

The Book of Judges

Lesson 17 - Chapters 10 and 11

This week we begin a 3 chapter series on the exploits of a fellow named **Yiftach**, or better known in English bibles as Jephthah.

We finished up our last lesson by briefly discussing 2 of the 5 so-called Minor Judges, Tola and Ya'ir. The main reason they're called "minor" is because almost nothing is recorded about them; so apparently as compared to the 7 **Shophet** who have reasonably extensive narratives explaining their actions and purposes the 5 were simply not as important.

The 5 minor Judges lived either before or even possibly during the same time as **Yiftach**, and **Yiftach's** era of operation is actually towards the end of the almost 4 centuries period called the time of the Judges.

Hopefully it is becoming clear to everyone that the time of the Judges was a time of transition; and the transition I'm referring to was from a time when Israel operated under a typical Middle Eastern tribal structure in which each tribe sought mainly to care for its own interests (the time immediately following Joshua) to the time when Israel would recognize their need for a king and thus would operate more like a nation-state. Transition periods within societies are invariably messy and uneasy times of turmoil and unrest. People instinctively feel a sense of instability and change.

Further we see that these various Judges we are studying operated only in specified regions of Canaan, with only some of the tribes involved in each case. Essentially God was raising up Judges to deal with local problems with His people (usually centered on idolatry and the oppression of a foreign government), not problems that faced all 12 tribes equally or simultaneously. We also see that the period of the Judges was one of Israel's steadily declining morality, values, and faithfulness to Yehoveh. It was a period when their dedication to following God's commandments was replaced by a dedication to following some evolving mix of Torah, pagan religious practices, men's doctrines, and then rationalizing it all to fit with whatever their current wants and needs and societal conditions dictated.

If we were to substitute American names and places for the Hebrew and Canaanite, we would more easily see that the time of the Judges was an eerie parallel to the state of the world in our day.

Let's begin by reading Judges chapter 10 starting with verse 6.

READ JUDGES 10:6 – end

Verse 6 gives us a statement of the general condition of ALL of Israel, of all 12 tribes, in the

time immediately following the death of the **Shophet** Ya'ir. And that condition is one of national apostasy and the adopting of other gods. We've discussed at length that what was occurring in Judges was syncretism, the melding of Canaanite pagan beliefs with the religion of the Hebrews (some scholars have taken to calling this the Canaanization of Israel, an apt description I think). Sometimes it's easy to forget how we arrived at a certain destination when there was never intent to do so, and that was Israel's situation. Almost immediately upon Joshua's death Israel (somewhat imperceptibly) started to water down God's instructions to rid the land of Canaan of pagans and their gods. The Lord explicitly told Israel they were to drive out or kill all who were dedicated to the Mystery Babylon religions; instead Israel decided that peace and brotherly love was a better course of action and that meant that they should find ways to get along with these pagans and of course this meant they had to (at the least) show respect and tolerance for these gentiles' gods and customs.

It is interesting that the wording the Bible used to introduce each of the cycles of rebellion and apostasy that precipitated the need for a Judge was usually the same: "The people of Israel did what was evil from God's perspective". From "God's perspective" are the operative words. That is, there was quite a disconnect between how the people of Israel viewed their moral and spiritual condition and how God viewed it. I wonder if ever in mankind's history people or a nation viewed their own actions as evil? I wonder if Israel ever thought that what they were doing (while they were doing it) was wicked and ungodly? From their perspective they were doing right and good; but all too often from God's perspective they were doing wrong. Humans have an amazing capacity to deny and rationalize our bad behavior, or to even attribute to God things that we do, even though He specifically prohibits them. And the way that happens is by slowly replacing or mixing God's Word with our own thoughts and opinions. If a lie is told often enough and loud enough, eventually it is taken as truth and few even challenge it. Once a tradition (Christian, Jewish, or secular) is practiced long enough, how it came into being and what it actually symbolized, and whether it's in harmony with God's will is no longer questioned. Those who might be so bold as to challenge established doctrines and customs are seen as troublemakers, people who are creating disunity, even heretics. So there is always great peer pressure in communities and congregations of people to keep quiet, put your brain in neutral, and just go along with the flow.

From God's perspective the main evil Israel was committing was worshipping other gods; and we get a list of the names of the other gods they were worshipping. Now interestingly this is NOT a hierarchy of gods, rather it is but a listing of the names of the chief gods worshipped by some of the nations that were located in and around Canaan. First, the people of Israel served the two main gods of Canaan, Ba'al and Ashtoreth. Second, they served the gods of neighboring nations including Hadoth, Ba'al, Moath and Anath (Syrian gods), the gods of Tzidon (Sidon), the gods of the Moabites (their main god being Chemosh), the gods of Ammon (Molech was their highest deity), and the gods of the Philistines (Dagon and Ba'al). This is not an exhaustive list it is simply representative. I told you that verse 6 was speaking of an overall condition of all of Israel. So it's not as though an Israelite would worship all of these gods; it's that it depended on where a person lived within Canaan. If he lived in the north (by Syria) he would be inclined to worship the Syrian god Moath. If he lived next to the Philistines he would be exposed to Dagon, and so on.

We get another key statement in verse 6 that is easy to overlook: "They abandoned YHWH and did not serve Him". Do not get the idea that the Hebrews no longer worshipped Yehoveh God of Israel; if you had accused them of such a thing they would have vehemently denied it. In their misguided minds they had in no way abandoned YHWH. Most still celebrated Sabbath, observed the Feasts, went to the Wilderness Tabernacle at the specified times, offered up Burnt Offerings and so on. Rather they worshipped the God of Israel AND the gods of the local pagans as well, because that seemed to make sense to them. The problem is that God makes it very plain that we cannot worship Him and something else. Any kind of mixing of our worship amounts to abandoning Him in His eyes. And His perspective is all that matters, isn't it?

The consequence was that God's anger blazed up and He turned the Hebrews who lived on the west side of the Jordan (in Canaan) over to the Philistines to be oppressed, and the Hebrews on the east side of the Jordan (in the Trans-Jordan) were put under the oppression of the Ammonites. Further the Ammonites crossed over the Jordan and fought against the southern Israelite tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and the northern Israelite tribe of Ephraim. In other words, this cycle of sin and apostasy of Israel led to the most widespread simultaneous oppression at the hands of gentile nations thus far.

Well the people of Israel may have had short memories but they weren't stupid. So in their misery, in verse 10, they decided to turn to their last resort and they cried out to Yehoveh to save them from this awful situation. But the God who knows the heart condition of every man says that this time I'm not going to save you just because you ask.

This period of intense tribulation upon Israel had gone on for 18 years before Israel began to look to the God of Israel for help, and even when God's people finally looked to Him for help He saw that they were not sincere. It is common among humans that we don't really want to change; we only want our circumstances to be different, more to our liking. So God says that since you enjoy serving the gods of your neighbors then go to them and ask them to rescue you.

We have an interesting lesson here for every Believer if we're willing to accept it; and the lesson is on the nature of confession and repentance. Crying out to God for help and mercy, by itself, has utterly no merit and God will not pay any attention. Our relationship with Him must be on firm footing or He closes His ears to our pleadings. If our relationship with Him has been severely compromised then action on our parts (real change) is required, not pitiful emotions or pious words. And the first action is to be confession; sincere confession. What is confession? Confession is agreeing with the Lord that you have broken His commandments and thus sinned against Him. Confession is humbly admitting that He is right and you are wrong. Confession is telling God what He already knows about you. But confession by itself isn't sufficient either; it must be followed by repentance. Repentance is not a promise or intent to do better. Repentance is active change; but the change must be in accordance with God's laws not in accordance with our sense of goodness or morality. Repentance is ceasing to do what is wrong in God's eyes, and instead doing what is right in His eyes. How do we know which is which? Read His book, His ENTIRE book.

Israel's response to God's refusal to help them is actually kind of funny if it weren't so sad

and typical: "Treat us in whatever way seems good to you but save us TODAY, please!" This statement is the biblical version of, "I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today". God save me now, and please accept this IOU; I'll start doing right later, at a more convenient time. But God is a God of tough love. He wasn't going to rescue them until they turned from their wicked ways, discontinued their love affair with the Canaanite gods and turned back to Him in full devotion. The sad reality is that when we abandon God, and we live a life compromised by evil, the day will come that we need Him. And the God-principle and pattern we see demonstrated here is that even after we confess our sin to Him, and even after we begin the painful process of letting go of the evil in our lives, we'll live with it's earthly consequences (possibly for a long time).

Only AFTER Israel confessed, and then demonstrated true repentance by getting rid of their foreign gods AND returning to proper worship of Yehoveh, did the Lord now look down upon His people in pity and respond. We cannot continue to wallow in the same sin whose consequence we want to be rescued from and expect God to act.

Do you think it was a simple matter for Israel to divest itself of those foreign gods? It would have created all sorts of serious societal problems and family divisions. Not every Israelite would have agreed; and not everyone would have approached this new path to the same degree or in the same enthusiasm. Not every person in a family would have been willing to change their theology. How do you suppose it went when a Hebrew man told his Canaanite business partner that he would no longer acknowledge his gods? What do you think happened when the Israelites who lived in the mostly mixed ethnic villages that formed the Land of Canaan announced they would no longer participate in the celebrations to the gods that were so much a part of their Canaanite friends' lives? Folks, once we've wandered down the path of tolerance to evil, it is difficult to turn around and climb back up to holy ground. We will be accused of hypocrisy, intolerance, unkindness, ignorance, even heresy.

Verse 17 changes course and describes two armies; one was Israel's army (a militia actually) who gathered at Mizpah on the west bank and the other was Ammon's army who assembled in Gilead in the Trans-Jordan. The time for confrontation between Israel and its eastern oppressor was at hand but something was missing; Israel did not have a field general. So the chiefs of Israel sat in council and decided that in order to get a general capable of achieving victory they'd have to offer him something of value. And that something of value was that if this general succeeded would become the head over all the Israelites who lived in Gilead.

Notice that what these council chiefs had in mind was not a judge or a tribal leader. First, a Judge, a Shophet, was a person raised up by God not a person chosen by men. A Judge ruled by divine fiat, not by human agreement. Second, Gilead was not an allotted tribal territory. In other words Gilead wasn't one of the 12 well-defined districts that had been assigned by Moses and Joshua to the one or the other of the 12 tribes of Israel. Rather this was a political region, set up by men. These men who formed the military general search committee could use the term "head" or "chief" when describing the position that this candidate would assume (if he was victorious), but in reality they all knew that this person would be a king.

Let's read Judges 11 to continue Jephthah's story.

READ JUDGES CHAPTER 11 all

This chapter of Judges contains an enormous amount of information that might seem superfluous and tedious to all but historians, but it helps us immensely to understand why certain decisions were made if we'll but take the time to digest all that's recorded.

Also, it is here that we find the very controversial matter of Jephthah making a vow to God that ended up with a horrible unintended consequence; the sacrifice of his daughter. I say this is controversial because what actually happened has been hotly debated within Christian circles (and Jewish to a lesser degree) for a long time, with strong sentiment on both sides of the argument; we'll join that fracas in due time.

While the aforementioned incident is usually the focal point of bible study and discussion for this chapter, if we look closer we'll see that actually there is another (and perhaps more important) issue that is dealt with; an issue that has profound implications in our current era. The issue concerns the claims of Israel's neighbors on the land that God gave to Israel through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But first, this chapter introduces us to **Yiftach**, Jephthah. Verse 1 says that **Yiftach** was a brave soldier; but he was also the son of a prostitute. His father was a Hebrew man, Gilead, who has sired other sons as well by means of his legal wife (again presumably a Hebrew). But when Gilead's other sons grew up they drove **Yiftach** away because they didn't want to share their family inheritance with him.

Let's immediately clear up some erroneous doctrine about **Yiftach**; first he indeed was an illegitimate child of Gilead. He was a bastard son born to his prostitute mother. The Hebrew words say that he was born to an **ishshah zonah**. **Ishshah** means female (or woman) and **zonah** means one who commits fornication, a harlot, a prostitute. Some Rabbis have made it a tradition that she was actually Gilead's concubine; that is absolutely false, there is no hint at such a thing, and was arrived at only to try to find merit for **Yiftach** that he was not due (because later Biblical passages accord him much honor). **Zonah** is the common Hebrew word for prostitute and it is used no other way. Jephthah's mother was a prostitute, not a concubine.

Sadly it wasn't all that uncommon for a man in that era to produce illegitimate children with a prostitute. Usually the father had little to nothing to do with that illegitimate child if it could even be conclusively proved that a prostitute's child belonged to certain man; and just as certainly that man typically had no interest in legitimizing that child. What is also demonstrated here is that prostitution was common and leading men of Israel partook of these women rather routinely; there was no social stigma for having sex with a harlot while being married, even among the Hebrews. That ought to give us some insight as to how low Israel had sunk by this time. But it was also not something that was openly discussed, nor admitted. So the odds of any child of a harlot being claimed by his or her father were near zero.

Illegitimate children of harlots were the lowest of the low in Israelite society (and most other societies as well). They were ignored and scorned, had no rights, received no schooling, and

were social outcasts. They lived miserable poverty stricken lives. However it seems that Gilead had an attack of conscience and must have made it clear to his legitimate sons that **Yiftach** was to be accorded family status such that he would even inherit some of the family's wealth; Gilead's legitimate sons weren't happy about this. Not only would **Yiftach** take away from their portion but also it brought this social misfit too near this family of aristocrats for comfort. I suspect we all know of family situations where a well-to-do person with children gets divorced or is widowed and then remarries to someone who has children from a previous marriage thus producing a blended family of biological and step children. And often the natural children of the affluent parent don't like the idea of sharing an inheritance with their stepbrothers and stepsisters. So this sort of thing is an age-old problem.

Yiftach left the area of Gilead and went to a place called Tov (which means, good). And there he formed a gang, if you would, much like the man called Ga'al of the earlier chapter we just concluded had done. Jephthah must have gained quite a reputation as a fighter and a leader of fighters, because he would soon be in demand to rescue Israel from yet another oppression of foreigners.

Verse 4 sets the story into motion; the oppressive Ammonites made war against Israel, and the council of leaders of Gilead went to **Yiftach** to ask him to come and lead Gilead against Ammon. Naturally **Yiftach** isn't immediately keen to come to the aid of the people who had banished him and treated him so badly. Without doubt some of his estranged family members were part of the council and among those who approached him. Equally without doubt **Yiftach** MUST have been their last resort because it took the swallowing of a lot of pride to approach **Yiftach** and seek his help. Not only that but the price they would have to pay for his acceptance of the challenge was going to be huge and humiliating: Jephthah would become the undisputed head over all of Gilead. The people of Gilead, and the sons of Gilead, would bow down the son of a common harlot.

Yiftach made them repeat their promise to him and then make a covenant with him by invoking Yehoveh's name to seal the deal. Even that wasn't good enough; Jephthah accompanied the council of elders back to their army headquarters at Mitzpah, and in a religious ceremony they were compelled to repeat his demands (which they again accepted with a vow).

With the agreement now publically and spiritually acknowledged, **Yiftach** proceeded with the assigned mission. Surprisingly we find that this is a cleaver man and not simply some ignorant street thug; **Yiftach's** first step is to try and negotiate with the Ammonites. He tried to reason with the Ammonites in an effort to avoid war and loss of life, if it was possible. I suspect he knew that this had little chance of success, but it was worth the try. He showed himself to be a skilled negotiator, quite intellectual, and a clear thinker; but also a tough guy who doesn't back down.

Working through messengers he communicates a simple question to the king of the Ammonites: "what do you want and why are you coming here TO MY LAND to fight?" This message makes a couple of things clear; **Yiftach** did not represent himself as a hired gun but rather as a patriot (MY land). Second it made it clear that as far as he was concerned there

was no reasonable dispute over the land: it was Israel's land.

In verse 13 we get the Ammonite's response: Israel took this land from us and we lay claim to it and want it back. The king says the wrongful taking took place during the Exodus from Egypt and goes on to describe the area he contends is his: to the south, from the Arnon, which was the border between Moab to the south and Ammon to the north. Then the northern border of the disputed territory was described as the Jabbok, which was the ancient border between Ammon (on its south side) and Gilead to the north. The eastern boundary was the Jordan River.

The king of Ammon says to give them back the land and there won't have to be war. Now things are going to get a little complicated and VERY historical so hang in there with me because it is quite relevant.

The king of Ammon's claim is nonsense and has no basis in fact. The fact is that the Ammonites had NEVER held this particular territory, because the Arnon River served as the border between Moab and the Amorites (Amorites, not Ammonites. The Amorites and Ammonites are in no way related). So **Yiftach** sent his messengers back to the king of the Ammonites with what we find written in verses 15–27 and here's the gist of it: Ammonites, you have no standing for your claim and I'm going to remind you of how everything occurred in Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan. Historically this is what happened: Israel did NOT capture the territory of Moab or Ammon. What happened says Jephthah, is that during their Exodus Israel had arrived at Kadesh and camped there; in order to go any further Moses followed standard protocol of that era and sent messengers ahead of them to the king of Edom asking if they might be able to travel through his territory so they could get to their destination, Canaan. But the king of Edom refused. After marching around Edom, Moses sent a similar message to the king of Moab, but he also refused a right of way to pass through. So in addition to marching around Edom, Israel journeyed far to the east and north in order to march around Moab to avoid any trouble with them. The Arnon River was Moab's recognized northern border, and Israel stayed north of that border to respect the king of Moab's wishes.

Next Israel sent messengers to Sichon, king of the Amorites whose royal city was Heshbon. Sichon not only refused but also got very hostile and actually went to war against Israel. Israel had threatened and done nothing against Sichon and had already proved that they would honor the territorial integrity of nations or territories that lay in the path of their journey to Canaan. The result of the attack from the Amorites was that God favored Israel, Sichon was defeated, and Israel took that territory that belonged to the Amorites (note: Amorites, not Ammonites) and that territory is now what is called Gilead.

OK, let's back up a bit. Saying that Israel did NOT take the Moabites land from them was a critical piece of information because Moab had a much stronger claim to their land than the Ammonites had. The Amorites, a very aggressive and warlike people from Mesopotamia, had come down and conquered Moab and taken their land from them. When Israel fought the Amorites led by Sichon, king of the Amorites, and won then of course they won whatever the Amorites owned. The former territory of Moab was among those possessions. Further, in keeping with Numbers 21:24, Israel made NO claim on any of Ammon's territory. Moses had

been instructed by God to respect the territorial boundaries of Edom, Moab, and Ammon. Why? Because Edom was the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, and Moab and Ammon were the descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew.

So to summarize Jephthah's argument against the king of the Ammonites' claim to the land of Gilead he says this: first, due to God's instructions, Israel had no interest in conquering or even bothering the people of Ammon; they only respectfully asked to pass through that area in order to get to Canaan. But because the king of the Amorites, Sichon, who ruled over the people of Ammon and Moab went to war with Israel (out of mistrust and paranoia), and because Israel won that war, whatever land the Amorites owned now by rights of conquest belonged to Israel. In fact the land that Ammon claimed for itself had NEVER belonged to the Ammonites to begin with; it belonged to the Amorites, the Ammonites had just lived there, and now it belonged to Israel since they took it from the Amorites.

The second argument he makes is theological and that argument begins in verse 23. **Yiftach** says that since the God of Israel enabled Israel to have victory over the Amorites, are you thinking that Israel is to hand that land over to the king of Ammon? Because obviously if Yehoveh gave the land to Israel, Ammon is certainly not going to be able to expel Israel now and Israel is not going to give it up.

In verse 24 we get a good example of the ancient oriental mind at work, and we see how the people of that era viewed the role of the gods. The logic goes like this: Yehoveh is the God of Israel. Yehoveh enabled his people to win the land of the Amorites. Therefore the land belonging to Israel's god belongs to Israel. Chemosh is the god of Ammon. Whatever land Chemosh has enabled his people (the Ammonites) to win is all they should have. Why would the god of Israel want to voluntarily give up land under his control to another god?

Another argument is presented in verse 26. **Yiftach** says: Israel has dwelled in Heshbon and all its surrounding towns and all the villages near the Arnon River for 3 centuries. So how come only now, after 300 years, do you suddenly decide that land ought to be yours? Where have you been for the last 300 years?

Now I took you through this history lesson to make this point: it is obvious that the king of Ammon had no legitimate claim over the land he wanted to fight Israel for. He simply wanted it and so came up with some convoluted reasoning as to why Israel ought to give it up, move out, and turn it over to him. Historically, Ammon had no legal claim to it. Theologically, Ammon had no religious claim to it. Even from a conquest standpoint, Ammon had no claim to the land because they had never conquered it, ruled over it or possessed it.

We see a replay of this scenario concerning Israel and foreign claims to their land today, in 2008. As I will repeat until your ears ring with the words, history is circular and we are reliving the time of the Judges right now. You see **Yiftach** doesn't make the point that NO ONE ought to be upset over this land of Gilead now controlled by Israel; he doesn't say that no one ought to challenge Israel's right to Gilead. He says that of all people Ammon hasn't got any dog in this fight because it never ever owned the land at any point in history. On the other hand might the Amorites who Joshua defeated have a reason to want to reopen the subject and fight Israel

to regain the land they held at one time? Sure. After all it was the Amorites who lost it to Israel. But Ammon? No. They never held that land at any time.

Now if Ammon was honest and just said, we're conquerors, we think we're more powerful than you and we intend on taking this land from you, well that's another matter. In time honored tradition that is how the boundaries of all the nations of this earth have been formed and changed and will continue to move around. It will be through wars and peace treaties that nations come and go. But instead the king of Ammon said they have a legitimate claim to Gilead, it was their land at one time, and Israel had no right to it. This is simply a false statement.

Today we have a people called the Palestinians that make this same kind of false claim on Israel's land. There has never in all history been an Arab nation or a people group called the Palestinians. It's a media and Arab League invention. To say that Israel is "occupying their land" is the same kind of bogus claim that the king of Ammon is making to **Yiftach**. The so-called Palestinians whose faces that we see plastered on our TV screens every evening never even existed prior to 1967. They are just a mixed group of refugees from several of the Arab nations who came to Israel to find work and stayed. Then, when the Arab League made war on Israel, those Arab guest workers fled to refugee camps outside of Israel where they were infiltrated by Yasser Arafat's band of thugs, and then eventually these refugees were given legitimacy by the anti-Semitic news media and UN.

But unfortunately there doesn't seem to be a **Yiftach** for Israel to turn to today. Israel doesn't seem to have a leader who will tell the Palestinians to go to the land where their god, Allah, holds sway because Israel is the land of Yehoveh, the God of Israel. Israel has no one with the courage to face the cameras and the Palestinians and the United States government and say that the Palestinians have no legitimate claim over Israel's land; they never were a nation, they never were a distinct or identifiable people group, they never possessed the land that Israel now possesses, they have never conquered the land Israel now possesses, and thus they need to take their claims and problems elsewhere.

The Palestinians are taking precisely same tact as the king of Ammon. Israel has tried and tried to find a peaceful solution, but the only solution as far as the Palestinian leadership is concerned is complete capitulation (the same demand as the king of Ammon made to Jephthah).

So Jephthah realizes that there is no hope to continue the negotiations; if Ammon wants Gilead they'll have to take it by force.

Next week we'll see the Lord anoint Jephthah with His Holy Spirit, and then Jephthah seek God's favor in the coming battle. Unfortunately this son of a prostitute, now a military general, made a very rash vow to the Lord to effect victory and the results were devastating. We'll look at that next time.