

Judges

But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. (Judges 2:19 ESV)

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25 ESV)

A Tragic Story
November 9th, 2025
Judges 11:12-12:7
Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please keep your Bibles open to Judges chapter 11. Thank you, Anna, for reading for us.

I remember the first time that I read through the book of Judges. I was so interested, but I was simultaneously so confused... Why does it feel like there are no good guys? Who are we rooting for here? Are we rooting for Jephthah – the guy who sacrificed his daughter and slaughtered 42,000 of his own people? Why is this story in my Bible?

As we consider that question, I want you to notice that the story of Jephthah is situated right at the centre of the book of Judges. It represents a turning point. In the first half of the book – though it has been bleak – there were some flashes of goodness. Othniel was exemplary! Deborah and Barak displayed great faith!

However, with each passing chapter, Israel descends further and further into the dark.

And that in itself is a lesson that's worth sitting in for a moment. A friend of mine shared this helpful illustration with me. When you choose to sin, imagine that you are choosing to step onto a train that is leading you into the dark. When you repent and turn away from that sin, you get off the train. Which is great! Unfortunately, however, you need to make your way back to where you started from, and the road back is marked with painful consequences.

Eventually, you feel a temptation to get on that train again, only this time, you want to take it FURTHER. You're not content simply to return to where you've been. Sin always wants more.

But the further you ride that train into the dark, the more painful consequences accumulate. When you finally repent and jump off, you have a terribly dark and difficult path to walk. Sin always leaves a scar.

God's forgiveness is INSTANT. He declares you justified and loved at the MOMENT of repentance! But that forgiveness does not nullify every earthly consequence.

Look around you this morning. There is so much grace on display in this room! And – at the same time – there are also so many SCARS. Some of us rode the train of addiction deep into the darkness. Others of us rode the train of sexual sin. Others of us rode the train of love of money. While still others of us rode the train of laziness. God in His wonderful mercy welcomed us with OPEN ARMS when we confessed our sin and turned to Him. Nevertheless, many of us are still limping our way through the consequences of our sin.

If you are wise, then you will LEARN from the painful mistakes of those who have gone before you. By God's grace, one of His purposes in our foolishness is that you can now LEARN FROM OUR LIMP.

I believe that's what we're meant to do with this passage. This is a tragic story, and I think the right response is simply to grieve the sin on these pages and to learn from this sad example. Let's begin by turning to the elephant in the room:

The Sin Of Jephthah

This morning, we're going to skip past Jephthah's negotiations with the Ammonites in verses 12-28 and we're going to focus in on his negotiation with God. Look again at verses 30-31:

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand,³¹ then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in

peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.”
(Judges 11:30-31 ESV)

Jephthah’s thinking has been so distorted by the surrounding culture that he thinks that it is pleasing to God to offer a human sacrifice in exchange for victory on the battlefield! He is praying to the God of Israel, but he is viewing Him as if He is like the gods of the Canaanites.

Now, some have tried to suggest that Jephthah never had human sacrifice in mind when he made this vow. But that’s just not a realistic interpretation of this story. First of all, Jephthah almost certainly wouldn’t have had animals living in his house the way that we do today. Second, even if he DID have a special pet goat that slept at the foot of his bed, animals were sacrificed all the time! Jephthah is making a *special vow* to the Lord here. What’s special about a sacrifice that was routinely offered?

No, Jephthah was offering something *unique*. This was a play from the Canaanite play book.

As much as we hate it, this IS a story of a man sacrificing his daughter. And he’s doing it under the guise of ‘worship’.

If you feel repulsed by that, then you’re feeling what you’re supposed to feel. Let’s be clear: God did NOT ask Jephthah to do this. In fact, God explicitly FORBADE this. Before the Israelites entered into the land of Canaan, He warned His people not to adopt their practices. God said:

You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, **for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.** (Deuteronomy 12:31 ESV)

God said: ‘When you live in that land, be wary of their influence. Their worship is an abomination! *They even sacrifice their children!*’ The Israelites who first heard that warning were likely tempted to roll their eyes. ‘As if any of us would ever be wicked enough to sacrifice *our* children!’

But after some 300 years of swimming in Canaanite sludge, the Israelites' view of God was looking more and more like that of their neighbours. The scenario that God warned against in Deuteronomy came true. We read in verse 39:

And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, **who did with her according to his vow that he had made.** (Judges 11:39a ESV)

Can I draw your attention to the most frightening detail in Jephthah's sin? He really, truly thought that God was pleased with it! His view of God had become so DISTORTED by the surrounding culture that he really believed that THIS was what God wanted.

Who is God? What is He like? What pleases Him? Where do you look to answer these questions?

Do you look to dead traditionalism? How many Christians have sacrificed their churches – torn them in two – believing that God was pleased with their fighting over matters of preference?

Do you look to the surrounding culture to answer these questions? I don't think it's an over generalization to suggest that, by-and-large, Canada would prefer a God who makes no exclusive claims. Canada wants a God who is on board with the sexual revolution and who has no problem with our greed and self-indulgence. Canada wants a God who is always affirming, never correcting – always perfecting my circumstances, never perfecting my character – always answering my prayers, never expecting my obedience. As one old preacher warns:

Our high calling is to be in the world, not of the world. It is not our being in the world that ruins us, but our suffering the world to be in us: just as ships sink, not by being in the water, but by the water getting into them.¹

Has any water gotten into your boat, Christian? Do you worship God for who He has revealed Himself to be in His word? Or do you worship a god of your imagination?

Let's learn from the tragic example of Jephthah. But his is not the only tragedy in this text. Next, we turn to:

¹ A. R Fausset as quoted in Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such A Great Salvation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2000), 34.

The Sin Of Ephraim

After Jephthah and his army drove out the invading Ammonites, in a time that should have been marked by joy and celebration, the tribe of Ephraim confronted Jephthah. Look again at verse 1 of chapter 12:

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.” (Judges 12:1 ESV)

It’s important to remember here that Ephraim is one of the 12 tribes of Israel. These people are FAMILY. The tribes in the region of Gilead have just been SAVED from the Ammonites who were trying to kill them! This should be a time for celebration!

But the Ephraimites are not celebrating. They’re jealous. They want a share of the glory.

If you’ve been tracking along through this series, then this story just might sound familiar. This is EXACTLY what Ephraim did when Gideon drove out the invading Midianites some 70 years prior. Flip back a few pages to Judges 8:1. There, we read:

Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they accused him fiercely. (Judges 8:1 ESV)

Ephraim can’t seem to celebrate a victory for God’s people unless they are at the centre of it.

Now, when they pulled this stunt with Gideon, he resolved the issue by stroking their ego.

And he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? ³ God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. **What have I been able to do in comparison with you?**” Then their anger against him subsided when he said this. (Judges 8:2-3 ESV)

Gideon said: ‘Ephraim, relax! You guys are amazing! Look at all the amazing things that you do! Everyone knows that you’re WAY more impressive than me!’ Perhaps they expected the same ego stroking from Jephthah. But he didn’t have Gideon’s patience. We read in verses 2-4:

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. ³ 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?” ⁴ **Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim.** (Judges 12:2-4a ESV)

‘Where were you guys when we needed help? We were overrun with enemies, and you were nowhere to be found! And now, after we’ve driven our enemies out, you decide to show up? And you’re going to pick a fight with me? Well than, let’s fight!’

We’ll deal with the fallout of that fight in a moment, but first I want to take a moment to grieve over this ugly sin of jealousy. I confess that I see this sin in myself more often than I would like to admit. There are some churches that are growing like gangbusters and that should FILL me with joy!

But the sin of Ephraim creeps into my heart from time to time, and I find myself playing the comparison game. I often find myself struggling to celebrate the victories that I’m not at the center of. It’s ugly. It’s sin. I repent, and I invite you to call me out if ever you see that sin in me.

I don’t know if or how the sin of jealousy manifests in your life. Maybe you doomscroll on social media and harbour resentment for the Christian women who seem to be better off than you are. Maybe you bristle every time someone else gets a compliment. Maybe you feel the need to talk about yourself and your accomplishments because you’re desperate for affirmation from others. However jealousy manifests, it is an ugly sin. It reveals that we are pursuing glory for ourselves rather than God. That is the sin of Ephraim and I pray that we would see less and less of it in ourselves. Finally, this story confronts us with:

The Sin Of Gilead

As I mentioned earlier, Ephraim’s complaint was met with a response that they didn’t expect. The tribes in Gilead turned against the Ephraimites and put them to the sword. We read in verses 5-6:

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,”⁶ they said to him, “Then say Shibboleth,” and he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right. (Judges 12:5-6a ESV)

Whenever we visit with my family in the south, they get a kick out of the way we say ‘house’. I love them deeply, but there is no ‘w’ in house. It’s not a ‘hows’. Evidently, the Ephraimites had their own distinctive accent. And whenever the guards at the Jordan heard it, we read:

Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell. (Judges 12:6b ESV)

When we reflect on this story, we tend to fixate on Jephthah’s daughter – and understandably so – but how often do we rush right past this detail? Think for a moment about how tragic this scene is. God has just delivered His people from the Ammonites! They’re SAFE! But their immediate response after that victory is to slaughter each other!

Grudges, infighting and unforgiveness transformed what should have been a season of celebration into a season of tragedy and despair. They somehow managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

To be fair, Ephraim started this fight. That’s true. But Gilead’s response here is disproportionate. They trap their brothers in. They murder anyone who tries to escape. Gilead doesn’t simply want to win – they want to exact thorough, uncompromising justice against the brothers who have wronged them.

But, is that what God wanted?

The book of Judges is a book that describes the countless times when God extended His mercy to people who did not deserve it. Unfortunately, it’s also a book that describes the many times that God’s people failed to extend mercy to one another. As Robert Murray McCheyne once said:

The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.²

² Robert Murray McCheyne as quoted in Warren Wiersbe, *Treasury of the World's Great Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 383.

It's a terrible thing when the people of God go to war with one another. And, while it would be easy to tell ourselves that we have not committed the sin of Gilead – that we would never murder one another over petty grievances – we would do well to remember what Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5:21-22 ESV)

When we measure our hearts against the standard of our perfect King Jesus, we discover that we are a room full of murderers. Who of us has never gossiped? Never slandered? Never held a grudge? Never indulged resentful thoughts? Like Gilead, we have taken it upon ourselves to be the executors of justice – to take vengeance into our own hands. Yet, the Apostle Paul reminds us:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "**Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.**" (Romans 12:19 ESV)

And so, as we reflect on this story, we grieve. We grieve the wickedness of Jephthah, the jealousy of Ephraim, and the wrath of Gilead. We grieve the 42,000 Israelite soldiers who struck each other down, and the young woman who went up in flames on her father's altar. We grieve that Israel is plunging further and further into the dark.

But, as we conclude, I want to draw your attention to the most mysterious detail in this story. We've seen the sin of Jephthah, the sin of Ephraim, and the sin of Gilead. But now, I want to make sure that you see:

The Presence Of God

Look back at verse 29 of chapter 11. There, we read:

Then the **Spirit of the Lord** was upon Jephthah (Judges 11:29a ESV)

What is the Holy Spirit doing in the midst of such a dark and wicked story? Why would He bear to be in the presence of a people who are as lost, and sinful, and VILE as this?

The great mystery of this passage is that – even here in this *unfathomable darkness* – God is near.

Whether you grew up in the church or not, there's likely not a person in the room who has not heard the famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*. The man who wrote it was an Anglican minister by the name of John Newton. What you might not know is that – before John was a minister – he was the captain of a ship that was used to transport captured slaves across the Atlantic.

When John wrote, 'Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!' *this* was the wretchedness he saw. Because of him, hundreds of men and women would suffer and die in captivity. Now, he went on to support his close friend William Wilberforce in abolishing slavery in Britain, but that didn't undo the wrong he had committed against those people. By every earthly standard, John Newton should NEVER have received grace.

But the grace of God is not limited by earthly standards. It is an AMAZING grace.

The story before us this morning is a tragic story. An ugly story. A story that seems to serve no purpose. And yet – in the midst of this darkness – the Spirit is present. Hovering over the darkness. Signaling that – somehow, someday – God will bring these dry bones to life.

The profound mystery of grace is that God sent His Son into this dark world – not to save perfect, shiny people – but to save ugly, sinful people. People like me. People like you. John Newton, nearing the end of his life, said this, and this strikes me as an appropriate place to close. He said:

My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior³

Let's pray together.

³ McMinn, Mark R. *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling: An Integrative Paradigm* (Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books) (p. 31). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.