

### Jephthah's Defeats Ephraim; Judges Ibzan, Elon and Abdon

#### Judges 12

Judges 12 - *"Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!"*

*<sup>2</sup> And Jephthah said to them, "My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands. <sup>3</sup> So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the LORD delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?" <sup>4</sup> Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites." <sup>5</sup> The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," <sup>6</sup> then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites.*

*<sup>7</sup> And Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried among the cities of Gilead.*

*<sup>8</sup> After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. <sup>9</sup> He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage, and brought in thirty daughters from elsewhere for his sons. He judged Israel seven years. <sup>10</sup> Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.*

*<sup>11</sup> After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years. <sup>12</sup> And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the country of Zebulun.*

*<sup>13</sup> After him, Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. <sup>14</sup> He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys. He judged Israel eight years. <sup>15</sup> Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mountains of the Amalekites."*

#### Background Notes

The book of Judges covers about 350 years of Israel's history. The four judges mentioned in Judges 12, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon, all come near the end of the period of the Judges. Samson, who is covered in the next few chapters, also comes near the end of that historical period. In fact, it could be that both Samson and Abdon overlap with the early part of the life of Samuel. Samuel is sometimes called the last judge and first prophet in Israel.

All the sons and daughters of Ibzan and Abdon are mentioned to emphasize their community status and influence, as well as their affluence. Abdon had 40 sons and 30 grandsons who rode on 70 young donkeys (v14)! Having your own young

donkey to ride in those days was a status symbol of wealth and nobility. Today that would be like saying, “The judge had 49 sons, and 30 grandsons, and they all drove new BMWs!”

What about the closing verses of Jephthah’s record here in Judges 12? Hebrews 11:32 says that Jephthah was a man of faith, and we’ve seen evidence of that in his life. But Jephthah was by no means flawless. We saw the rash and foolish vow that he made at the end of Judges 11. Here in chapter 12 we see another rash decision – a decision that resulted in the deaths of 42,000 fellow Israelites from the tribe of Ephraim!

The men of Ephraim were uptight because they claimed that Jephthah hadn’t called them to join in the battle against the Ammonites. Jephthah said that he had indeed called them - but they didn’t come! The men of Ephraim resorted to name-calling: “*You Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites*” (v4). In other words, they were saying that Jephthah and the people of Gilead, who lived on the east side of the Jordan River, had deserted the illustrious tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh that lived on the west side of the Jordan.

In the civil war (or internal strife) that ensued, Jephthah and the men of Gilead defeated the men of Ephraim who had come over from the west side to the east side of the Jordan River to fight against Jephthah. But Jephthah wasn’t content with just the military victory. He wanted revenge! He captured the fords of the Jordan River, and cut down any of the men of Ephraim who tried to cross back over the Jordan to escape. Jephthah’s men presented a linguistic test to the fleeing Ephraimite army, and anyone who couldn’t pass the pronunciation test was cut down! 42,000 men of Ephraim were killed. What a sad day in the history of Israel.

## Doctrinal Points

What is the Bible teaching us in Judges 12? I think we have some very good lessons on how to avoid internal strife. There’s no doubt that this civil war and all the bloodshed could have been avoided if attitudes had been changed. And there’s no doubt that a lot of internal strife that exists today in the home and in the church could be avoided if we guarded against “bad attitudes,” and held anger in check. Let’s look at three critical attitudes that we should guard against to avoid internal strife and friction:

### 1. Believers should watch out for the “Sideline Critic” attitude.

Ephraim had the “Sideline Critic” attitude. The men of Ephraim should have come to help Jephthah fight against the Ammonites, but they didn’t. Afterwards they had the audacity to criticize Jephthah -- from the sidelines!

And this was not the first time they had done this. Ephraim had this same “sideline critic” back in Judges 8. There they complained that Gideon hadn’t invited them to fight against Midian. They didn’t get involved in the battle - they just criticized from the sidelines.

Do you know any Christians like that? They don't get involved much in the work of the Lord, but they have the audacity to criticize everyone who **is** involved. They're "sideline critics." This is **wrong!** It's bad enough to criticize fellow believers when you're involved, but to criticize fellow believers from the sidelines is really bad! Many elders and church leaders have had to endure this type of criticism. Faithful leaders should be commended for weathering the storm, because that kind of sideline criticism and verbal abuse hits them all the time. And words hurt.

Folks, let's not be sideline critics. Let's get involved - and not criticize! A lot of internal strife could be avoided if believers would just guard against developing a "sideline critic" attitude.

## **2. Believers should watch out for the "I've had it!" attitude.**

The men of Ephraim were wrong to criticize Jephthah, but Jephthah was wrong to take the "I've had it with you people!" attitude. That's basically what Jephthah said, right? "I've had it! Take this!" And Jephthah ended up slaughtering 42,000 of his fellow Israelites. Jephthah's "I've had it" attitude was surely a wrong and bad attitude, and yet I think that we can all identify with that attitude. Many of us must confess that we've felt like saying "I've **had** it"? when things get rough. How often has criticism from other Christians caused fellow-believers to retaliate in anger, or to suffer major problems with anger or discouragement or bitterness?

I almost got to the point of an "I've had it" attitude this past month! A major glitch developed in the plans for our current Holy Land tour. Olympic Air changed the schedule for our flight to Athens to a different date, with only a few weeks left before the tour was to begin! As a result, 40 people had to change their domestic flights to New York. Talk about logistical nightmares! Penalty fees! Higher fares! Disgruntled tour members! Margie and I almost got to the "We've had it" stage! We were tempted to cancel the whole thing in disgust - but we didn't, because so many people would have been disappointed! We didn't cross the "I've had it!" line! [PS: And we never did.]

Unfortunately, many of us **do** cross the "I've-had-it" line when criticism or disillusionment arise in our lives - and it's often far more critical than just a Holy Land tour. Gifted people leave the ministry. Committed people leave the church. Husbands leave their wives. Wives leave their husbands. What heartache! How much better to work out the problem!

That's what Gideon did when the men of Ephraim had the same critical attitude back in Judges 8. Gideon could have said: "I've had it with you people!" -- but he **didn't**. He wisely gave the men of Ephraim a soft answer, and their anger was turned away. They talked it out, and civil war was avoided. Much internal strife can be avoided if we don't cross the "I've had it" boundary line. Believers should guard against developing an "I've had it!" attitude.

## **3. Believers should watch out for the "Say Shibboleth" attitude.**

Verses 5-6: *"The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," then*

*they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites."*

A couple of weeks ago Margie and I were in Boston. There they say "pahk the cah" rather than "park the car," because many people from New England don't pronounce the letter "r." We could easily set up a test to see who is from the Boston area!

And that's what Jephthah did. The men from Ephraim couldn't say the "sh" in "Shibboleth." They pronounced it "Sibboleth" - and on that basis their fate was decided, with no mercy. It seems so cruel - and it was cruel - but sadly the same attitude exists in our churches today. I know people who have been judged to be unspiritual because they don't use "thee" and "thou" when praying! I know Christians who refuse to fellowship with other believers, depending on what translation of the Bible they use! I know Christians who like to worship the Lord with their hands raised when they sing praises, and I know Christians who prefer not to raise their hands - and both tend to criticize those who differ from them.

So some Christians say "Shibboleth," and some say "Sibboleth," - but **we are all brothers and sisters in Christ!** Let's not let our "shibboleth tests" cause internal strife in our churches and our fellowship with other believers. Let's watch out for these unbiblical tests of spirituality. Believers should guard against having a "Say Shibboleth" attitude!

## **Practical Application**

### **Let's not be part of a circular firing squad!**

A "circular firing squad" is another way of describing a civil war. It was civil war in Israel in Jephthah's day, and it's internal strife in the church today. A "circular firing squad" is a good description of the way Christians shoot at one another instead of shooting at the enemy.

Galatians 5:15 - *"...if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!"* Can this happen in your church? Yes, it certainly can! Sadly, it happens in many churches!

Folks, let's be on our guard against being drawn into a "circular firing squad."