

JUDGES || The Rollercoaster of Sin
Judges 11–12 || Who Will Fight For Us?
North Center || November 26, 2023
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As we enter into this season of advent, we are continuing our study through the book of Judges. Today, we are going to look at the story of a man named Jephthah (11–12), but before we look at his story, it's important for us to consider the **CONTEXT/CIRCUMSTANCES** in which he was raised.

Context is always important. As D.A. Carson was fond of saying, “*A text without a context is a pretext for a prooftext.*” In other words, when you skip the context, you can make the Bible say just about anything you want it to say. So, context is always important, but then there are times when it seems particularly important – like in the case of Jephthah.

Jephthah is often remembered for his **failures** (as a father, as a leader, as a person). He certainly did some things in his life that were despicable to say the least. In fact, his story is probably the darkest story in the book of Judges that we have seen so far. Some of Jephthah's decisions are so disturbing that it makes you sick to even think about it.

Yet, as I spent this past week thinking about his life, I was reminded (*by another pastor*) just how easy it is for us to criticize **the performance** of others (*like Jephthah*) without taking time to understand **the person** – without taking the time to consider their context. Every single one of us was raised in **a particular context** that has played a significant role in shaping who we are, how we think, our sense of right and wrong. **Our context** would include: *our family, parents, friendships, neighborhood, education, upbringing, past trauma, physical handicaps, socioeconomic status, whether or not we were raised in the local church, what denomination we were raised in, and countless other factors...*

It can be so easy for us to **criticize** specific things that people do without **considering** the world in which they were raised. How often have you looked at something somebody did and think to yourself, “*I can't believe they would do that!*” “*Why would she say that?!*” “*How could he possibly think that was a good idea?*” “*What in the world was he thinking?*”¹

When it comes to somebody like Jephthah, all we see is what he did. We **don't** see his thoughts. We **don't** see the emotional war raging in his heart. All we see is what he did, but so often that seems to be all we need to pass judgment on someone.

But when we wait to throw our stones until after we have spent time getting to know somebody *in their context*, **(1)** it helps us understand **why** they did what they did (*this doesn't excuse their sin, but it does help to foster a Christ-like compassion in us as we engage them in their sin*), and **(2)** it often helps us see that we have much more in common with them than we might have originally expected. And I think this is certainly true of Jephthah.

When you read Jephthah's story without any understanding of his context, he sounds like a monster (which is the way many commentators talk about him). But when I seek to understand him in his context (*not my context*), he suddenly begins to look a lot like the guy in the mirror.

When we see one another as human beings, struggling to navigate the world around us, struggling with the same kinds of things that you and I struggle with, now we are in a position to actually learn something from the lives of people like Jephthah.

¹ Last week, I watched **a football game** where one of the wide receivers was yelling at the quarterback for not passing the ball to him when he was wide open down field. If the quarterback had passed the ball, it would almost certainly have been a touchdown. And the guy was furious with his quarterback. Well...what the receiver didn't realize was that the defense decided to blitz, and so the quarterback was so focused on the pressure in his face that he never noticed that his receiver was wide open.

PRAY

So, what is **Jephthah's context**?

1. He grew up in a world without a judge, without a deliverer. The last two deliverers (Tola and Jair) both died (**10:1–5**), and as soon as they were dead, God's people jumped into bed with every god on the market (**10:6**). It wasn't like they had sold out to "*another god*"; they had sold out to "*every other god*" available. They embraced every pagan **religion** across the land of Canaan.²

Because these pagan idols weren't real (i.e., *they weren't the true and living God*), there was no such thing as a **RELATIONSHIP** between the Canaanites and their gods. Their gods didn't love them. Their gods didn't know them. Their gods didn't see them or hear them or care for them in any way. There was absolutely no relationship, which means you didn't seek **to know** your god; **you sought TO APPEASE your god**. It wasn't a matter of loving your god; it was a matter of seeking to **appease** your god so that you it would give you what you wanted. And the way to **appease** your lifeless god was by offering something valuable as a sacrifice to it: something like a human being. In many of these Canaanite religions, if you wanted your god to do something for you, then you would offer up a human being as a burnt offering (*most often, it was your firstborn son*).³ It was horrific.

These are the pagan gods that Israel served for 18 years. This was the **religious context (cultural situation)** in which Jephthah was raised. Human sacrifice was normal and expected (much like abortion is in our culture today).

Now, what about **his family context**?

Judges 11:1–2

2. Jephthah was raised in a broken and divided **family**. His mother was a harlot. His father (Gilead) was unfaithful. His brothers despised him. And we can assume that his father's wife was not too fond of Jephthah since he would have been a constant reminder of her husband's unfaithfulness. In other words, he was raised in a "family" that did not love him. He didn't grow up as a son or a brother; he grew up seeing himself as a mistake and an embarrassment.

When his brothers were finally old enough, they drove him out of the house. They told him that he had "no inheritance" in his father's house. In that society, to lose your inheritance was to lose everything. It wasn't like you could just go off to college and get a degree in computer science or auto mechanics or tech support or get a job at UPS. When his brothers kicked him out of the house, they also took away his livelihood. He lost everything. He grew up as an outsider in his own home, and now he was an outcast with no home at all.

No judge to deliver him. No king to lead him. No family to care for him. No home to protect him. No church to support him. No godly friends to come alongside him. This was the context in which Jephthah was raised.

So, he fled from his brothers and began to chart his own course.

Judges 11:3

He became something of a land pirate, and he was apparently good at it. He developed a reputation as being an effective commander, and Israel was about to need a commander. Chapter 10 ended with the people of Ammon encamping in Gilead preparing to make war against the children of Israel (**10:17–18**), and the question on

² "**Coexist**": Islam, Peace, Gay Rights, Egalitarianism, Judaism, Wicca, Paganism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity.

³ E.g., Deut 12:31; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer 19:5.

everybody's mind was "**Who will lead us in the fight**"? Well, the day eventually came when Ammon attacked (11:4). So, what did the leaders do? 😊 **Read Judges 11:5.**

Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander; that we may fight against the people of Ammon."
Judges 11:6

As you might expect, Jephthah was confused (11:7). The last time he had spoken to them was when they had kicked him out of his father's house. And now they were asking him to save them from their enemies?

Interestingly, this is similar to the conversation that we heard last week in chapter 10. God's people had rejected Him for 18 years. But then, when they wanted His help in rescuing them from their enemies, they came to Him. And God responded by telling them to go ask all their other gods for help. God used that conversation to expose the hypocrisy in their hearts and to lead them into repentance (10:10–16).

But Jephthah used this conversation as leverage to regain the inheritance that had been stripped away from him. If he agreed to lead them into battle, then he wouldn't just be their commander; he would be the head of everyone in the land. And they agreed (11:8–11).

What happens next is the high point of Jephthah's life and the clearest example of his faith in the one true and living God. He begins his engagement with the enemy by reasoning with them (11:12–27). He starts by asking the king of Ammon why he has come to fight against the people of this land (11:12). The king responded by saying that Israel stole the land from him and that he wanted it back (11:13). Jephthah then gives the king of Ammon a history lesson on who owns the land. He tells the king, "***This land never belonged to you, and we never stole it. It belonged to Almighty God, and He gave it to us*** (11:21). ***Yes, people inhabited this land, but it never belonged to them. It belonged to God, and He gave it us.***" Not only did Jephthah give them a history lesson, but he also gave them a theology lesson on the sovereignty of God – in comparison to the utter powerlessness of their idol gods (e.g., Chemosh). And, in his speech, he used the covenant name of God (YHWH) more than any other judge in this book (11:21, 23, 24, 27).

In other words, despite everything Jephthah had been through (*despite the culture he was raised in, despite his family dynamics*), he knew God, and he had some level of faith in the sovereignty of his God. It wasn't perfect (not by a longshot). But it was there, nonetheless. He didn't approach the king of Ammon with some arrogant speech about his own military abilities. He came with a word about the power, authority, and supremacy of Almighty God. He knows that victory belongs to God alone. He is the Deliverer (11:21). He is the Judge (11:27).

But the king of Ammon wouldn't listen to reason (11:28). So, Jephthah's next move was war, and the battle began with the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him (11:29).

At this point in the story, Jephthah is the underdog hero if ever there was one. The Spirit of the Lord is upon him. He is about to gain a great victory and have his inheritance restored. He is about to create a legacy that he can pass down his children and grandchildren for generations to come. You can just feel the electricity of this moment! But this is when everything in his story begins to collapse.

As he is riding out to battle, the weight of this moment overwhelms him, and he doubts the goodness and the love of God. And (*in what appears to be a moment of weakness*) he seeks to **coerce** God's help by making the kind of vow that every other religion in the land was making to their false gods: a vow of a burnt offering. In a moment of weakness (*of fear, of doubt, of uncertainty*), he attempted to **persuade** God to give him the victory by **appeasing** Him with a transactional vow that God abhorred.

Judges 11:30–31

In that culture, it was common for the farm animals to occupy the same space as their owners. The barn was often part of their house, and so I used to think that Jephthah was expecting an animal to come trotting out of his house upon his return. But as I've meditated on Jephthah's life this past week, I don't think that's what he was doing. In **11:31**, where he says, "*whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me*", that word "*whatever*" can just as easily be translated as "*whoever*". Given the context in which he was raised, I think he was expecting one of *the servants* to come out of the house when he returned, and so he was making a vow to sacrifice one of *his servants* in exchange for victory.

Whatever he meant by his vow, it shows that he didn't know God as well as he thought he did. You do not barter with Almighty God. You don't have anything to offer God that He needs. He's God. He doesn't need your abilities. He doesn't need your money. He doesn't need your help. He doesn't need your sacrifices. He's God.

In that moment, Jephthah reverted to a pagan form of worship, and he treated God as if the Creator of the universe operated like just another pagan idol that needed to be **appeased**. And he ended up making the most foolish vow imaginable.

Jephthah goes into battle, and the Lord delivered the enemies into his hands (**11:32–33**) – not because of Jephthah's foolish vow, but because (*as we read last week*) His people had repented of their sinful rebellion, and His heart could no longer endure their misery (**10:16**) and because His Spirit had already come upon Jephthah (**11:29**). There was never any question about the outcome.

While Jephthah may have felt anxious over the battle, there was never any doubt as to the outcome. The battle always belongs to the Lord. This battle is so insignificant in the big picture of this story that the author only devotes 2 verses to it (**32–33**). The real story is what happened after the battle was over (**11:34–40**).

READ **Judges 11:34–35**

When he returned home (victorious, inheritance restored, head of the land, a future that was bright and secure), he is ready to offer a burnt sacrifice and then celebrate with his family. And as he approached the house, the most horrific thing happens.... His daughter comes running out of the house to greet her father. With tambourine in hand, she came out dancing with joy for the victory of her father and his safe return (**11:34**). The text tells us that she was his only child.

The sight of her broke him (**11:35**). He wasn't expecting her to be the first one out of the door. And then he reveals again that he doesn't know his God as well as he thought he did. He said that he couldn't take back his foolish vow when, in fact, God's Word says that he could (**Leviticus 5:4–13**). Jephthah knew that God takes our vows very seriously, but what he didn't seem to know is that God made a way for His people so that they didn't have to keep vows that were foolish.

As wicked as his vow was, his daughter responded with a submission to the Lord and to her father that was extraordinary (**11:36–38**). She went into the mountains and mourned the life that she would never know – which also meant that Jephthah had two months to agonize over his foolish vow – because he didn't know the heart of God or the provision God had given for Jephthah to offer something else to God in place of his daughter.

The chapter ends with this haunting sentence that "*he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed*" (**11:39–40**). There's a lot of debate on exactly what this means. Does it mean he sacrificed his only child? Does it mean that he offered her into the service of God in a way that prevented her from ever getting married? Whatever happened to Jephthah's daughter, this father destroyed her future because he thought he needed to somehow earn or coerce God's loving care. He didn't know that he was already loved (*completely, totally, eternally, by the God of the universe*).

If that was the end of his story, it would be bad enough, but it's not the end. It gets worse.

In **chapter 12**, we read that (a short time later) the people of Ephraim came to Jephthah furious that he had not called them to join him in the fight against Ammon (**12:1**).⁴ They were so mad that he didn't call on them to fight with him that they threatened to burn him alive (**12:1**). When you consider what he has just gone through with his daughter, you can imagine how he might have responded to their threat of setting his home on fire (with him in it)...

But that wasn't the only thing they said to him. In **12:4** they proceeded to mock him by saying, "*You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim...*" What's a **fugitive**? It's a wanderer. A vagabond. Somebody who doesn't have a home. In other words, not only do they stir up memories of the horrific events surrounding his daughter, but now they throw his past in his face. It's as if they remind him that he doesn't have a daughter, and he doesn't truly have a home. "*Jephthah, you are a nobody, and you have nobody.*"

Once again, he broke, and he went to war against the men of Ephraim – his own flesh and blood (**12:5–6**). And Jephthah didn't stop fighting until he had slaughtered 42,000 Ephraimites. Even when it was clear that he had won the battle, he continued to fight. His army captured the escape routes along the Jordan River (**12:5**), and whenever an Ephraimite escaped the battle and attempted to cross over the river, Jephthah's men would intercept him ask him if he was an Ephraimite. If he said no, then they told him to prove it by saying the word "*Shibboleth*". Apparently, the men of Ephraim had trouble pronouncing the "sh" sound in this word, and so they would say "*Sibboleth*" (**12:6**). And then Jephthah's men would put them to death.

"Are you an Ephraimite?"

"No".

"Okay. Oh, say the word Shibboleth."

"Sibboleth".

"Okay... You're dead."

42,000 – dead.

And that's how his story ends. The author tells us that he judged Israel 6 years and then he died (**12:7**). That's it. Son of harlot. Captain of thieves. Heartbreaking father. Bloodthirsty in his vengeance. Six years as the judge of God's people. And then he dies.

But then, believe it or not, this isn't the last time we hear about Jephthah in the story of God's Word. Hundreds of years later, his name shows up in Hebrews 11, which is often referred to as "*The Hall of Faith*", right next to David (**Heb 11:32**). The author of Hebrews says that Jephthah was a man of faith right next to King David. What does this mean? It means, in spite of all the failures that we see on the outside, God saw something on the inside that was pure gold. In spite of all his failures, there was more to Jephthah than human eyes could ever see. We look at the outward appearance, but God always sees our heart.

Even in the deepest depths of human depravity, God sees the faith of His children... even when that faith is the size of a mustard seed.

APPLICATION

1. Seek to understand before you judge. There is always so much more going on in somebody's heart (and in their life) than you can see with your physical eyes.
2. God uses very imperfect people to accomplish His purposes.
3. God doesn't need anything you have to offer to accomplish His will in your life. He's God. He's got you. He's got this. He's just calling you to trust in Him with all your heart.

⁴ This isn't the first time that the men of Ephraim showed up after the fighting was all over and said that they wished they could have been there (see 8:1).

4. When you know who you are in the eyes of God, it doesn't matter who you are in the eyes of the world.
When you know that God receives you, it doesn't matter who rejects you.
When you know that God loves you, it doesn't matter if the world hates you.
When you know that God is for you, it doesn't matter who is against you.
When you know that God's plans are for your good, it doesn't matter what your enemy's plans are.
When you know that God is enough, you don't need to make foolish vows, and you don't need to seek revenge. You have God. And He is enough.

It's so appropriate that we getting to the darkest days in the book of Judges as we begin celebrating the advent of Christ. The Father sent His only begotten Son into the world (1) to be the One who fights for us – to be the Deliverer that none of these judges ever could be, and (2) to show us just how loved we are. Completely, perfectly, radically loved. That's who you are. You are not a failure. You are not a disappointment. You are not a sinner. You are not a nobody. None of these things are who you are. Jesus came so that you would know that you are loved. That's who you are. And knowing that changes everything.

You are loved. That is your context. That's your identity.

And Jesus came so that, in His light, you would see that you are loved.