

Adult Bible Class

The Book of Judges

Lesson 4 - March 20, 2022

A Recap of Our Last Lesson

Gideon was called by God to lead the Israelites in battle against the Midianites and their allies. God's people had once again forsaken the God of Israel and worshiped the idol gods of the Canaanites. Because of this, God sent the Midianites to strip the land of its crops, steal the herds and flocks, and generally plague Israel with continual trouble to get their attention so they would call on Him.

Gideon was God's man for the hour to lead Israel's army into battle. Under normal circumstances a good general insures that he has enough men to win a battle (basic battle strategy). But in this story, we find that quality is preferred over quantity. Like winnowing wheat, God sifted Gideon's army of 32,000 by sending home the fearful and the reckless. When God was finished with the group, Gideon was left with only 300 - but these 300 were just what God wanted!

The Midianite host numbered about 135,000 men. Gideon had a plan to make his army look like a great number of warriors. The weapons of Gideon's 300 were lamps, pitchers, and trumpets. These tools were just right to bring victory - making Gideon's 300 look like a large army and creating noise and light that brought confusion to the enemy camp. The enemy already had it in their mind that Gideon had the victory over them! They were ignorant of the real number of Israel's army. They created an imaginary foe in their minds.

Judges 7:21 (NLT) Each man stood at his position around the camp and watched as all the Midianites rushed around in a panic, shouting as they ran to escape. **22** When the 300 Israelites blew their rams' horns, the Lord caused the warriors in the camp to fight against each other with their swords. Those who were not killed fled . . .

Then Gideon called on the tribes of Israel to help finish the job. Gideon and his men crossed the Jordan River to chase the few fleeing Midianites. Twice he asked for food from his countrymen but was denied. Finally, the Midianites were completely vanquished.

Judges 8:22 Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Be our ruler! You and your son and your grandson will be our rulers, for you have rescued us from Midian."

23 But Gideon replied, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son. The Lord will rule over you!"

After his great victory, Gideon modestly refused to be king as the people requested. Israel at this time was a "theocracy," meaning it was a country ruled by God (with human judges in time of need). Gideon meant to keep it that way. But then Gideon asked the people . . .

24 However, I do have one request—that each of you give me an earring from the plunder . . .

27 Gideon made a sacred ephod from the gold and put it in Ophrah, his hometown. But soon all the Israelites prostituted themselves by worshiping it, and it became a trap for Gideon and his family.

As we read the book of Judges, we find that the tabernacle at Shiloh is rarely mentioned. Instead, we read over and over again how the Israelites worshiped idol gods. Here, they worshiped the gold ephod that Gideon made.

Judges 8:28 That is the story of how the people of Israel defeated Midian, which never recovered. Throughout the rest of Gideon's lifetime—about forty years—there was peace in the land.

29 Then Gideon son of Joash returned home. **30** He had seventy sons born to him, for he had many wives. **31** He also had a concubine in Shechem, who gave birth to a son, whom he named Abimelech . . .

33 As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites prostituted themselves by worshiping the images of Baal, making Baal-berith their god. **34** They forgot the Lord their God, who had rescued them from all their enemies surrounding them. **35** Nor did they show any loyalty to the family of Jerub-baal (that is, Gideon), despite all the good he had done for Israel.

And so . . . the cycle of Judges continued.

Judges Chapter 9

Abimelech Rules over Shechem

Judges 9:1 (NLT) One day Gideon's son Abimelech went to Shechem to visit his uncles—his mother's brothers. He said to them and to the rest of his mother's family, **2** "Ask the leading citizens of Shechem whether they want to be ruled by all seventy of Gideon's sons or by one man. And remember that I am your own flesh and blood!"

3 So Abimelech's uncles gave his message to all the citizens of Shechem on his behalf. And after listening to this proposal, the people of Shechem decided in favor of Abimelech because he was their relative. **4** They gave him seventy silver coins from the temple of Baal-berith, which he used to hire some reckless troublemakers who agreed to follow him.

Abimelech was a son of Gideon who had evil intentions to make himself ruler in Israel. He began by going to his mother's relatives in Shechem for support - and they gave him money from the pagan temple there. He gathered people around him who were like-minded - troublemakers.

5 He went to his father's home at Ophrah, and there, on one stone, they killed all seventy of his half brothers, the sons of Gideon. But the youngest brother, Jotham, escaped and hid.

6 Then all the leading citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo called a meeting under the oak beside the pillar at Shechem and made Abimelech their king.

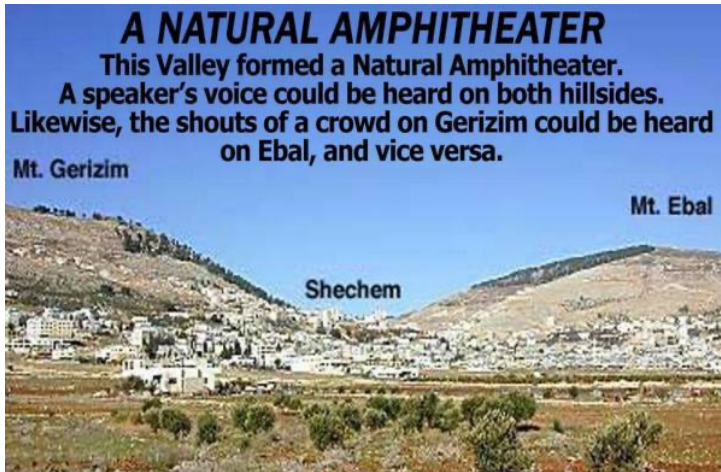
When we compare Gideon to his son, Abimelech, we see quite a contrast! Gideon was moved by the call of God to deliver Israel from the yoke of the Midianites and to restore the worship of the one true God. He was humble, seeking the will of God, and faithfully walking in God's revealed will. He was also tireless in finishing what God called him to do.

Abimelech, on the other hand, sought power for himself. He pretended to have the people's interest in mind, but it was all a sham. He stirred up his relatives in Shechem to get the people on his side. His kingdom was built on a foundation of usurping authority, bloodshed, violence, and cruelty.

Next we hear from Jotham - the one son of Gideon who escaped murder by Abimelech.

Jotham's Parable

7 When Jotham heard about this, he climbed to the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted,



Shechem lies between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. It was from Mount Gerizim that Joshua proclaimed the blessings of the law after the capture of Ai (see Deuteronomy 11:29 and Joshua 8:30-35). The curses of the law were proclaimed opposite on Mount Ebal. This place is like a natural amphitheater. The human voice can be heard clearly up to a mile away! This is why this particular place was often used to speak to the people, and this is why Jotham climbed Mt. Gerizim to speak.

Judges 9:7b "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem!

Listen to me if you want God to listen to you!

8 Once upon a time the trees decided to choose a king.

First they said to the olive tree,

'Be our king!'

9 But the olive tree refused, saying,

'Should I quit producing the olive oil that blesses both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

10 "Then they said to the fig tree,

'You be our king!'

11 But the fig tree also refused, saying,

'Should I quit producing my sweet fruit just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

12 "Then they said to the grapevine,

'You be our king!'

13 But the grapevine also refused, saying,

'Should I quit producing the wine that cheers both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

14 "Then all the trees finally turned to the thornbush and said,

'Come, you be our king!'

15 And the thornbush replied to the trees,

'If you truly want to make me your king, come and take shelter in my shade.

If not, let fire come out from me and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'"

Jotham used a fable or story to get his message across. All of the trees mentioned - the olive tree, the fig tree, the grapevine, and the thorn bush - all grew in the valley and on the hillsides right where he was speaking. Jotham's meaning is clear. The first three trees mentioned are fruitful plants with purpose. The olive represents Gideon who was asked to be king of Israel but refused (Judges 8:22-23). Likewise, his sons (the fig and grapevine) refused the kingship. But then the most unworthy - Abimelech, represented by the thorn bush (an unfruitful tree) - stepped up to govern, threateningly. Thorn bushes were used to kindle fires - that was all they were good for. A "thorn bush fire" could bring down a mighty and noble cedar tree, and Abimelech could cause serious trouble for the people of Shechem!

Judges 9:16 Jotham continued, "Now make sure you have acted honorably and in good faith by making Abimelech your king, and that you have done right by Gideon and all of his descendants. Have you treated him with the honor he deserves for all he accomplished? **17** For he fought for you and risked his life when he rescued you from the Midianites. **18** But today you have revolted against my father and his descendants, killing his seventy sons on one stone. And you have chosen his slave woman's son, Abimelech, to be your king just because he is your relative.

19 "If you have acted honorably and in good faith toward Gideon and his descendants today, then may you find joy in Abimelech, and may he find joy in you. **20** But if you have not acted in good faith, then may fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leading citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo; and may fire come out from the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo and devour Abimelech!"

21 Then Jotham escaped and lived in Beer because he was afraid of his brother Abimelech.

Jotham, from the top of the sheer cliff, had a head start, so he ran and escaped from Abimelech. He had done his part.

Shechem Rebels against Abimelech

Judges 9:22 After Abimelech had ruled over Israel for three years,

Abimelech was made king by the Canaanite men of Shechem and by the house of Millo, and he had some sort of dominion over the tribes of Israel. He exercised power over Shechem and enough of the tribes to say that he ruled over Israel; yet, he was not an anointed king. In some histories he is called the first king of Israel, but most agree that he was not. The first true king of Israel was King Saul who was appointed by God (1 Samuel 10:1).

23 God sent a spirit that stirred up trouble between Abimelech and the leading citizens of Shechem, and they revolted. **24** God was punishing Abimelech for murdering Gideon's seventy sons, and the citizens of Shechem for supporting him in this treachery of murdering his brothers. **25** The citizens of Shechem set an ambush for Abimelech on the hilltops and robbed everyone who passed that way. But someone warned Abimelech about their plot.

Abimelech was an ungodly leader of the ungodly people of Shechem, and God took note. Though the wicked may prosper for awhile, God's eye is upon all.

26 One day Gaal son of Ebed moved to Shechem with his brothers and gained the confidence of the leading citizens of Shechem. **27** During the annual harvest festival at Shechem, held in the temple of the local god, the wine flowed freely, and everyone began cursing Abimelech. **28** "Who is Abimelech?" Gaal shouted. "He's not a true son of Shechem, so why should we be his servants? He's merely the son of Gideon, and this Zebul is merely his deputy. Serve the true sons of Hamor, the founder of Shechem. Why should we serve Abimelech? **29** If I were in charge here, I would get rid of Abimelech. I would say to him, 'Get some soldiers, and come out and fight!'"

Tables can turn quickly. Now a newcomer states that Abimelech should not be followed. Gaal says that Abimelech is a man of no consequence, and he challenges his authority to rule.

30 But when Zebul, the leader of the city, heard what Gaal was saying, he was furious. **31** He sent messengers to Abimelech in Arumah, telling him, "Gaal son of Ebed and his brothers have come to live in Shechem, and now they are inciting the city to rebel against you. **32** Come by night with an army and hide out in the fields. **33** In the morning, as soon as it is daylight, attack the city. When Gaal and those who are with him come out against you, you can do with them as you wish."

Zebul counsels Abimelech to attack Shechem to retain his rule by doing away with Gaal and those who follow him.

Judges 9:34 So Abimelech and all his men went by night and split into four groups, stationing themselves around Shechem. **35** Gaal was standing at the city gates when Abimelech and his army came out of hiding. **36** When Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, "Look, there are people coming down from the hilltops!"

Zebul replied, "It's just the shadows on the hills that look like men."

37 But again Gaal said, "No, people are coming down from the hills. And another group is coming down the road past the Diviners' Oak."

38 Then Zebul turned on him and asked, "Now where is that big mouth of yours? Wasn't it you that said, 'Who is Abimelech, and why should we be his servants?' The men you mocked are right outside the city! Go out and fight them!"

39 So Gaal led the leading citizens of Shechem into battle against Abimelech. **40** But Abimelech chased him, and many of Shechem's men were wounded and fell along the road as they retreated to the city gate. **41** Abimelech returned to Arumah, and Zebul drove Gaal and his brothers out of Shechem.

42 The next day the people of Shechem went out into the fields to battle. When Abimelech heard about it, **43** he divided his men into three groups and set an ambush in the fields. When Abimelech saw the people coming out of the city, he and his men jumped up from their hiding places and attacked them. **44** Abimelech and his group stormed the city gate to keep the men of Shechem from getting back in, while Abimelech's other two groups cut them down in the fields. **45** The battle went on all day before Abimelech finally captured the city. He killed the people, leveled the city, and scattered salt all over the ground.

46 When the leading citizens who lived in the tower of Shechem heard what had happened, they ran and hid in the temple of Baal-berith. **47** Someone reported to Abimelech that the citizens had gathered in the temple, **48** so he led his forces to Mount Zalmon. He took an ax and chopped some branches from a tree, then put them on his shoulder. "Quick, do as I have done!" he told his men. **49** So each of them cut down some branches, following Abimelech's example. They piled the branches against the walls of the temple and set them on fire. So all the people who had lived in the tower of Shechem died—about 1,000 men and women.

50 Then Abimelech attacked the town of Thebez and captured it. **51** But there was a strong tower inside the town, and all the men and women—the entire population—fled to it. They barricaded themselves in and climbed up to the roof of the tower. **52** Abimelech followed them to attack the tower. But as he prepared to set fire to the entrance, **53** a woman on the roof dropped a millstone that landed on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull.

54 He quickly said to his young armor bearer, "Draw your sword and kill me! Don't let it be said that a woman killed Abimelech!" So the young man ran him through with his sword, and he died. **55** When Abimelech's men saw that he was dead, they disbanded and returned to their homes.

56 In this way, God punished Abimelech for the evil he had done against his father by murdering his seventy brothers. **57** God also punished the men of Shechem for all their evil. So the curse of Jotham son of Gideon was fulfilled.

Two millstones were used to grind wheat into flour - an upper and a lower millstone. An upper millstone was about 18 inches in diameter, and this is what landed on Abimelech - and it was dropped on his head by a woman. The millstone didn't kill him instantly, but Abimelech knew he would not live long. He commanded his armor bearer to kill him, and the armor bearer did so. The battle ended with the defeat of Abimelech's armies.

The just hand of God was upon Abimelech. He and the wicked people of Shechem had murdered Gideon's seventy sons upon a stone (which could have been a lower millstone). Abimelech was mortally wounded with a stone - an upper millstone. The head that had stolen the crown of Israel was crushed. Those that supported him were also punished, rejecting God's warning through Jotham.

There is a reference to Abimelech later in Scripture, in the story of David's sin with Bathsheba and his attempt to cover it up by having Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed in battle:

2 Samuel 11:18 (NLT) Then Joab sent a battle report to David. **19** He told his messenger, "Report all the news of the battle to the king. **20** But he might get angry and ask, 'Why did the troops go so close to the city? Didn't they know there would be shooting from the walls? **21** Wasn't Abimelech son of Gideon killed at Thebez by a woman who threw a millstone down on him from the wall? Why would you get so close to the wall?' Then tell him, 'Uriah the Hittite was killed, too.'"

The story of the foolishness of Abimelech lived on.

Judges Chapter 10

Judges 10:1 After Abimelech died, Tola son of Puah, son of Dodo, was the next person to rescue Israel. He was from the tribe of Issachar . . . **2** He judged Israel for twenty-three years . . .

3 After Tola died, Jair from Gilead judged Israel for twenty-two years. **4** His thirty sons rode around on thirty donkeys, and they owned thirty towns in the land of Gilead . . . **5** When Jair died, he was buried in Kamon.

6 Again the Israelites did evil in the Lord's sight. They served the images of Baal and Ashtoreth, and the gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia. They abandoned the Lord and no longer served him at all. **7** So the Lord burned with anger against Israel, and he turned them over to the Philistines and the Ammonites, **8** who began to oppress them that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites east of the Jordan River . . . (that is, in Gilead). **9** The Ammonites also crossed to the west side of the Jordan and attacked Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim.

The Israelites were in great distress. **10** Finally, they cried out to the Lord for help, saying, "We have sinned against you because we have abandoned you as our God and have served the images of Baal." **11** The Lord replied, "Did I not rescue you from the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, **12** the Sidonians, the Amalekites, and the Maonites? When they oppressed you, you cried out to me for help, and I rescued you. **13** Yet you have abandoned me and served other gods. So I will not rescue you anymore. **14** Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen! Let them rescue you in your hour of distress!"

God, though rich in mercy, has a point where He will no longer play games. Israel had repeated the cycle so many times that God said, "I've had enough. I will no longer rescue you."

15 But the Israelites pleaded with the Lord and said, "We have sinned. Punish us as you see fit, only rescue us today from our enemies." **16** Then the Israelites put aside their foreign gods and served the Lord. And he was grieved by their misery.

God was looking for repentance with true change. Israel put away their idols. Now God would help them like He did in times past.

17 At that time the armies of Ammon had gathered for war and were camped in Gilead, and the people of Israel assembled and camped at Mizpah. **18** The leaders of Gilead said to each other, "Whoever attacks the Ammonites first will become ruler over all the people of Gilead."

Judges Chapter 11

Judges 11:1 (NKJV) Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah.

Gilead was a man from Ramoth-Gilead which is the area east of the Jordan River where the two and a half tribes lived. He had sons by his wife, but he also had a son by a harlot whose name was Jephthah. Gilead took responsibility for his illegitimate son, and he was raised as one of the family.

Judges 11:2 (NLT) Gilead's wife also had several sons, and when these half brothers grew up, they chased Jephthah off the land. "You will not get any of our father's inheritance," they said, "for you are the son of a prostitute." **3** So Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Soon he had a band of worthless rebels following him.

Jephthah was driven out, his only fault being that he was born! There are many who have been wronged through no fault of their own, living under the cloud of the transgression of the other person. Jephthah decided to run away from the persecution of his own brothers.

He then found himself in the company of other outcasts and rejects. This group followed Jephthah who was a natural leader of people.

4 At about this time, the Ammonites began their war against Israel. **5** When the Ammonites attacked, the elders of Gilead sent for Jephthah in the land of Tob. **6** The elders said, "Come and be our commander! Help us fight the Ammonites!"

7 But Jephthah said to them, "Aren't you the ones who hated me and drove me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now when you're in trouble?"

8 "Because we need you," the elders replied. "If you lead us in battle against the Ammonites, we will make you ruler over all the people of Gilead."

9 Jephthah said to the elders, "Let me get this straight. If I come with you and if the Lord gives me victory over the Ammonites, will you really make me ruler over all the people?"

10 "The Lord is our witness," the elders replied. "We promise to do whatever you say."

11 So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him their ruler and commander of the army. At Mizpah, in the presence of the Lord, Jephthah repeated what he had said to the elders.

The elders who once rejected Jephthah are now asking him to return to lead them in battle against Ammon. No doubt Jephthah felt used. They only wanted him when they were in trouble and needed his leadership abilities. They only had a place for Jephthah when they were in trouble!

But God wanted to deliver Israel from the Ammonites - and who did He choose? A reject! Verse one says that he was a mighty man of valor - and the son of a harlot, rejected of his brethren. He is like so many others in the Bible who were mightily used by God despite the shadow over their lives. God chooses what men reject. Paul said, *But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are* (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

There are many rejects in the stories of the Bible. Joseph was rejected by his brothers and sold as a slave. Eventually he became the savior of the then known world! David was the "little brother" who was overlooked by his family. After David was anointed king, it took seven years to gain the full support of all the tribes of Israel, but eventually he became Israel's greatest king. Paul, the apostle, after his conversion was rejected by the Jews, and even the Christians were suspicious of him for years because of his former life. Even Jesus Christ was despised and rejected of men, accused of being illegitimate, yet his life was the greatest life ever lived.

Jephthah accepts their request to be their commander.

Judges 11:12 Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of Ammon, asking, "Why have you come out to fight against my land?"

13 The king of Ammon answered Jephthah's messengers, "When the Israelites came out of Egypt, they stole my land from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River and all the way to the Jordan. Now then, give back the land peaceably."

When Israel came out of Egypt, this particular piece of land between the Arnon and the Jabbok was ruled by Sihon, king of the Amorites, who had previously taken it away from the Moabites (Numbers 21:29). Ammon didn't have any claim to it back then nor now. Jephthah, the expert negotiator, brings out three points:

14 Jephthah sent this message back to the Ammonite king:

15 "This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not steal any land from Moab or Ammon. **16** When the people of Israel arrived at Kadesh on their journey from Egypt after crossing the Red Sea, **17** they sent messengers to the king of Edom asking for permission to pass through his land. But their request was denied. Then they asked the king of Moab for similar permission, but he wouldn't let them pass through either. So the people of Israel stayed in Kadesh.

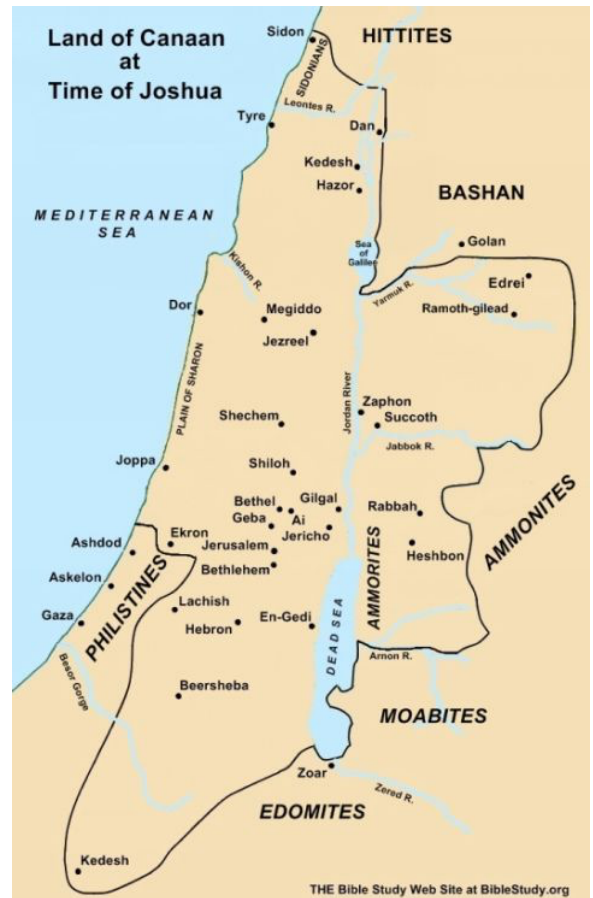
18 "Finally, they went around Edom and Moab through the wilderness. They traveled along Moab's eastern border and camped on the other side of the Arnon River. But they never once crossed the Arnon River into Moab, for the Arnon was the border of Moab.

19 "Then Israel sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, who ruled from Heshbon, asking for permission to cross through his land to get to their destination. **20** But King Sihon didn't trust Israel to pass through his land. Instead, he mobilized his army at Jahaz and attacked them. **21** But the Lord, the God of Israel, gave his people victory over King Sihon. So Israel took control of all the land of the Amorites, who lived in that region, **22** from the Arnon River to the Jabbok River, and from the eastern wilderness to the Jordan.

First, history bears out that Israel did not attack first and take the land between the Arnon and the Jabbok. Israel was attacked and then gained the land through war (the land didn't even belong to the Ammonites, but to the Amorites).

23 "So you see, it was the Lord, the God of Israel, who took away the land from the Amorites and gave it to Israel. Why, then, should we give it back to you? **24** You keep whatever your god Chemosh gives you, and we will keep whatever the Lord our God gives us.

Second, God gave them victory after they were attacked. God gave them the land. It was God's to give, and He gave it to them. They weren't going to give back land that God gave them.



Judges 11:25 Are you any better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he try to make a case against Israel for disputed land? Did he go to war against them?

26 "Israel has been living here for 300 years, inhabiting Heshbon and its surrounding settlements, all the way to Aroer and its settlements, and in all the towns along the Arnon River. Why have you made no effort to recover it before now?

Further, there is a "statute of limitations," so to speak. It had been 300 years. Are they coming to claim the land now? It's too late to make land claims! Go home!

27 Therefore, I have not sinned against you. Rather, you have wronged me by attacking me. Let the Lord, who is judge, decide today which of us is right—Israel or Ammon."

28 But the king of Ammon paid no attention to Jephthah's message.

Jephthah's Vow

29 At that time the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he went throughout the land of Gilead and Manasseh . . . and from there he led an army against the Ammonites. **30** And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord. He said, "If you give me victory over the Ammonites, **31** I will give to the Lord whatever comes out of my house to meet me when I return in triumph. I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

32 So Jephthah led his army against the Ammonites, and the Lord gave him victory. **33** He crushed the Ammonites, devastating about twenty towns from Aroer to an area near Minnith and as far away as Abel-keramim. In this way Israel defeated the Ammonites.

Jephthah made a vow. But Jephthah did not need to bargain with God. He said, *"If you give me victory over the Ammonites, I will give to the Lord whatever comes out of my house . . . as a burnt offering."* God had chosen Jephthah, and all he needed to do was believe God and fulfill His purpose. Making bargains was a habit of the heathen - not something that God's people should do.

Certain animals were never to be used for burnt offerings. Even though Jephthah had a heart toward God, his vow was careless and too open-ended. A burnt offering was a serious thing! Here, Jephthah, whose life had been shaped by the carelessness of his father - this Jephthah himself is careless! He did not need to make a vow for God to give him the victory. Yet, he did, and God takes vows seriously.

Scripture says, *"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams"* (1 Samuel 15:22). God wants us to obey him. It's as simple as that.

Moses wrote, *"When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you. But if you abstain from vowing, it shall not be sin to you. That which has gone from your lips you shall keep and perform, for you voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth"* (Deut. 23:21).

A vow in the Old Testament was a purely voluntary act, but once the vow was made the person was committed before God, and for that very reason God warned against taking vows in a rash or thoughtless way. Solomon said: *Better not to vow than to vow and not pay* (Ecclesiastes 5:5).

Jephthah's Daughter

Judges 11:34 When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, his daughter came out to meet him, playing on a tambourine and dancing for joy. She was his one and only child; he had no other sons or daughters. **35** When he saw her, he tore his clothes in anguish. "Oh, my daughter!" he cried out. "You have completely destroyed me! You've brought disaster on me! For I have made a vow to the Lord, and I cannot take it back."

36 And she said, "Father, if you have made a vow to the Lord, you must do to me what you have vowed, for the Lord has given you a great victory over your enemies, the Ammonites. **37** But first let me do this one thing: Let me go up and roam in the hills and weep with my friends for two months, because I will die a virgin."

38 "You may go," Jephthah said. And he sent her away for two months. She and her friends went into the hills and wept because she would never have children. **39** When she returned home, her father kept the vow he had made, and she died a virgin.

So it has become a custom in Israel **40** for young Israelite women to go away for four days each year to lament the fate of Jephthah's daughter.

The God of Israel is not a God of human sacrifice. When people are given to the Lord (like in the case of the firstborn of Israel), it is symbolic. Bible scholars struggle with this passage, not really knowing what became of the daughter. But in some manner Jephthah's daughter - his only child - was given to the Lord and remained a virgin the rest of her life.

Jephthah was a mighty judge of Israel. In his early life he was treated with cruelty and injustice by his brothers and townspeople. He had been forced to bear the consequences of an act of which he was completely innocent. Others decided his fate for him and condemned him to it. By the grace of God, Jephthah was able to overcome this and be a great blessing to Israel.

But then - in a moment of overzealousness - Jephthah does precisely the same thing to his daughter. She becomes the one who suffers the consequences of her father's ill-advised vow. However, Jephthah is still a mighty hero and judge in Israel, mentioned in the great hall of fame in Hebrews 11:32.

Judges Chapter 12

Jephthah's Conflict with Ephraim

Judges 12:1 (NLT) Then the people of Ephraim mobilized an army and crossed over the Jordan River to Zaphon. They sent this message to Jephthah: "Why didn't you call for us to help you fight against the Ammonites? We are going to burn down your house with you in it!"

The hot-headed Ephraimites are at it again! They scolded Gideon in Judges 8:1, saying, "*Why have you treated us this way? Why didn't you send for us when you first went out to fight the Midianites?*" Pride was at the root of this! In earlier years, Gideon had spoken softly to Ephraim, pacifying them. However, Jephthah does not do the same. Civil war breaks out.

2 Jephthah replied, "I summoned you at the beginning of the dispute, but you refused to come! You failed to help us in our struggle against Ammon. **3** So when I realized you weren't coming, I risked my life and went to battle without you, and the Lord gave me victory over the Ammonites. So why have you now come to fight me?"

Judges 12:4 The people of Ephraim responded, "You men of Gilead are nothing more than fugitives from Ephraim and Manasseh." So Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and attacked the men of Ephraim and defeated them.

5 Jephthah captured the shallow crossings of the Jordan River, and whenever a fugitive from Ephraim tried to go back across, the men of Gilead would challenge him. "Are you a member of the tribe of Ephraim?" they would ask. If the man said, "No, I'm not," **6** they would tell him to say "Shibboleth." If he was from Ephraim, he would say "Sibboleth," because people from Ephraim cannot pronounce the word correctly. Then they would take him and kill him at the shallow crossings of the Jordan. In all, 42,000 Ephraimites were killed at that time.

In this civil war, the people of Gilead controlled the shallow crossing place on the Jordan River. They easily identified an Ephraimite by his accent as he tried to cross the Jordan to go home to his tribe.

7 Jephthah judged Israel for six years. When he died, he was buried in one of the towns of Gilead.

Ibzan Becomes Israel's Judge

8 After Jephthah died, Ibzan from Bethlehem judged Israel. **9** He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He sent his daughters to marry men outside his clan, and he brought in thirty young women from outside his clan to marry his sons. Ibzan judged Israel for seven years. **10** When he died, he was buried at Bethlehem.

Elon Becomes Israel's Judge

11 After Ibzan died, Elon from the tribe of Zebulun judged Israel for ten years. **12** When he died, he was buried at Aijalon in Zebulun.

Abdon Becomes Israel's Judge

13 After Elon died, Abdon son of Hillel, from Pirathon, judged Israel. **14** He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys. He judged Israel for eight years. **15** When he died, he was buried at Pirathon in Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

What's with all the sons and donkeys? Judges 10 tells us of another one of the lesser known Judges: "*After him arose Jair, a Gileadite; and he judged Israel twenty-two years. Now he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys*" (Judges 10:3).

It seems that some of these lesser known judges ruled during times of relative peace in Israel. Many sons riding many donkeys was a demonstration of the wealth, prestige, and influence of these judges. But the good times were about to change - again.