

## **“Here Comes the Judge!” - A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges**

**Session 7 November 4, 2020**

**Tola, Jair, Jephthah Judges 10:1-2, Judges 10:3-4, Judges 10:6-12:7**

### **Recap: The Judges’ Cycle**

The Judges’ Cycle (found in Judges Chapter 2, verses 10 through 19) is as follows...

1. The tribes of Israel rebel against God, often worshipping the gods of the people of Canaan (Baal, Ashtoreth, etc.)
2. God is provoked to anger by the Israelites actions, and allows another group to rise up and invade, plunder, or oppress the tribes of Israel.
3. The distress causes the tribes of Israel to cry out to the Lord, asking for repentance for their actions.
4. God sends rescue through a chosen leader, a “judge” to put down the oppressors, creating a time of peace for the tribes.
5. When the “judge” dies, the tribes once again turn away from God and rebel again.

### **Session 6 Recap**

In Session 6, we looked at the “False Judge”, Abimilech. The illegitimate son of Gideon, Abimilech used his desire for recognition and gift of persuasion to gain the support of his mother’s family and tribe around the city of Shechem. After first eliminating any threat to his power (his 70 half-brothers, all except for the youngest brother, Jotham, who speaks a curse onto Abimilech and Shechem), he is crowned “king” by the residents of Shechem. Their support for Abimilech is short-lived when God stirs up trouble and dissatisfaction among the Shechem residents about their new leader. With the arrival of a possible new leader, Gaal and his relatives, Abimilech quickly thwarts this “new” arrival and turns his attention on his once former supporters, the citizens of Shechem. After a three-stage assault, Abimilech kills the townspeople and eventually the leadership in the city. Abimilech’s rage is out of control and he turns towards a neighboring city, Thebez. Desiring to punish the leadership by fire as they gathered in a tower, a woman drops a millstone on Abimilech’s head, fatally wounding him. To prevent complete shame, he asks his armor bearer to finish him off with a sword. Abimilech’s desired glory was short lived, because God did not “call” him to be judge. This period left the tribes of Israel in complete disarray and turmoil.

## **Session 7: Tola, Jair, Jephthah**

**Judges 10:1-2, 10:3-4, 10:6-12:7**

Following the turmoil associated with the reign of Abimilech, there was no peace among the tribes of Israel. At this point in Old Testament history, we are introduced to two minor judges – Tola and Jair – who bring “peace” to the area. Tola judged and brought 23 years of peace. Jair, whose story is closely marked with the number “30”, brings 22 years of peace to Israel. Following their rule, the tribes turned their back on God, worshipped other idols/gods, and were sold into the hands of the Philistines and Ammonites. Jephthah, a Gileadite warrior, once disgraced by the tribes, is called up to lead Israel. He first attempts a peaceful resolution with the oppressors, but then turns to battle to free the tribes of Israel. The sad note to Jephthah’s story was the vow he made to God before the battle, and the ultimate result that came from it. Peace was short-lived after his reign.

### **The Reign of Tola**

**Judges 10:1-2**

The minor judge, Tola, is only given two verses in the Old Testament. The little information that we have on this minor judge is that he “delivered” the tribes of Israel for 23 years. His role was to clean up the chaos brought about by the end of Gideon’s reign and the subsequent period of Abimilech. Many biblical scholars believe that Tola’s rule closely mirrors the rule of Gideon. His name in Hebrew means, “worm or worm of scarlet”, used to describe furnishing in the wilderness tabernacle. He is connected to the Issachar family (mentioned in Numbers 26). Tola is one of the only “minor” judges that is said to have “saved Israel”, indicating some type of military conquest.

### **The Reign of Jair**

**Judges 10:3-5**

Tola’s reign is immediately followed by the reign of the “minor” judge, Jair. Jair was a Gileadite (as will be Jephthah that follows) and is said to have ruled over the tribes of Israel for 22 years. Scripture tells us that Jair had 30 sons who rode on 30 donkeys, and controlled 30 cities in the land of Gilead. One interesting note about Jair is that his focus seems to be on personal rule and gain during his 22 years of judging (indicated by the focus on how many cities he controlled). This slight shift from Tola to Jair reflects an increasing downward fall of the intention and goal of the judges. We will see this ultimate fall with the reign of Samson. His burial took place at Kamon, which is modern day Qamm, Jordan.

## **Jephthah**

### **The Judges' Cycle: Step One**

**Judges 10:6**

Following the 22-year reign of Jair, the tribes of Israel once again “did evil in the sight of the Lord”. This time the Israelites worship of other idols and gods consisted of both Canaanite gods within the Promised Land and additional gods outside the Canaan borders. The Baals and Ashtoreth were gods of the native Canaanites. However, the gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistines fall outside the borders of the Promised Land. An interesting note is that the gods that the tribes of Israel worshipped are all locations dealt with by previous judges (Othniel – Aram; Ehud – Moab, Ammon; Shamgar – Philistines; Deborah – Canaanites). Their idolatry lead to oppression, this time from the Philistines and the Ammonites.

### **The Judges' Cycle: Step Two**

**Judges 10:7-9**

God’s anger burned against the tribes of Israel, once again, and he “sold them” into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites. “Being sold” is strong terminology, but one thing we want to remember is that God has not “left” the tribes of Israel. Idolatry and slavery go hand in hand. The tribes of Israel dedicated their energy to idolatry, and thus God “sold them” into the hands of slavery under the Philistines and Ammonites.

For 18 years, the tribes of Israel were “afflicted and crushed” by their oppressors. The oppression was the worst that Israel had experienced yet, literally “shattering” the tribes of Israel. One interesting note about the extent of this oppression, the Philistines and Ammonites oppressed both the tribes of Israel in Canaan (similar to previous oppressions) and those across the Jordan River outside of Canaan (the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim).

### **The Judges' Cycle: Step Three**

**Judges 10:10-18**

After 18 years of oppression, the tribes of Israel “cried out to the Lord”. However, this time God responds in a different way. Mirroring the response in Judges 6, yet this time a little harsher, God reminds the Israelites of the many times before that He has come to the “rescue”. Each time, however, the tribes have forsaken him and served other gods. God felt rejected by the Israelites. Therefore, this time He says He will not “deliver them”. God challenges the

Israelites to go to the gods they had been worshipping and let them “help” deliver you from distress.

The Israelites felt sorry for the consequences of their sin, but failed to offer true repentance. The tribes were giving lip service to God. The Israelites did not feel sorry for their sin, just the consequence – the oppression. Similar to their worship of idols, the Israelite tribes were trying to get results from the “god” they were crying out to, not realizing He was the one true God!

The Israelites recognize their lack of genuineness and turn their next request to true repentance. Before their focus was on the conditions. This time, their focus was on their sin which deserved punishment, but asking for help in the future. “We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to You...” The Israelites knew they deserved punishment for their sin of idolatry, and were willing to accept God’s punishment. The Israelites put away their false gods, and turned to the Lord. This shows a change in heart. God could “hear the misery of Israel no longer”, and He steps in to help. Many biblical scholars have debated the meaning of this statement. (1) Some scholars believe that God remains frustrated with the Israelites, but steps into help. God still realizes that the tribes will turn their back on Him again – this period of repentance is temporary and shallow. (2) Other scholars believe that the Israelites’ repentance is genuine, and He is ready to stop the misery of His people any longer. Either way, the wording of this statement about God is different from any other judge in the Old Testament.

Before a judge is identified, scripture tells us that the “sons of Ammon” (Ammonites) gathered at Gilead, while the Israelites camped at Mizpah. The Ammonites reached their peak strength during the period of the Judges. This people group were descendants of Ammon, the son born when Lot’s daughter slept with her father (Genesis 19). The Ammonite land was located just east of the Jordan River, across from Jerusalem. Directly south of Ammon was the land of Moab, the people group conceived when Lot’s other daughter slept with her father. In battle, Moab and Ammon were usually allies and a formidable opponent to face. While the Ammonites were ready to battle, the tribes of Israel are still looking for their leader and a reward - the man who leads and succeeds against the Ammonites will be the ruler over the inhabitants of Gilead.

## **The Judges' Cycle: Step Four**

## **Judges 11:1-33**

The leader of the Israelite army is finally identified, Jephthah. However, he is not the leader that you would have expected! Jephthah is first identified as a “valiant warrior” (following the Judge’s mold), but then said to be the son of a harlot. (Oh no! Do we have another Abimilech on our hands?!?) Jephthah was the illegitimate son of Gilead, and was driven out of his home by his half-brothers who did not want him to receive any inheritance. Jephthah was from a dysfunctional family, which led him into a period of being an outcast in the land of Tob. Other “worthless fellows” were attracted to Jephthah’s leadership and they lived a life of crime (similar to a marauder or pirate, as we see with David after he is expelled from Saul’s home).

The Ammonites lay siege on the tribes of Israel. As the battle begins, the leaders of Gilead come to Jephthah, knowing his “valiant warrior” reputation, and ask him to lead the troops. Similar to God’s response when the tribes of Israel cry out to God, Jephthah questions the Israelites. “Why me? You drove me out of my father’s home. NOW, you need me?” Jephthah did not want this to be just “lip service”, as it was initially with God. Desperate for a leader, the elders of Gilead promise him that he will be head of the inhabitants of Gilead after the battle. At this point in Abimilech’s story, Abimilech turned his attention on those who shunned him, his brothers, killing all but one of them. Jephthah’s response is the polar opposite. He accepts the call, accompanies the elders to Mizpah, receives the command and leadership over the people of Gilead, and “spoke all his words BEFORE THE LORD”. This judge’s calling was divinely accepted and appointed, unlike Abimilech.

Jephthah was keenly prepared to approach the Ammonites. Both a “valiant warrior” and a shrewd negotiator (with the elders of Gilead), Jephthah approaches the confrontation with the Ammonites in two ways – diplomatically and militarily. First, he seeks out a peaceful solution through negotiation. Jephthah sends a messenger to the King of Ammon asking, “Why have you attacked us?” The Ammonite king’s response is that the Israelites have stolen their land when they came from Egypt. Jephthah uses three arguments to refute this claim. (1) Historically, Jephthah refutes this claim. The Ammonites (who lived north of the Jabbok River) never owned the land in question. The King Sihon and the Amorites controlled the land in reference. The Israelites asked to travel through peacefully to the Promised Land. The Amorites refused, and then

attacked the Israelites. They responded with attack and the tribes won the land fairly from the Amorites. (2) Theologically, Jephthah argues that God was on the sides of Israel and delivered the land. Jumping on the assumption of most of the people in that region, if the land was intended to stay with a particular people group, their “gods” would have favor on them and allow them to win. The same would be true if the Ammonite’s primary god, Chemosh, blessed them in battle. (One interesting note, the Ammonite’s primary god was actually Milcom, or Molech; Chemosh was the primary god of the Moabites) Biblical scholars have debated whether Jephthah actually believed this worldview, or was he simply adopting it for this theological argument. (3) Legally, Jephthah argues that the Moabite king of the time, nor did the Ammonite’s ancestors, see reason to attack the Israelites. So why should they now?

All three arguments prove that the Ammonites were in the wrong, but the Ammonite King refuses to listen. He refuses to reply or retreat. The battle is on!

“The Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah.” As had been described with previous judges, God sends the Spirit to this new judge to enable him to win in battle. As he advances for battle, Jephthah does something unusual, an act that he will regret in the end. He makes a vow to God that if he leads the Ammonites into his hands, that whatever is the first thing that comes out of his home when he returns, he will offer it to God in sacrifice. Why? First, this reflects maybe a lack of trust in God. The Spirit had landed on Jephthah, God was supporting him, and the battle result was inevitable. Second, this vow may reflect a lack of understanding of appropriate Jewish practices and faith. We will come back to this shortly! Jephthah travels through the areas of Gilead and Manasseh to gather troops before he heads to battle.

The battle takes all of two verses in Judges 11. In verses 32 and 33, Jephthah overwhelms the Ammonites. God delivers them, including twenty cities, into Jephthah’s hands.

### **The Judges’ Cycle: Step Five...**

**Judges 11:34 – 12:7**

This should be the triumphant moment in the midst of the Jephthah judgeship. However, he stills has this lingering vow...When Jephthah returns home to Mizpah, the first thing that comes forth out of his home is his one and only daughter, his only child. Remembering the words of his vow to God, he is devastated! In what should have been a triumphant moment, now the pending

result is tragedy. Instead of peace for Israel, the reaction is inner turmoil for the judge. Half blaming his daughter, but really blaming himself for the inexplicable vow, Jephthah echoes his promise to God to his daughter.

The reaction of the daughter is incredible. She tells her father that he must honor the vow that he has made to God. Her only request is that he allow her, along with her companions, to travel to the mountains to grieve her virginity and her pending sacrifice. After this two-month period, Jephthah's daughter returns and we are told in verse 39, that he "did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man..." Scripture goes on to tell us that it became a custom in Israel for the daughters of Israel to remember Jephthah's daughter four days each year.

Why such an "open ended" vow? Biblical scholars have debated this part of the Jephthah story for centuries. Did he realize that this could be a human sacrifice? Did he only intend it to be an animal sacrifice? Why didn't God step in and stop him? (1) Many biblical scholars believe that Jephthah only intended an animal sacrifice upon his return. A couple things that go against this point. First, it is unlikely in the home that Jephthah lived that animals would reside inside. This would be extremely unusual for a man of limited means. Second, if an animal were intended, the noun used in Hebrew would have been in a different form. For an animal, the noun would have been in a neuter case. It is not in this passage. Finally, if this were what Jephthah intended, when his daughter emerges from the home, he would never have considered the vow to have any binding on her, instead, an animal.

(2) Some scholars have read this passage to mean that a "human sacrifice" was never made at all. Instead, the "sacrifice" made by his daughter would be to never marry. Jephthah would have then mourned for his lineage to have stopped with his daughter. Scholars focus on the words following the "act" taking place, "that she had not relations with a man". If this were the case, sending her away for two months to "mourn" would have been extremely unusual.

(3) Finally, many scholars believe that Jephthah made this vow, and even though the Lord saw human sacrifice as detestable (Deuteronomy 12:31), he carries it out. First, Jephthah had been desensitized to violence that was prevalent in this pagan culture. He allowed this atrocity to creep in and reside next to his understanding and faith in God. Second, Jephthah allowed not just the pagan moral code but also their "works understanding" of God's character to

seize him. Human sacrifice was an act used by other people in that time period to “buy off” a pagan god. Going to the extreme – human sacrifice - would show their “extreme” faith in a god. God does not want this type of extreme act. He only wants the self-sacrifice of giving our lives to Him. Jephthah thought God needed to be impressed or bought; neither was required.

Whatever the ultimate result is with the sacrifice, the reflection of Jephthah’s lack of understanding of God’s grace and provision is apparent. He did not trust God to go to Him before the final act of the sacrifice was made. He was trapped by the mistrust, which led to deep grief. Jephthah was influenced by the Canaanite culture, as we are, and struggled to believe in God’s grace, as we often do.

Then peace...not quite. The tribe of Ephraim was angry that they were not called upon to participate in the battle. Similar to before, the Ephraimites were angry that they were missing the honor of victory. Different from before, the men threatened Jephthah and his home. Jephthah argued that he did seek their help, but they refused to join the battle. Jephthah assembled his soldiers from Gilead and fought a fellow tribe, killing 42,000 men from Ephraim. He captured the fords of the Jordan River, the only possible place to cross. He created a “pronunciation test” to determine who was crossing, men of Ephraim or someone else. Those crossing would be asked to pronounce the word “Shibboleth” (which means “stream” in Hebrew). The people of Ephraim pronounced the letters “sh” as just “s”. Therefore, a person from Ephraim would pronounce the word “Sibboleth”. (A great *West Wing* television episode uses these words as a central understanding of faith in God!) Those that did, Jephthah and his army immediately killed – 42,000 in all.

Jephthah judged the tribes of Israel for 7 years (the shortest time of any judge so far). Notice, no mention of “peace” is made here in the end. The tribes of Israel have turned on each other, unification through a judge is impossible, and increased chaos is prevalent.

## Questions to Reflect On...

*God called out the tribes of Israel in their “less than truthful” repentance. Have you ever caught yourself in your faith life wanting what God gives you (like heaven) more than wanting God? Which aspect of God’s perfection will you meditate on so that you love Him more than you love His blessings?*

*How does your understanding of the “sacrifice” in Jephthah’s story open your eyes to the way our human minds can distort what we think God desires instead of who He truly is and wants from us? What blind spots may we have in our understanding of God?*

## Next Week...

**“Here Comes the Judge” – Session 8**

**Wednesday, November 11      6:30 PM**

**Focus – Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson**

**Judges 12:8-10, Judges 12:11-12, Judges 12:13-15, Judges 13:1-16:31**