

Judges 08-06-06a

This is Friday, the 6th of June, 2008. We are continuing tonight our study in the book of Judges. We're at chapter 12.

Let's take a moment, as always, to go to the Lord in prayer. It gives us a chance to kind of clear the decks mentally. I don't mean that your mind should be blank, but it should be free of the distractions that can keep us from concentrating and gaining the benefit that is so important for us to gain from the study of God's Word.

Shall we pray? Father, it is always an encouragement to recognize the many ways that you bless us and provide for us. Your mercies are renewed each day. Your compassion for us is great, and the provision that you make for us is beyond anything that we could fully comprehend or appreciate.

But we are sustained by your grace. We are in a permanent and eternal relationship with you through the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are so grateful for that, and we are grateful for the opportunity that we have to learn and grow in our understanding of your plan and purpose and in our appreciation for your character as we see it revealed ultimately in the Lord Jesus Christ and throughout the pages of your Word. As we study this passage this evening, we pray that your Holy Spirit will lead us and guide us.

May each one of us find in these verses the truths that will equip us for every good work and will give us the insight and the understanding to see both our own weaknesses and failures and where your grace can overcome those, and also to give us the patience and the endurance to face whatever challenges lie ahead. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we are coming to the conclusion of the career of Jephthah. I was thinking about names. You remember we've already studied the bracketing judges on each side of Jephthah.

There are two before and three after, and we looked at the whole scenario with the donkeys and sons and daughters and what have you. And I'm not sure I spent much time on Jephthah's name, but I think I did mention when we first came across him that his name derives from a very common Hebrew word, patach, P-A-T-A-C-H. And patach, I could tell you a lot of things.

There's a mark in Hebrew that is a patach that tells you something about how to pronounce words. But more importantly, it is the verb that means to open. The Aramaic derivative from this ancient Semitic root was spoken by the Lord Jesus when he said, Ephatha, be opened.

Remember when he was healing the man in the New Testament. And it's a very difficult thing to say. You think, well, if you've got to have a simple word, if you're going to open someone's mouth, you shouldn't have to say Ephatha, which is E-P-H-T-H-A-T-H-A-H or some such thing.

But it comes from patach. Patach is the verb that means open. And it's a somewhat unusual

word in its parsing, but yif-tach would be the Hebrew pronunciation of this name, yif-tach, and it means he opens.

One of the earliest uses of this word is found over in Exodus, where you have the injunction against opening a pit and worrying about someone's donkey falling into it. And I think this is sort of interesting because we are reminded of the fact that this is a hazard. And so in Exodus 21-33, for example, it says if a man opens a pit or digs a pit and does not cover it over, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, this is one of the more memorable uses of yif-tach.

It's in the very same form. If a man, if he opens a pit, yif-tach, and it sort of puts you in mind of a potential hazard. If a man digs a hole, there's a hazard.

Nowadays, they have the little stands that you put around it or protective tape or something. Say, wait, don't step in here. Don't drive your car in here.

You've got a pothole. You've got a pit. It's a potential hazard.

Another early use of this word is in Genesis 42-27, where you have the brothers who have come down to Egypt to buy grain, and Joseph has put the money back in the sack. And so in Genesis 42-27, one of the brothers opens his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place. He saw his money, and behold, it was in the mouth of the sack.

He said to his brothers, My money has been returned, and behold, it is even in my sack. And their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, What is this that God has done to us? And so it was a hazard. He opens the sack, and it's sort of bad news.

They're afraid because now it looks as though they've stolen the grain. The money that they paid is in the sack, and they're deeply disturbed. So in Genesis and in Exodus, the two earliest uses of this, where you find this exact form, yiftach, something is opened, and the potential for trouble is there.

It's not actually trouble at the point that it's opened. They're not in trouble when they open the sack. The man is not in trouble when he opens the pit.

But you hear warning music. It's kind of like the camera zooms in, and you think, Well, this could be trouble. This could be trouble.

Open pit, no markers on it. Sack opens, there's the money. This could be trouble.

Wonder what's going to happen when the Egyptians catch up with us. And it seems like a very appropriate name for Jephthah because when he opens his mouth to make this vow, he's not in trouble at the point that he opens his mouth and makes the vow, but warning music is playing underneath, just like opening a pit, just like opening the sack. So it seems very apropos in the story that he opens his mouth.

And the reason I bring this up as an introduction tonight is it's important for us to guard our

mouths and keep the door of our lips. It says over in James that the man who can control, can bridle his tongue, has brought his whole body into subjection. And it is beginning to be something of a lost art.

It is not a skill. It's not an aspect of character that is much cultivated today. People will say whatever comes into their head, and later on if it turns out to be a problem, well now we have explanations, we have dissembling, we have retreating, we have backtracking.

This happens a lot in the political world where words are said and, you know, well I landed from the plane and I was under sniper fire as I ran for cover. Then a film arrives and here's a little girl greeting Mrs. Clinton with flowers and it turns out she wasn't under sniper fire after all, but she made this statement and it came back to haunt her. We don't want to be those that say a thing and then have to backtrack or say well I was under duress or I didn't really mean that or how was I to know.

Jesus said, let your yea be yea and your nay be nay. And the only way you can fulfill that command is to think carefully before you make a commitment. It's easy, you know, it's kind of a part of our courtesy and our polite expectation if we're on the phone with someone and they say, oh well, and we say oh yes of course and we want to be glib, we want to be polite, we want to keep the conversation in a real positive tone and sometimes we say yes when we really ought to think before we say yes or maybe we need to do a little bit of checking, maybe we need to run something by our spouse.

I have learned, generally speaking, not to make any commitment until I can check because I don't keep track of our schedule. My brave and talented and organized wife does that and if I don't check with her I can get myself in trouble and I'll commit to a thing that I shouldn't commit to because well don't you remember and I don't. My memory is terrible.

It's a blessing to have someone who keeps track of those things and we all should avail ourselves of the grace that God has put in our lives that we ourselves might lack. So the lesson from Jephthah, if you just think about his name, he opens. Well he opens his mouth, he opens and it's not well thought out.

He tries to use a technique with God that he has successfully used with people. Well God is not a man to have commitments made to him and so on and there is quite a bit of legislation in the law of Moses that deals with this eventuality, with the making of vows and so forth. So the law is very explicit that if you decide that you are going to make a vow, think about it and be sure that it is something that you can fulfill.

The law has things to say about this in a number of places and I thought about going and doing a big study of vows but the best way to deal with vows is don't make them. Vows are kind of like divorce. The law made provision for them but in general they are not a good idea.

The one New Testament example that we have of a vow is the Apostle Paul when he went to

Jerusalem and he took a vow and it got him in trouble. He ended up ultimately in prison for that thing because he fell back into legalism. He was trying to please people.

He took this vow in order to try to get along with the legalistic, law-bound Jews who were in Jerusalem and he was trying to assure them that he wasn't against the law of Moses and that he wasn't a bad guy. He engaged and cooperated with some other guys, you can read about that in Acts, and it got him in trouble. There is no need.

God has already made promises and instead of us trying to make promises to God, we should be claiming His promises. We should be resting in His grace, in His provision and leaving things up to Him. It is so much easier to let God figure things out.

Whatever the course of our life may be, and remember God incorporates our bad decisions as well. We may try to do our best and we still make a bad decision. Maybe we are just inexperienced.

Maybe we are ignorant. Maybe we are rash. But God works all things together for good, even our failures.

So, if we concentrate on recovering when we fail, walking in the light, and leave things in God's hands, rather than making promises to Him, simply claim His promises and rest in His grace, everything will turn out fine. It may take a while. We may think that we have irreparably messed things up.

It is never the case. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you are doing your best to walk the narrow road that goes through the straight gate that leads to life, we have nothing to fear. We have nothing to fear.

We don't even have to fear our own failures, because we have a loving Heavenly Father, and He will work things together for good to those who love Him, to those who are called according to His purpose. You cannot fail. You cannot suffer irreparable loss if you are a faithful, obedient, enthusiastic believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just keep trusting God. Don't try to bargain with God. Don't try to operate in some sort of I will give you this if you will give me that kind of a thing.

We have nothing that we don't receive from Him anyway. Jephthah wouldn't have had a thing to come out of his house if it weren't for God. And it's better not to try to sort of even the tables and say, well, I'm a... When you bargain with God, you are sort of raising yourself to His level.

You are saying, well, I'll enter into a contract with you, and you are part of the first part, and I'm part of the second part. The only covenants we need to enter into with God are to receive the ones that He has constructed. His provisions are perfect.

His construct for a covenant cannot be improved upon. So enter into His promises. Enter into

His covenants.

We are not qualified to try to create a covenant or a bargain with God. It will always lead to trouble. That's the main thing to remember from Jephthah.

So now as we come across the threshold of chapter 12, after this great victory, the men of Ephraim were summoned. Now, it says, they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you. There's a lot of fire associated with Jephthah.

His promise that he will make an olah, which is generally a whole burnt offering. And now the Ephraimites basically say, we're going to make an olah out of you. And your house is going to be the fire under this sacrifice.

Why are they upset? Because when he went and fought the Ammonites, they say that he did not call them. Now, it's a little bit unclear in the beginning of verse 1 who summoned the Ephraimites. It looks to me like when Jephthah says, I and my people were at great strife in verse 2 with the sons of Ammon.

When I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand. I think when it says the men of Ephraim were summoned, that's Jephthah's summons. But they didn't show up on time.

They're late to the party. Jephthah doesn't wait for them because they don't show up. And so he goes ahead and attacks the Ammonites.

And by the time they show up, he says, look, you've crossed over and fought them, and why didn't you wait for us? Why didn't you call us before you went over? You called us, but then you didn't wait. It's kind of like they figured that Jephthah wouldn't do anything without them, and he went ahead and did it. Because he says, I did call you, and you did not deliver me from their hand.

I had to go, I had to fight, you didn't show up. One way or another, Jephthah says, I called you, and they don't dispute it later. So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands, and I crossed over against the sons of Ammon.

You all didn't show. The Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up this day to fight against me? Now, this has a familiar ring to it, because this same thing happened with Gideon.

Remember? Gideon went across and fought the Midianites, and the Ephraimites didn't help him. And then after he wins a great victory, they say, hey, why didn't you call us? And we understand that the reason is, there's huge spoils involved in this. And they want the loot, they want to participate in the victory, but they're slow to show up for the fight.

And this is your fair weather friend scenario. Win the lottery and watch all of your friends and

long-lost people come out of the woodwork. Jephthah is now the victor and is the man of the hour, and he's got a lot of wealth from these victories.

And so now the Ephraimites come up and say, hey, wait a minute, you need to split this with us. We were just about to get there, and you left without us, when it was really nothing of the kind. They are rascals.

And God actually gives Jephthah this victory apart from the Ephraimites, because the Ephraimites are not qualified. They have no spiritual horsepower going here. They're not interested in God or the things of God.

They're interested in loot. And God sends Jephthah on a cross. Remember, he's under the influence of the Spirit, specifically for the purpose of defeating the Ammonites.

Now, other things in his life may not be, but the Spirit of God is upon him when it comes to being a general and accomplishing the victory over Ammon. So, why have you come up to me this day to fight against me? Well, they don't leave when he sends them this answer. So, in verse 4, Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim.

Now, the Ephraimites evidently are not much in the way of fighting. They didn't get any experience with Gideon, and they didn't get any experience with Jephthah. Jephthah's experience... These guys are nuts to stick around for Jephthah with his bloody, battle-hardened, Gileadite army.

But these guys are just kind of thick, apparently, because they stick around. And so, Jephthah just kicks them all over the east side of the Jordan here. The men of Gilead defeated Ephraim because they said... Now, listen.

Because they said... The Ephraimites said to the Gileadites, You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and in the midst of Manasseh. Not only do they come in and try to take the spoils, but they mocked them. They insulted them.

They said... Now, when they said fugitive, this is a nice translation. They say, You are runaways. You're hobos.

You're kind of the off-scouring of our tribe. You Gileadites are worthless men. You're fugitives and vagabonds.

You're bums. I guess would be the most colloquial way to translate this. You are bums from Ephraim.

You're people that couldn't hack it in the main part of Ephraim and you had to head for the hills. And don't be telling us how to cowade the cabbage or whether or not we ought to be getting the spoils or not. You all are runaways.

You have no claim. You have no standing. You have no status.

It's a huge insult. And so Jephthah... Not only did they not go home and leave Jephthah with his victory, but they insulted him. And so Jephthah says, Well, I've had about enough out of you.

And he just kicks them all over the area. And so the Gileadites not only defeated them, but they captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. So all of these people that came across trying to big deal Jephthah and insult him and sort of browbeat him out of his victory and out of his winnings, who are you to talk to us? You're the product of some sort of unholy unions in the back alleys between Manassehites and Ephraimites.

You're not even legitimate. You ought to be in hiding somewhere. So they said, Well, not only did they defeat them, but they cut off their avenue of retreat.

And so they can't get back across the river to Ephraim proper. And this is very, very interesting. Because it happened when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, Now look at that fugitives of Ephraim.

This is the very same phrase that they used against the Gileadites. Ephraimites said, You all are fugitives. Well, this is the irony.

It's the very same phrase in Hebrew. These actual fugitives of Ephraim trying to get back home across the river now. I mean, this is just really sticking a finger in their eye.

You call us fugitives. Now you're the fugitives. Let's see if you can get back home, fugitive.

Run away from Ephraim. See if you can get back across the river or not. And this is what the Gileadites are laughing to each other about over their campfires at night.

They said, Yeah, call us a fugitive. Let's talk who's a real fugitive now. So when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, Let me cross over.

The men of Gilead would say, Are you an Ephraimite? And, of course, apparently none of them would say yes. Because they would say no. So they would say to him, Say now, Shibboleth.

Shibboleth is the word that means stream. It's stream or flood. And so tell me what it is you want to cross.

Well, I want to cross the Shibboleth. They would keep getting the guy to talk until he would say Shibboleth. But the Ephraimites, who remember now, are on the west side of the Jordan.

But Ephraim never did drive out their Amorite, their allocated Canaanites. If they were supposed to drive them out, they never did drive them out. Ephraim was one of the most crummy tribes when it came to executing their commission and getting rid of the Canaanites.

So they've intermingled and tolerated and done business with Amorites now for 300 years. And so much so that their language was Canaanite. This is the Arabic or Canaanite pronunciation.

And the Canaanites did not say the S-H sound. It came out like a hard S. And you can imagine sometimes people who... Well, you think about Mel Gibson. His parents were American, but they were over in Australia.

And so he grew up and went to junior high and high school in Australia. And so when he first started making movies, he had that thick Australian accent. And if you watch his earliest movies, Mad Max or whatever, he's got that Aussie talk.

Well, you can't be a mainstream blockbuster actor with an Australian accent all the time. You just can't play the range of parts because you sound too strange. So he had to unlearn that accent.

Well, these Ephraimites had picked up an accent because it's still the language, but it's got that Canaanite flavor. And what this really tells us is what caused the Ephraimites to die. This is symbolic.

Their amalgamation of the language is emblematic of the fact that they had become so Canaanite in their thinking. They were greedy. They were disloyal to their brethren, their clan kindred.

And they were willing to fight their kindred over the loot. And they have gone so far in the direction of the Canaanites that their speech no longer matches Israelite speech. And so the Gileadites knew this.

They said, all right, say Shibboleth. And they would say Sibboleth. And they would get killed because you're too Canaanite for us.

You can't speak our language anymore. You die. And so it's not just a pronunciation test.

It is symbolic of their drift and their amalgamation into the Canaanite culture to where they couldn't even speak Hebrew properly anymore. And so this is what's going on here. Now, once again, they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan.

Thus there fell at that time forty and two Eliphs. Forty and two Eliphs. You remember my long discussions about Eliph not being a literal thousand.

If you go and check the census of the Israelites in Numbers chapter 26, the last time all the Ephraimites were counted, now granted it was a couple of centuries earlier, but the families of the sons of Ephraim in Numbers 26-27, according to those that were numbered of them, were 32,500. That's the entire tribe of Ephraim. So to say that 42,000 of them got slaughtered at the fords doesn't seem to be really possible.

Some people tried to get around this by saying, well, literally in Hebrew it says 40 and 2,000. So it would be 2040 was the total amount. I don't really think so.

Eliph, Aleph, being the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, implies a chief. It's used that way in

some other passages where it talks about the chiefs of the people. They are the Alephs.

It's kind of like a Rosh, meaning a head or a chief. These are units that are led. These would be clan militias perhaps from within the tribe.

You could imagine how many clans would be in the tribe of Ephraim by now. Pretty much 42 of these clan militias got wiped out trying to get back across the ford. What was the actual size of these militias? It's hard to say.

Probably something in the hundreds. It could be 200 to 300. I would think they might be sort of a battalion strength.

And I would translate this as 42 battalions with a battalion being on the, or companies perhaps, with a company strength being on the order of maybe 300, 300 to 400. And this is still a huge slaughter. But 42,000, nobody should, I think you're going to have difficulty trying to take that literally.

And the Hebrew, I don't think, is trying to tell us that there were that many actual individuals. Okay, so, Jephthah now in verse 7 judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead.

Now, I believe that his daughter was dedicated to the service of God, and this is why these ladies went back each year for four days and commemorated. In fact, the word there that's translated at the end of chapter 11, the daughters of Israel went yearly to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah. The word translated commemorate there can also mean to lament or to honor.

They could have actually been coming to visit her and to sort of comfort her and to pay tribute to her is probably the best way. They would come yearly to pay tribute. And I suspect that this custom continued as long as she lived, and she may have lived several more decades.

And so every year for four days, certainly the Gileadite maidens would go and sort of commiserate with her and commemorate her dedication. And so this would have well extended past Jephthah's life because he's just going to live six more years. And then these judges that we've already studied somewhat in advance, verse 8, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel after him.

There is more than one town named Bethlehem in Israel. There's Bethlehem of Judah, and it is almost always designated that, Bethlehem of Judah or Bethlehem Ephrathah is usually attached to that so we know that that's the Bethlehem which will become the city of David. But there is another one mentioned in Joshua 19, verse 10, in the territory of Zebulun.

The third lot for the territory of Zebulun, it talks about the border, and we traced some of those out. And in verse 15 of Joshua 19, it says included in the Zebulun allotment was Kattah, Nahalal, Shimron, Iddalah, and Bethlehem, 12 cities with their villages. And I think it's slightly more likely

that this was the Zebulunite Bethlehem.

But the name is so interesting, as we pointed out before, the house of bread. Thirty sons and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside the family, brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons. He judged Israel seven years.

Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem. And depending on how you parse his name, Ibzan can either mean great fatigue or it can mean beautiful. It's related to the word that is used to describe tin.

But I think this is probably really tired. If you had thirty sons and thirty daughters, and you had to get the thirty daughters married off and bring in thirty daughters-in-law, I think great fatigue is probably the most likely translation of his name. But as we pointed out, and the main thing to remember about these judges, the two that precede and the three that follow, is that they are not so much deliverers as overseers.

There's no great battle. There's no connection with God or deliverance per se. They just seem to oversee.

And it's a harbinger of things to come, these signs of their prosperity, having thirty towns or thirty donkeys, thirty sons and thirty daughters, and so on. Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem. Elon, the Zebulunite, again, this is why I think this Bethlehem is probably the Zebulunite Bethlehem, because these all seem to be successors after Jephthah.

Elon, the Zebulunite, judged Israel after him. He judged Israel ten years, and he is buried at Ezion in the land of Zebulun. And his name, of course, I mentioned before, has the idea of being an oak or a tree.

And Ezion is the one that we have mentioned again in Joshua 19, verse 42, talking about the same general region. It was an area that had pasture lands. We know this from 1 Chronicles 6, 69.

Ezion with its pasture lands, and Gath-Ramon with its pasture lands are mentioned there in 1 Chronicles 6. And we find out in 1 Chronicles 8, 13 that the inhabitants of Ezion will, in the future, put to flight the inhabitants of Gath. So this Elon, Zebulunite, dies after overseeing for ten years. And then Abdon, and we talked about that, this is related to Eved, the word for servant or slave, servile service or servitude, is the son of Hilai, the Pirathonite, judged Israel after him.

He had 40 sons, 30 grandsons, 70 donkeys, judged Israel eight years. He died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim in the hill country of the Amalekites. Now, this brings us to chapter 13, where the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, so that the Lord gave them into the hands of the Philistines 40 years.

I mentioned last week that we have an overlap here. The Philistine oppression and the

Ammonite oppression overlap. And the easiest way to understand the timing here is to recognize that Jephthah and Eli are contemporaries, and Samson and Samuel are going to be contemporaries.

To talk about the chronology, again, I thought about trying to make a chart for this, but essentially here are a couple of dates, and this should help mark it out. The occupation of Gilead by the Ammonites, Jephthah says it takes place 300 years after Moses allows the Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh to take over Og's Bashan area and so forth. So 300 years later.

If we're down to around 1400 B.C., then we're down to about 1106, actually, is the beginning of Jephthah's judgeship. That's when he makes his comment about the 300 years. So 1106 B.C. is where we are, just remember that.

1446, give or take, 1440, that's going to be the Exodus. 1406, give or take, is going to be the occupation of Transjordan by Israel. 300 years later, you're down to 1106.

Now, Samson is dateable to roughly 1105 to 1085 B.C. So Samson is starting out about the same time as Jephthah, but he's over on the Philistine side, Timnah and all those areas. He's on the other side of the country from Jephthah, who's basically on the east side of the Jordan. So at the time that Jephthah is beginning his ministry, so is Samson.

Beginning his judgeship, so is Samson. Samuel, Eli has already been around for about 40 years, when Jephthah gets cranked up. Eli has already started.

We're going to have to go to 1 Samuel and backtrack to cover Eli and his sons, and the capture of the Ark by the Philistines and so on. And Samson is going to come into play to remediate these Philistines that defeated Israel, took the Ark of the Covenant, Hophni and Phinehas are slain, Eli falls off the wall, Samuel is a little boy, all of that has taken place. Eli began around 1144 B.C., roughly 40 years before the Jephthah story.

Eli is already operating. He's been around for four decades. His sons have grown into men during this time.

So we're at a real pivotal point at the beginning of Jephthah's judgeship, and he's only going to be around six years, so we're going to be right down to about 1100 when you have Elon, Abdon, and the other guy. So we're down to Samuel is already alive, and he's taken the place now as a very young lad for Eli. Samuel starts around 1104, Samson starts around 1105, and Jephthah starts in 1106.

So these guys are all contemporaries. That's the thing to remember. We've got three different strands going, three different parts of Israel.

And the other judges pretty much stack up sequentially as we've already seen. So we're backing up now. The Philistine oppression happens at the same time as the Ammonite oppression.

And that's why Samson is going to come on the scene in one side while Jephthah is going to be operating, and these other judges are operating on the eastern side of the country. And Eli is alive. Another part of the Philistine oppression is going to kill Eli's sons and cause Eli to break his neck and launch Samuel as the next great spiritual leader in Israel.

So hopefully that will give us some context here. Chapter 13 is going to tell us, once again, we have this Gilgal cycle, this recurring downward spiral where the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, so that the Lord gave them into the hands of the Philistines 40 years. And much of this is going to be during the time of Eli.

And Samson is going to come to relieve that pressure. Well, this is a good place for us to pause and take our break now that we've kind of got our ground all cleared and our foundation laid and we know where we are. And we're right, we're just less than 100 years to the kingship of David.

And we're at a good stopping place here. So let's pause and take our break. We'll come back and in our second lesson tonight, we'll launch into chapter 13 of the book of Judges.