

THE SPIRIT OF GOD CAME UPON JEPHTHAH

Judges 8:33-12:15

Key Verse: 11:29

Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.

Today's passage contrasts the lives of two judges, Abimelech and Jephthah. Both of these judges had humble human background; they were born illegitimate sons. However, the two became very different leaders of their time. Abimelech was an opportunist who became a king according to his ambition at the cost of other people's lives. Jephthah, on the other hand, overcame his fatalism by turning his eyes to God and his word. God used his faith and courage to deliver his people from the Ammonites. May God help us overcome our fatalism so that we may be used in his redemptive history!

I. ABIMELECH, THE THORNBUSH (8:33-9:55)

What did the Israelites do upon Gideon's death? Look at 8:33-35. *No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. They also failed to show kindness to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) for all the good things he had done for them.* The vicious cycle of idolatry and its terrible consequences replayed again in Israel after the death of Gideon.

Look at 9:1-4. Gideon was survived by his 70 sons. He also had another son by a slave woman who was a Shechemite. His name was Abimelech and he was very ambitious. He wanted to be king. Earlier Gideon had been asked to be king by his people. But Gideon refused to be king. He said, "The Lord will rule over you." But Abimelech did not think this way. He wanted to usurp the position reserved for God. And he did not hesitate to use any political trick to fulfill his political ambition. First he went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and persuaded them to support him in his bid to be king. He said to them and to all his mother's clan, "Ask all the citizens of Shechem, 'Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Gideon's sons rule over you, or just one man?' Remember, I am your flesh and blood." When the brothers repeated all this to the citizens of Shechem, they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." The men of Shechem thought that they would benefit politically if they supported Abimelech. So they even made a large donation to his campaign fund, taking 70 shekels of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith. And Abimelech used it to hire reckless adventurers, who became his followers.

Next Abimelech went back to his father's hometown and slaughtered 70 of his brothers in order to eliminate any possibility of opposition from them. In his selfish quest, he murdered his own brothers and was crowned king by the people of Shechem. He was very political and cunning. He used his blood connection for his political

ambition. The people of Shechem were equally evil; they chose their leader not for their nation's future but for their own special interests. Like Abimelech, people with selfish ambitions often seek to fulfill them in ruthless ways. But we must examine our own ambitions to see if they are in line with God's will. We must also learn to fulfill our desires in ways that God would approve.

Look at verse 7. *When Jotham was told about this, he climbed up on the top of Mount Gerizim and shouted to them, "Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you."* Who was Jotham? Jotham was Gideon's youngest son. He hid and escaped Abimelech's massacre. After Abimelech became king, Jotham stood on Mt. Gerizim and proclaimed God's judgment on Abimelech and the people of Shechem in a parable.

One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, "Be our king." But the olive tree answered, "Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?" Next, the trees said to the fig tree, "Come and be our king." But the fig tree replied, "Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?" Then the trees said to the vine, "Come and be our king." But the vine answered, "Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?" Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, "Come and be our king." The thornbush said to the trees, "If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!" (8-15)

When the olive tree was invited to be king of the trees, he declined the offer, saying, "Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?" The olive tree knew his mission and purpose in life. His oil honored both gods and men, as oil was used to anoint kings and priests. It was used for altars. It was used for food and medicine. The olive tree found satisfaction and fulfillment in producing olive oil.

The fig tree also refused to be king. He said, "Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?" He said that he did not want to give up his fruit bearing. The fig tree also knew the mission and purpose in his life. And he was happy to fulfill the purpose. Likewise, the vine said: "Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?" The vine knew his position in God's world and was happy to contribute to his society.

But the thornbush was different. He said: "If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!" The thornbush does not produce any fruit. People and animals are wounded by its thorns when they come near it. The thorns give them pain. In the parable, the thornbush invited others to take refuge in his shade. But the thornbush does not provide good shades for people. The thornbush makes the land useless. The life of the thornbush neither pleases God nor glorifies God. In fact, it represents a cursed life (Ge 3:18).

So what is the point of Jotham's parable? A productive person would be too busy doing good to want to bother with power politics. A worthless person, on the other hand, would be glad to accept the honor—but he would destroy the people he ruled. Abimelech, like a thornbush, could offer Israel no real protection or security. A truly great man, like an olive tree in Jotham's story, wants to be fruitful. He is happy to serve others humbly, selflessly and sacrificially. He puts others ahead of himself. He is precious in God's eyes. God can use him. It is the useless thornbush of a man who wants to rule over others. If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?

Look at verses 22-23. *After Abimelech had governed Israel three years, God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech.* After just 3 years of Abimelech's reign, God sent an evil spirit to bring about judgment on the Shechemites and Abimelech. (God judged Saul in a similar way later; 1Sa 16:14) The men of Shechem had participated in terrible murders. They also had financed the political cause of Abimelech. Now God used Abimelech to judge them. When a rebellion led by Gaal was reported, Abimelech brought his troops to Shechem to destroy the people who had supported him at the beginning of his political career. He even killed the Shechemites working in the fields; in the city, he killed men, women and children by setting fire on the tower where they were hiding. He destroyed the city of Shechem and scattered salt over it (45).

Then what happened to Abimelech? He went to another city called Thebez and besieged it. When the people there hid in their tower, Abimelech was very confident that he could use the same strategy which had been proven to be so effective at Shechem. But when he approached the tower to set it on fire, a woman dropped a millstone on his head and cracked his skull. Thus, Abimelech's death was especially humiliating. He was killed by a housewife, not by a soldier. He was killed by a household appliance, not by a weapon. God judged Abimelech who had shed the blood of many innocent people for his selfish ambition. As Jotham predicted, Abimelech and the people of Shechem first conspired and then destroyed each other (20). We learn that God is the God of righteousness (56-57)

II. JEPHTHAH'S FAITH (10:1-12:15)

After the time of Abimelech, Tola son of Puah, the son of Dodo, rose to save Israel. He led Israel twenty-three years. He was followed by Jair of Gilead, who led Israel twenty-two years. But once again the years of tranquility were followed by Israel's idolatry.

Look at verses 6-8. *Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the Lord and no longer served him, he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites.*

Israel's real enemy was within. She was influenced by the Canaanite culture and religion. They forsook the Lord and worshiped the false gods of the Canaanite nations. It seems that they were willing to worship any gods other than the true God. Verse 6 says that *they served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines*. Why did they worship the pagan gods when they had the real God, the one who brought them out of their slavery in Egypt, the one who helped them to cross the Red Sea as on dry land? It was because the pagan gods offered them materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle. The Israelites were attracted by the easygoing ways of life. This is true in our generation as well. The first two of the Ten Commandments teach us that we must worship the true God only. But sinful people want to worship such man-made gods as money, power, pleasure, and other things, because they cater to our sinful desires. The false gods are enticing because they don't seem to make any demands. They let us do as we please. The problem is that these gods have no power to save us.

Look at 10:6-7. The Lord became angry because his people forsook him. And he allowed the Philistines and the Ammonites to shatter and crush Israel, especially on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead. He wanted to lead his people to repentance. Then, after 18 years of suffering, the Israelites finally repented and cried to the Lord for help. At first, God told them to ask their idols for help (14). God wanted to teach them that salvation is not cheap. But when they confessed their sins, got rid of foreign gods and pled for his mercy, he relented. He couldn't bear his people's misery any longer. He looked for a man to send to deliver them. And he sent a judge by the name of Jephthah.

Look at 11:1-3. *Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman." So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him.*

Jephthah was the illegitimate son of Gilead. He was the son of "another woman" who was a prostitute. His half brothers kicked him out of the family, because they did not want to share the family inheritance with him. With no fault of his own, Jephthah was hated by his brothers. Jephthah could have been bitter about his life. He could have been fatalistic. He could have been vengeful toward his half brothers and toward the society. But Jephthah overcame his fatalism by turning his eyes to the Lord. Through his ordeal he became strong in his inner person. He grew to be a leader.

Verse 1 says that Jephthah was a mighty warrior. However, he did not use his power to fulfill his selfish ambition or to vent his anger toward the society of injustice. He did not become a crime boss. Instead, he became a shepherd and leader for a group of adventurers who gathered around him and followed him in the land of Tob. He understood these people well because of his own experiences, and took care of them. In fact, this was God's way of preparing Jephthah to be a spiritual leader for his people.

Look at verses 4-6. *Some time later, when the Ammonites made war on Israel, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites."* When the Ammonites made war on Israel, the elders of Gilead looked around for a leader who could lead them to fight against their enemy. But there was no one. Finally, they decided to invite Jephthah to become their commander. They desperately needed a leader. They had abandoned him earlier, but now they recognized him to be a mighty warrior who could deliver them from their enemy.

How could Jephthah who was born as the son of a prostitute become a leader who was recognized even by his own brothers? It was because Jephthah was a man of God. Look at 11:9. *Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the Lord gives them to me--will I really be your head?"* Even though he was a mighty warrior, he depended on God, not on himself. Jephthah was also a man of prayer. Look at verse 11. *So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the Lord in Mizpah.* We learn that we must live by faith even when we are abandoned by some people. We waste our lives when we become bitter toward people or society. Instead, we must overcome our fatalism and become useful before God. Joseph in Genesis is a good example. At the tender age of 17, he was sold as a slave to a foreign country by his own jealous brothers. Then when he refused to sleep with his master's wife, she accused him of rape and he was thrown into a dungeon for several years. But Joseph did not become fatalistic. He held on to God's grace. He believed that God loved him and he had a good purpose for his life. Finally, God used him precious in his redemptive history.

Jephthah had humble human background. But by faith he overcame his fatalism and became a leader. The Book of Hebrews lists him as one of the heroes of faith along with Gideon, David and Samuel (Heb 11:32). When we suffer from unfair rejection, we should not blame others and become discouraged. Instead, we should remember Jephthah who was used by God despite his unjust circumstances.

Jephthah was also a good Bible student and a Bible teacher. First, he tried to solve the conflict with the Ammonites through dialogue. He sent messengers to the Ammonite king twice (11:12-14). The king of the Ammonites accused Israel of stealing the land of Gilead and he wanted it back (11:13). Jephthah gave him a lesson from history. He had three arguments: (a) Gilead was never the king's land in the first place because Israel took it from the Amorites, not the Ammonites (16-22); (b) Israel should possess land given by Israel's God and Ammon should possess land given by Ammon's God; (c) No one had contested Israel's ownership of the land since its conquest 300 years earlier (25-26). Jephthah said that their invasion was a challenge against God's sovereignty who had given the land to his people. Obviously, Jephthah studied the Bible and knew well what God had done to his forefathers. This shows that he feared God. He had the fear of God's word. Jephthah also considered God the true Judge (27). We learn here that Jephthah lived by the word of God, not by his emotional feelings. He was not a slave of his own emotions. People who live by their emotions are useless before God.

How did Jephthah rely on God in his battle against the Ammonites? Look at verse 29. *Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.* Jephthah was not only a military commander but also a spiritual leader. He followed the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord. Jephthah also made a vow to the Lord before the battle. *“If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering”* (30-31). This vow was an expression of his faith and loyalty toward God. Jephthah was a mighty warrior, but he depended on God for the upcoming battle. So what was the outcome of the war? Verse 32 says: *Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands.* God gave him a great victory.

Look at verses 34-35. *When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, “Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.”* We learn here something about a vow before God. Jephthah’s vow was his own idea; God did not expect such a vow. We don’t know why he made such a rash vow. Perhaps he was thinking about an animal to sacrifice. Nonetheless, one thing is clear: Jephthah was a man who feared God. He honored his vow at a great cost. Can we say the same thing about our vows?

Look at 12:1. The Ephraimites antagonized Jephthah after the great victory because of their jealousy. The Ephraimites who had not lifted a finger to fight their common enemy acted as though they had been slighted by Jephthah. They had done the same thing to Gideon (8:1-3). Gideon had been generous to them. Jephthah, however, was not so kind to the whining Ephraimites. Instead, he fought the Ephraimites. Jephthah’s righteous zeal resulted in a bloody civil war. Jephthah led Israel six years. Then he died and was buried in Gilead (7). After him, three minor judges led Israel. Ibzan, Elon and Abdon were men of their times (8-15). They brought some degree of order and peace to Israel, but their spiritual and moral influence was poor.

In conclusion, we learn that God can use us preciously in his redemptive history if we overcome our fatalism by faith in him. May God raise up spiritual leaders who can overcome their human conditions and live by faith in God! May God raise up leaders among us who fear God and who study the word of God with trembling heart!