



# A MIGHTY BUT UNWISE WARRIOR

*SERIES: JUDGES: CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART*

Judges 10:6–12:7

8th Message

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For the past two weeks we have been watching the Republican and Democratic conventions. The candidates are settled, but everyone is asking, “Who will lead our nation?” Who will keep America great, ensure economic prosperity, and deal with terrorist threats here and around the world? Who will fight for us? These are the same questions that precipitated the rise of Jephthah to the position of judge in Israel.

We are down to two final judges in our summer series—Jephthah and Samson. Many of you might be asking, who is Jephthah? Most people skip over Jephthah and go from Gideon to Samson, because we don’t know what to do with him. His story is ambiguous, tragic, and filled with contention and bloodshed. But all of Scripture is profitable for teaching and there are important lessons to be gained.

The story consists of 5 scenes. I am going to touch on each scene, but there is no way we can cover everything. Scene 1 begins with the beginning of a new cycle that has now become familiar in Judges.

## Israel vs. God

**The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. (Judges 10:6 ESV)**

Not only is Israel serving the Canaanite gods but also the gods of the surrounding nations. Israel is plunging deeper into idolatry. Idolatry always begets greater idolatry. Idolatry always leads to a downhill slide.

**So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people ... For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. (Judges 10:7–8)**

Samson deals with the Philistines on the west while Jephthah deals with the Ammonites on the east. Both stories occur simultaneously. God is putting Israel in a vice grip. Gilead is a term referring to the two and a half tribes east of the Jordan—Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Serving the gods of another nation leads to oppression by that nation. In this case serving the gods of the Ammonites leads to the Ammonites oppressing Gilead. And so it is with us. Serving an idol causes enslavement to that idol. If we worship money, money enslaves us. If we worship sex, sex enslaves us. If we worship power, obsession with power controls us. We must confront the idols of our hearts if we are going to experience our life in Christ fully. This has been our focus this summer.

**And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, “We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have**

**served the Baals.” And the LORD said to the people of Israel, “Did I not save you?... Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.” (Judges 10:10–14)**

Notice that God speaks directly to Israel instead of through a prophet or angel.

**And the people of Israel said to the LORD, “We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.” So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel. (Judges 10:15–16)**

Some people think that Israel truly repented. But Israel is saying, God do what you want, only just save us today. True repentance consists of sorrow over sin and a willingness to let God have his way completely with us, even if we are not saved immediately. So it does not appear that Israel truly repented.

All the familiar components we find in the Judges cycle are here except for peace or rest in the land. But there is something new: God says he will not save them this time. God tells Gilead to go to the gods they worship. What we see is the conditionality of God. God can change his intentions based on his people doing good or evil. What we do is important. We cannot have our cake and eat it too. We can’t serve our idols of pleasure, career, or possessions and then, when we get in trouble, think that we can come to God and that he will save us over and over again. This thinking leads to half-hearted repentance. There comes a time when God won’t save us. Faithfulness to covenant is essential.

But amazingly God relents in the end. He is like a frustrated parent who finally gives in to a whining child even though the child lacks heart-felt humility.

## Jephthah vs. Gilead

In scene 2 we are introduced to Jephthah.

**Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.” (Judges 10:17–18)**

The leaders of Gilead want a military commander to fight the Ammonites. They don’t want to fight themselves, but they want to maintain their power and status. Notice that they are not asking God to raise up a leader, but rather seeking human wisdom. Enter Jephthah:

**Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And**

Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out ... Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him. (Judges 11:1–3)

Jephthah, like Gideon, is a mighty warrior, although he is not fearful like Gideon. But Jephthah has a questionable birth. He doesn't have the right family pedigree. He is the son of a man named Gilead and a prostitute, perhaps a Canaanite woman. His father adopts him, but when his half-brothers grow up they reject, disinherit, and cast him out. Jephthah flees and surrounds himself with worthless fellows, literally empty men, criminals who operate outside the law. This is not Robin Hood and his merry men.

**And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites." ... Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head." (Judges 11:5–9)**

The elders of Gilead call on Jephthah for help and they enter into negotiations. The leaders offer Jephthah the position of military commander, but Jephthah negotiates for being head over them, a position similar to king or ruler. Both the elders and Jephthah are self-seeking and ambitious for power.

Jephthah starts with several strikes against him. He is an illegitimate child. His family and tribe reject him. He is a social outcast. As a Gileadite living east of the Jordan, he is from the wrong side of the tracks. His community is unhealthy. And yet Jephthah overcomes these challenges to be a mighty warrior and important political figure. There is a big downside to Jephthah, as we will see, but he is strong and resourceful and a great negotiator—at least early on.

Jephthah can be an encouragement for us. Maybe you had a tough beginning, faced rejection or abuse, lacked the advantage of a "good" family, or hung out with the wrong people. Many of us experienced the same things Jephthah did. But that doesn't mean that we are worthless or that God can't use us. Most of the judges are flawed people—Barak, Gideon, Samson—and yet they are listed in Hebrews 11. Some of the most important people in history started with two strikes against them. Read David Brooks' book *The Road to Character*. We all have weaknesses and face challenges. But God makes himself known through weak and broken people like you and me. Life in Christ means that we don't have to be limited by our difficulties or be perfect.

Jim Foster shared a bit of his story this morning and how he fought against God. And yet God worked in his life to redeem and heal all the things that had happened early in his life. Jim is a modern day testimony of what God can do for any of us.

## Jephthah vs. Ammon

Scene 3 features negotiations between Jephthah and the king of Ammon.

**Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" And the king of the Ammonites answered... "Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took**

**away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." (Judges 11:12–13)**

The king of Ammon claims that Gilead is their land.

**Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites (Judges 11:14–15)**

Jephthah then sets the king straight with a lengthy history lesson. When Israel came up from Egypt, they went around Edom and Moab on the east side of the Jordan. When they tried to enter the land peaceably via the Amorite land, the Amorites didn't allow it. And so Israel defeated the Amorites, not the Ammonites, and took possession of their land. Ammon lived to the east of the Amorites. Gilead is formerly Amorite land.

Next Jephthah makes a theological argument:

**Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess. (Judges 11:24)**

This sounds like a good argument, but it's not really accurate. First, Chemosh is the god of the Moabites. Milcom is the god of the Ammonites. Second Yahweh gave Ammon its land because the Ammonites were descendants of Lot. Third, Jephthah portrays the god Chemosh as equal to Yahweh. We see Jephthah understands history, but he doesn't understand God.

Many people make the same mistake of equating the God of the Bible with the god of another religion. They think that there are many ways to God, that Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. are on par with each other, that as long as you have a religion and worship a god then that is fine. That idea lacks an understanding of the God of the Bible. The Bible teaches that there is one God who is sovereign over all things and there is only one way to get to God. There is no other God equal to Yahweh. Idolatry leads to a diminished view of God.

## Jephthah's Tragic Vow

Scene 4 is where things get really confusing, and why no one wants to teach this text.

**Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah, ... And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 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." So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the Lord gave them into his hand. (Judges 11:29–32)**

So the Spirit empowered Jephthah like Othniel, Gideon, and Samson and he defeated the Ammonites. But right before this battle Jephthah makes a vow. The victory is minor compared to the vow.

Why did Jephthah make a vow? He was trying to manipulate God, make a deal. This is what the Canaanites and other nations did with their gods. Jephthah is relating to Yahweh like others related to their gods. But Jephthah had the Spirit and God was going to give him victory. He didn't need to persuade God.

Thinking we can manipulate God with vows is a wrong understanding of how God works. But we do it in small and large ways. We might vow to do such-and-such if the Warriors win. Or if our business deal is successful, I will give a lot of money to church.

Or if you save my child, I will do anything you want and never doubt you again. God is sovereign. He controls the outcome. We can pray. We can ask. But God doesn't make deals. Rather we are to live in dependence on God, trust him for whatever happens, and believe that all things work for good.

And what did Jephthah expect to come out of his house? Some people think an animal. But then, why wouldn't Jephthah just sacrifice an animal? It is likely that Jephthah expected his wife or daughter to come out to celebrate the victory. And that is what happens.

**Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me." (Judges 11:34–35)**

Jephthah's daughter comes out of the house to celebrate with her dad. When Jephthah sees her, he laments—not for his daughter but for himself. He blames her for causing him this trouble and for the fix he is in because of his foolish vow. Notice that the text emphasizes that Jephthah's daughter is his only child. The emphasis of *neither son or daughter* calls to mind the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. But that story and this one are quite different.

If you are a parent, you cringe at this story. But how many parents sacrifice their children for career or accomplishments? How many parents push their kids too intensely for success in school or sports? The story of Jephthah is probably more relevant to our culture than we dare to admit.

The girl asked to take two months with her friends to lament her virginity, not her death, but then Jephthah did what he vowed:

**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 11:39)**

There are some commentators who do not think Jephthah actually carried through, but I think the text is clear. This is a tragic story, one of the saddest stories in all the Bible. The Moabites and Ammonites would offer child sacrifices to their gods. This idea had worked itself into Jephthah's thinking. He did not know the Scripture. If he did, he would know that Yahweh detests child sacrifice and also know that Leviticus 27 provides a way to pay money to redeem a person in this situation. In other words, sacrificing his daughter was unnecessary. Jephthah's rash words cost him his daughter, but if he had known the Word he would not have had to fulfill his vow. Jephthah did not have spiritual wisdom.

## Jephthah vs. Ephraim

In the final scene Jephthah contends with the tribe of Ephraim, his own people.

**The men of Ephraim were called to arms ... 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." ... Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites." (Judges 12:1–4)**

Basically Ephraim is jealous of Jephthah. They wanted to be part of the victory. The same thing happened with Gideon in chapter 8. They call the Gileadites bad names. There is no negotiation. Jephthah goes to war.

**And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan ... 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," they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him. (Judges 12:5–6)**

The Gileadites have a complete victory, and when the Ephraimites try to pass back over the Jordan to get home, the Gileadites identify them by asking them to pronounce the word "Shibboleth." They could not say it right. This is like someone asking me to say "wash." Being from the Midwest I would respond by saying "warsh." Why is this in the story? Because Jephthah's daughter was doomed by a careless word and Ephraim was doomed by one word. And you have to get all the way through the story to get that punch line.

## Application

What do we do with Jephthah? He is a mixed bag. There is positive and negative. On the positive side he is a mighty warrior, a great negotiator; he overcame many obstacles and the Spirit was upon him. But on the negative side, he is self-seeking, ambitious, and manipulative. He lacks spiritual wisdom and knowledge of God and his Word. Let me give you four takeaways:

### Know your identity in Christ

Our identity is not our family. It's not based on what has happened to us or how we were treated growing up. It is not based on our failures, mistakes, accomplishments, or popularity. Our identity is based on being in Christ, being a new creation, and being the beloved of God. We are shaped by many things, but the more we understand our identity, the more we will understand who we really are, and the more we will be shaped into Christ. Part of Jephthah's problem was that he never healed from his past. He lived with a chip on his shoulder. He sought to look out for himself even though it cost him his only child.

### Seek spiritual wisdom

The story encourages us to be a spiritual person, to understand God and his Word. The Psalmist writes:

**Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night. (Ps. 1:1–2)**

Jephthah lacked understanding of God and his Word. This led to some foolish decisions. If he had known, he would have fared much better. Paul prays for the Colossians:

**And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Col 1:9–10)**

It seems to me that many churches offer a gourmet dinner without the Word of God. But to be faithful, a church needs to teach God's

Word and all of his Word, so that we can understand God. This is what allows us to gain spiritual wisdom.

### Choose words carefully

Jephthah was a great negotiator but he was careless with his words. It cost him his daughter and it cost the Ephraimites their lives. Our words are incredibly important. They have the power of life or death. They have the power to destroy or heal, to bless or hurt. All of us know this. The old saying that “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me” is simply not true. We can heal from a blow to our body. But we may never heal completely from a careless or sarcastic word spoken in anger or malice. Some words remain lodged in our memory. As James reminds us the tongue is a restless evil:

**And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. (James 3:2)**

We need to be careful with our words, to allow the Spirit to filter our words before we say them. Our words come from our heart. And to be wise instead of foolish, they must be shaped by God’s word.

### Understand the role of leadership

Jephthah does not represent a biblical understanding of being a leader. His desire for power and gain controlled his life. Biblical leadership or headship involves responsibility, not privilege, accountability, not power. Biblical leaders are to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of others and seek the well-being of those they lead instead of their own gain. And this principle also applies to business. A real leader lays down his or her life to shepherd the people they lead. Our church needs good leaders. Our nations needs good leaders. Our world needs good leaders.

In the upcoming election we will be asking, who will lead us? Who will fight for us? No matter who wins, no human leader can ever be enough. But the good news is that we have a leader. All of the judges point us to Christ, who saves from our enemies. Christ fought for us. He laid down his life for us. Like Jephthah, Jesus had a questionable birth. His family and people rejected him. But he fought for us on the cross. Rather than letting us die eternally, he sacrificed himself on the cross. And so we don’t have to rely on the presidential election to set things right, because we have someone who has already set things right, and will continue to set things right. Jesus is the leader who is worthy of being our Lord and King.

*And now may we “be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Col 1:9–10)*

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