too much.

This is Jephthah. It's clear he's had an awful road to walk. He didn't choose his parents. He didn't choose his lot in life. He didn't want his brothers to reject him. He didn't ask the leaders of his people to side with his brothers. These things happened. Jephthah's problem is how he chose to deal with his lot in life. Rather than continue to trust the Lord and seek to do the right thing, he chose to focus on himself. His pride made him the center of everything. His desire to be loved and respected made him the center of everything.

Every perceived slight was magnified. Every perceived insult was the worst possible insult. Everything was interpreted as being against Jephthah but rather than trust the Lord for what is good and true, Jephthah sought to correct all the perceived insults by showing the world how important he was. He had to show them he mattered.

Once again, rather than do the right thing, Jephthah responded with what he thought was in his own best interest. In verse 4 he gathered his army—they probably hadn't yet dispersed to go home—and struck the men of Ephraim. Notice why in verse 4.

Jdgs 12:4 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.”

Judges 12:4

As with the threat to burn down his house with him inside, this is a true insult. The Ephraimites called Jephthah and his army “fugitives”, whether they're in the land of Ephraim or in the land of Manasseh. In a nutshell, they're telling Jephthah, “No matter where you go, *you don't belong*. Nobody wants you. Nobody cares for you. Nobody will miss you.” It is a wicked thing for them to say, but Jephthah responds with wickedness of his own: he attacks them with his army. Rather than respond with wisdom and grace, rather than seek to do what is right, Jephthah chose to violently defend himself.

While the fighting was going on some of the men of Gilead captured the fords of the Jordan river. This was a wider, shallower point where folk could wade across. Further north and further south the river was deeper and moving more swiftly. This is like capturing a bridge: it is the safest way across. As men of Ephraim headed back home, Jephthah's men tested them before letting them cross.

We see here tribal differences in pronunciation had already developed, much like Michigan versus Kentucky. Yeah, we both speak English, but in Michigan we don't have accents. It seems the people of Ephraim had for some time pronounced Hebrew sibilants differently. Sibilants are the "s" and "sh" sounds: Sally sells seashells by the sea shore. In short, the Ephraimites pronounced all "sh" sounds with "s".

Before letting a man cross the fords, the army forced him to say "Shibboleth". If he were a native Ephraimite, he would have said "Sibboleth". It would be like asking someone from Texas to say "oil". Even if he pronounced it "oɪl", it would be obvious he was trying very hard to pronounce it the way you wanted him to. At the fords of the Jordan, if a man could not pronounce the word Shibboleth properly, they killed him. Forty-two thousand men of Ephraim died that day. Once again we see that a judge who was supposed to impose justice on his people and was supposed to be a blessing to Israel was Israel's oppressor. Jephthah became the enemy within.

The author indicates a profoundly sad ending for Jephthah. In verse 7 he says Jephthah judged Israel for six years. The ESV renders the next part, he "was buried in his city in Gilead". The word city, however, is plural. He was buried in *one of the cities* in Gilead. Which one? Who knows? No one cared to remember.

## The Real Idol

In the end, the idol Jephthah worshiped was popularity and fame and love and acceptance. More than anything else, he wanted to belong. In the end, however, his idol abandoned him. He sought the approval of others and was willing to give up the thing that was most precious to him for it—his own daughter!—and his idol still denied him. He was buried in a tomb no one remembered. The reader is left wondering how long it took for others to notice he was gone and needed to be buried.

When faced with the decision to honor his terrible vow or honor the Lord by embracing the alternatives that were available to him, he chose poorly. He chose the worst possible option. Surely it would have been better to throw himself at the mercy of God for breaking a vow than to keep a vow by killing his own daughter! When faced with the option to either ignore the insult or to inquire of the Lord how he should respond, he chose violence. He chose the worst possible option.

Jephthah's entire life has been a tragedy and while his childhood and the shame he would have experienced as a kid despite being adopted into his father's household would have been magnified because of the cruelty of children. His brothers didn't suddenly get the idea to challenge his right of inheritance. They probably grew up knowing that as soon as Dad died, they would get rid of the family's shame.

It wasn't Jephthah's fault. He didn't choose how he was conceived, or by whom. He had no say in his mother's occupation. His fault lay with consistently making the wrong choices. We've seen what he did with his daughter. We've seen what he did in trying to negotiate with God. We've seen what he chose to do with his fellow Israelites when they insulted him. His entire life he has faced an option that he continued to ignore.

It's not hard to feel a bit of compassion for Jephthah. It's also not hard to be really angry with him. The selfishness evident in offering his own daughter is horrifying. K. Lawson Younger really captures the essence of Jephthah.

The tragedy of this passage is repeated again and again in our modern society. Hurt people hurt people. Jephthah came from a dysfunctional background. He was an illegitimate son, born of a prostitute, rejected and disinherited by his family, leader of a gang. He became a man who was hurt, angry, bitter, ambition-driven, ready to fight, manipulative, ignorant of God's Law, abusive of his daughter, lacking boundaries, contentious, emotionally reactionary, revengeful, and doing what is right in his own eyes for his own gain. He made his daughter responsible, blaming her for the disaster that he would inflict on her and making himself the victim of his rash vow.

K. Lawson Younger, Jr., NIVAC

It may seem trite, but all this stems from his idolatry. It is clear that his syncretism, that is, the blending of true worship with false worship, dominated his life. Offering one's child as a sacrifice was acceptable to Molech, but YHWH God of Israel despised it. The gods of the nations around Israel demanded sacrifices in exchange for their blessings, but YHWH God of Israel offered blessings to his people freely. The right response to his blessings was to trust him and keep his covenant, not in order *to receive*, but because *they have received*. All of God's blessings were available to his people; they only had to respond in faith.

God's blessings and his kindness and his mercy and his grace are freely given; faith is the appropriate response to what God freely gives. All the way back to Mount Sinai, when God gave Israel a covenant, how did that covenant begin?

Ex 20:2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Exodus 20:2

This was God's declaration of who he is and what he had already done for them. Do you remember what comes next in Exodus 20? After declaring that he has saved his people, he gives them the terms of the covenant—the Ten Commandments. The commandments come after God's grace. They are in response to God's grace. Back in chapter 6 when Israel was suffering under the oppression of the Midianites, the Lord sent them a prophet. He said something very similar:

Jdgs 6:7 When the people of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites, <sup>8</sup> the LORD sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. <sup>9</sup> And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. <sup>10</sup> And I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed my voice."

Judges 6:7–10

God's blessings—his rescue of them—came before his commands. Israel was to respond to the rescue they had already received by obeying the Lord in faith. The right response to what the Lord has done is faith and therefore obedience. God had rescued Israel and

claimed them to be his people. In spite of their origins he claimed them. In spite of their sin he claimed them. In spite of their low status in the world he claimed them. Though they had been born in slavery, God chose them to be his people. Again, he didn't choose them because they were so great. Remember back in Deuteronomy he told them he claimed them as his people but his claim on them had nothing to do with them or how great they were. They were his people because God is great.

This is what Jephthah failed to understand. Rather than rest in the truth that he was counted among the people of God, that he was loved as a member of Israel, he sought another identity. He wanted to be loved by his people, by his family, by his fellow Gileadites. He should! He should both desire their love *and receive it!* His error was in thinking their love would give him value. He was wrong. He already had incredible value because he belonged to the Lord—sins and all! With all his incredible shortcomings, Jephthah belonged to the Lord and God gladly claimed him. Jephthah was not satisfied with this.

Rather than respond to his life circumstances in faith, he grasped at an idol. All idols have one thing in common: they all deceive you. Every idol lies, promising you the very thing you desire most, and never delivers. An idol can never give you the pleasure it promises. An idol can never give you the security it promises. An idol can never give you the joy it promises. An idol can never give you the meaning and purpose and value it promises. The idol of self, especially, but any idol that we pursue for meaning and significance will always fail us and will never give us what it promised to give us. All an idol can do is leave us buried...*somewhere*.

## Application

I can never stress this enough: God did not choose Israel because Israel was so great. God did not choose you or me because we were so great. Remember Paul's words to the church in Corinth.

<sup>1</sup> Cor 1:26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

1 Corinthians 1:26–31

Your family of origin does not define you. Your current family status, whether single or married, whether you have children or not, whether your extended family welcomes you or you haven't seen your mother in many years because that's how she prefers it, this doesn't define you. Whether you were the product of a loving and committed marriage or something else, this doesn't define you. Whether you grew up in poverty or great wealth, whether you



were popular or largely despised, whether you were lonely or invited to every party, this doesn't define you.

I understand—all too well—how these things affect us. It has been said that a person spends her entire childhood learning how to be an adult but then spends her entire adulthood recovering from her childhood. The pain we all have from our childhood, even for those who had an otherwise enviable childhood, this pain does not define you. Yes, it's real pain. Jephthah was a deeply wounded man who suffered for the decision of his parents. He continued to suffer the shame of their sin his entire life. I understand how and why this affected him, but Jephthah failed to grasp a simple truth: this is not what defined him.

Even though his sins were great, Hebrews tells us Jephthah “put foreign armies to flight” through *faith*. Like the others listed in Hebrews 11 he was a deeply flawed man whose sins greatly affected others. Yet because of his faith—no doubt faith the size of a tiny mustard seed—he was counted among the people of God. He is part of that great cloud of witnesses Hebrews mentions in the next chapter. He is among the assembly of the firstborn in heaven in Hebrews 12. This is Jephthah's true identity, one that cannot be taken from him.

Jim made a pointed observation in an elders meeting several weeks ago that really struck me. It continues to stick in my mind. I love being a grandfather. I love being Trystan's Halbi. Jim pointed out that my grandson's children won't know where I am buried. Trystan will. My goal is simple: I will be his favorite grandparent. This is why there is a steady supply of bacon in my refrigerator. Any time he asks, he can have bacon.

Whatever sense of meaning I may pursue in this life, there is only one that will last. There is only one identity that will carry me through to eternity and that is this: I belong to the Lord. He didn't save me because I was wise or powerful. He didn't save me because I was of noble birth. Instead, he chose to save what is foolish in the world, what is weak in the world, what is low and despised in the world, that I might boast in the Lord.

The truth is, there is only one way to not be forgotten. The Lord remembers those who are his. Nobody in Israel remembered exactly where Jephthah was buried. When God inspired the author of Hebrews to write, God remembered Jephthah. Church, whatever the world's estimation of you, whatever your self-estimation is, however you are perceived by others or how you perceive yourself is not final. God's declaration is final. His declaration of his people is clear in Romans 5.

Rom 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:1

This is the only way to not be forgotten. God remembers his people and declares what is really true of them. That is the only opinion that matters.