

Judges 12:1 “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.” - ESV

Zaphon – (tsaw-fone or zay-pahn)

Jephthah - (JEF-thuh)

Gilead - (gi-lee-uhd)

Gileadites - (GIL-ee-uh-dahyts)

Shibboleth - (shi-buh-leth)

The tribe of Ephraim is one of the main tribes, they are dominate in war and regarded as a leading tribe and de facto leader of a select group of tribes. But there are issues within this successful battle-ready tribe. They are not only known as warriors, holders of great land, an economic powerhouse; they also hold the tabernacle within their borders for 400 years, and yet they are also known for arrogance, jealousy, resentment, pride, and loose with the tongue. With great achievements they also have failed to drive out the Canaanites (Judges 1) and fall into idolatry, repeatedly setting themselves up for destruction because of spiritual compromise and decay. (Judges, Jeremiah, Chronicles, and Hosea all record a stubborn tribe with a persistency for rebellion against God.)

Joshua conquers the promise land. The land is divided amongst the tribes. Internal conflict and strife builds over time due to land allocation, military might, military victory, success, spoils of war, tribe status among the rest.

Ephraim confronts Gideon for not calling on them to join his battle, but Gideon is able to smooth things over (**Judges 8**) but the resentment, emotions of feeling slighted, feelings of being cheated out of spoils and prestige lingers and deepens.

Now we land in **Judges 12**. The beginning here is not a one-on-one discussion. The men of Ephraim were called to arms which means they gathered troops like they would for battle and went to confront Jephthah. Now in **Judges 11** we find out Jephthah’s background. He’s the son of a prostitute who is driven out by his brothers and will not get an inheritance (he is now an outcast), but he is regarded as a mighty warrior, and when the Ammonites come knocking, they seek Jephthah to lead them into battle. Here is his condition. If the Lord delivers them a victory, they will make him the head of Gilead. They agree.

This helps us to set the tone for some underlying issues Ephraim was looking at. Here is a man who is an outcast, his mother is a prostitute, his own family disowns him, and now he is a leader who disregards one of the most powerful and successful tribes (in their opinion) and still manages to win a battle. They feel insulted and have unhealed offense from their issue with Gideon and now another supposed leader has overlooked them. This time pride and anger is taking the wheel and they head to Jephthah to put this leader in his place because they deserve respect, honor, and prestige they are one of the toughest and most successful tribes in the region they will not be overlooked, they will not be cheated out of spoils, they will not have their leadership status questioned which is what happened when Gideon and Jephthah both took victory with God without Ephraim.

The tribe of Ephraim is so angry they threaten Jephthah by saying, “*we will burn your house over you with fire.*” They have let pride/ego take over instead of the safety of the tribes and congratulations due to victory.

Jealousy of someone else's success can drive people to do some very irrational and self-destructive things. Here is a tribe that is a part of God's chosen people and they threaten to kill one of their own brothers because they did not get invited to the party. They would rather cause internal war than humble themselves and broker peace.

Jephthah knows what happened between them and Gideon; he knows both reputations they carry. He tries to be diplomatic about things, but he is more straightforward than Gideon. He says, *"I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand. 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?"*

Jephthah lays down what's what. I tried to reach out, and you did nothing, instead of me waiting on you, begging you, or getting destroyed waiting for you. I went with the Lord and defeated the enemy. Why do you want to fight? We won; our tribes are safe!

Ephraim refused to listen, settle down, or leave so in verse 4 we see Jephthah must gather his men who just got done winning a battle against the Ammonite. A tribe of people that were known for brutality, military power, and predatorial methods. But Ephraim was not impressed instead they were upset that this prostitute's son would use God to slight them. Even though the Bible does not confirm Jephthah did or did not try to reach out to them to fight. But he did try to honor them. He said, *"when I called you, you did not save me"* he was highlighting their power and status within the tribes. He actually showed humbleness in this moment to them "thinking less of himself" and did not say "you did not join or aid me" but instead he used the phrase "save me" he acknowledged they had significant capabilities that were above those of his people. At some point though humility loses and the two groups fight.

"And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh." here is where everything comes to a breaking point. A final insult that cuts deep and strikes Gilead right to the core of who they are. Ephraim accuses Gilead as being a fugitive of Ephraim, runaways from this tribe. They are calling them an illegitimate group of people that are not distinct in nature as the other tribes. So, Gilead goes to battle over angry bitter words.

Now we have come to the end of this story. Gileadites capture the **fords of the Jordan** (refers to shallow, strategic crossing points along the Jordan River used for travel, trade, and military control. In the Bible, these spots served as critical locations for battles, escapes, and transitions, often representing moments of testing, divine intervention, or passage into a new phase of life) because of how similar these people looked they devised a way to identify who was an enemy combatant. If someone wanted to cross the Jordan to get back to where the tribe of Ephraim was located, they were asked if they were an Ephraimite. If they said no they were told to say "*Shibboleth*" now Ephraim because of dialect could not pronounce this word correctly and instead would say "*Sibboleth*" if they said the word wrong, they were killed on the spot. This resulted in 42,000 men from the tribe of Ephraim dying needlessly because pride got in the way.

Words are powerful. They will either bring about peace or instigate war and death.

Proverbs 18:21 “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”

Pride demands recognition and respect at all costs. It is humility that creates harmony.

Proverbs 16:18 “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”

While the Bible does not condemn Jephthah’s actions we are called to seek peace first. There is no contention so bitter than that between the brethren.

Psalms 133:1 “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”

Matthew 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

Romans 12:18 “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Rash decisions can have dire consequences. Take time to seek God before making decisions.

James 1:19 “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;”

James 1:5 “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”

Let us recognize and seek guidance from leaders (Ephraim failed to see who had placed Jephthah)

Proverbs 11:14 “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.”

We should abandon our tribalistic instincts; they only cause division.

Galatians 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

James 4:6 “But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

We all make mistakes and should keep that in the forefront of our mind, especially when there is a perceived offense. Communication between people is VITAL!

Proverbs 19:11 “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.”

Matthew 18:15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

The “Shibboleth” Test will reveal who you are and what kind of person you really are.

Matthew 7:15-16 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”

John 13:35 “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

James 3:6 “And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”

Psalms 52:2 “Your tongue plots destruction, like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit.”

Psalms 64:8 “They are brought to ruin, with their own tongues turned against them; all who see them will wag their heads.”

Proverbs 13:3 “Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.”

Psalms 141:3 “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!”