

Judges 12:1-7

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. Please keep your Bible open at that passage. We've been doing a series in the book of Judges on Sunday mornings and also in the evenings, and we're in the second episode dealing with the story of a man called Jephthah.

Let me pray, and then we'll start on the story. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that your word is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and we pray, please, that you would bring your word to bear on our lives here this morning.

Whatever our situation in life, whether we're new to Christianity, just looking into the person of Jesus for ourselves for the first time, or whether we've called ourselves Christians for a long time, please would you speak to us, teach us, and change us, we pray.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, we're dealing with a somewhat unpleasant little story this morning. Let me introduce you to the playing field and the players in this rather unpleasant episode.

We'll need a little bit of history here. We're in the book of Judges. It's just over 3,000 years ago, quite a long time ago, really. The people of Israel have been rescued from slavery in Egypt.

[1 : 22] They now occupy the promised land. I see the maps come up. Yes, from your gazes. Good. We're in a period where Israel was ruled by the judges, a series of leaders raised up by God to rescue the people from their enemies.

The particular judge today, a man called Jephthah, a complex character. On one hand, a born leader. A man with the potential to unite a nation.

A first-rate military strategist. A man very clever with words. He's capable of top-drawn diplomacy as his message to the king of Ammon in the previous chapter indicates.

On the other hand, he is a deeply flawed person. Haunted by a sense of insecurity. Driven by a deep desire to succeed.

To establish his own position at all costs. And by the end of chapter 11, both of those aspects of his character, his brilliance and his flawedness, are really obvious.

[2 : 32] God has used him to win a massive victory against the Ammonite enemies. But it's happened at the cost of his daughter's life, following a stupid, insecure, self-centered vow that he made before the battle.

What now of Jephthah? Well, we've done a bit of history. Now we need a bit of geography to understand this episode. Here is a tribal map of the land of Canaan around the time of the judges.

Let me point out the big landmarks because the detail is much too much to take in. The Mediterranean Sea to the west. To the north, the Sea of Galilee, the small blue bit.

To the south, the Dead Sea, the larger blue bit. The Jordan River connecting the two. The colored in bits represent where the different tribes are.

When the people of Israel occupied the land of Canaan, they moved in from east to west across the Jordan River. On the way in, some of the tribes stayed east of the river.

[3 : 40] Today's episode is an episode of east-west conflict. Jephthah is an east bank man. He's from the tribe of Manasseh.

He comes from Gilead, the mountainous region to the east of the Jordan. A region regarded by some in Israel as not really proper Israel.

Not proper promised land. It's the other side of the Jordan. The battle he won in chapter 11 was against the Ammonites. You'll see them labeled further east.

So Gilead on the east bank has been right at the forefront of the conflict with the enemy. In a hot, dry place where water is short, access to a big river and fertile land is something that people fight and die for.

Now let's outline the story. We'll keep the map up. Let's outline the story. At the beginning of the chapter, look at chapter 12, please. We meet the men of the tribe of Ephraim. They are from west of the river, the kind of gray bit, sort of right of center.

[4 : 53] They think themselves very superior to the guys from Gilead, despite the fact that they've not fought in the battle and have not been exposed to the foreign threat in the way the east bank people have been.

They come intending to kill Jephthah because he dared to lead some of the tribes into battle without consulting them. They're not seeking clarification. They do not want to be neighborly.

They are offended, verse 1. We're going to burn down your house over your head. That's how offended we are. Jephthah, insecure to the core, verse 2, does not repeat the diplomatic feats of the previous chapter and responds in kind.

Well, I did send word from the battlefield when I was fighting. Incidentally, there's no mention in the previous chapter of him having done that, so he may just be saving face at this point.

I did send word, but you jellyfish didn't show up. So I had to take my life in my hands and do the fighting, and the Lord helped me. So what on earth are you brave boys doing here now?

[6 : 02] I imagine the language may have been a little more colorful than that, but the brave boys from across the river hit back, verse 4. You Gileadites, you've always been like this.

You've never been team players. You aren't even a proper tribe, just the dregs of Ephraim and Manasseh, left behind when we entered the promised land.

You look like foreigners. You speak like foreigners. You probably smell like foreigners too. You've always belonged over there. You aren't proper Israelites at all. That's the tone of verse 4.

And so, slaughter. Brutal slaughter. The Gileadites take the river crossing. They kill everyone coming across who doesn't have an East Bank accent.

Now, folks, what are we to make of a story like this? Let me say there are lessons at a whole bunch of levels. First, just in case you thought to yourself, that story belongs a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

[7 : 12] Just in case you thought, those people back then, they really were exceptionally primitive, weren't they? We've moved on since then, haven't we? Let me mention three timeless human realities about this story.

First, how geography often determines identity. A river runs through this event. It's just water.

It's just a geographical feature. But one side of the river or the other side of the river, it's no mere geographical issue. You are from Gilead.

That says something about who you are and what we think of you. In this story, East or West is a matter of life and death. When we moved to Glasgow, I'm originally from Glasgow, but when we moved back to Glasgow just a few years ago, before we were able to sell our house in Nottingham, we lived in Clarkston for a while.

I remember chatting to someone in church one Sunday morning. Where are you staying? Oh, in Clarkston. Oh, the south side. And I remember thinking, is it dangerous there or something?

[8 : 26] Geography divides people, doesn't it? Or rather, people use geography as a hook on which to hang opinions and often hostility towards people who are not quite the same as we are.

We have loads of phrases that illustrate this. The wrong side of the tracks, the wrong side of the road, the bad side of town. Geography is often loaded with extra freight for human beings.

East and West, they're just points of the compass, but East End and West End, in this city, those are not compass points. Those are identifiers of what kinds of aspirations I have in life, what sort of person I am.

Geography often determines identity. It was like that then. It is now. And often these geographical dividers are linked with the second timeless human feature of this story, how tribal loyalties often eclipse the greater good.

What do the Ephraimites care about in this episode? Well, they care about being slighted, being thought of as not necessary.

[9 : 42] They're offended because they've been left out. They like to think of themselves as the leading tribe. And now a group of people they regard as inferior have won the day without them.

Tribal loyalties often undermine the greater good. Here we have a great national victory. But rather than being celebrated by the nation, the victory becomes grounds for tribal warfare and the slaughter of an enormous number of people.

It's not hard to think of recent historical examples of such tribal loyalties undermining the greater goods. One thinks of the killing of perhaps a million people in Rwanda in a hundred days in 1994.

That would be 10,000 a day. Around a seventh of the national population at that time. A tribal conflict fueled by political forces, pride, and by previous history.

When geography and tribal loyalties conspire together, things can be even worse. At the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, around 10 million refugees crossed the newly made western border, dividing the Punjab.

[11 : 07] Muslims traveled west. Hindus and Sikhs traveled east. It's estimated now that somewhere between a million and two million died, many slaughtered by those who'd been their neighbors.

The new governments of India and Pakistan seem to have been completely unprepared for this, thinking that the drawing of lines between the communities would lead to greater safety for their historically troubled relationships.

And just in case we think this is something that only foreigners over there do, East Belfast and West Belfast, not points on the compass when those terms are used, but indicators of deep societal division.

There are 21 miles of so-called peace walls, separating neighborhoods in Northern Ireland who cannot live next to one another.

And just in case we think that's something that only those crazy Irish people who live across the water do, we live in a city which is just as divided by exactly the same issues.

[12 : 28] It's probable that history also plays a factor here in chapter 12. The insult of verse 4, look at verse 4 again, you renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh.

That insult seems to be the spark that lights the fire. You Gileadites, you renegades, you don't properly belong. And I think this is harking back to the fact that some of the tribes settled east of the Jordan when they occupied the promised land.

It's possible that's 100 or 200 years before this. It's not easy to do the timeline, but it's long enough for regional accents to have changed.

Those people who settled on the East Bank were viewed with suspicion back then when they did that. Were they not wanting to join in with the rest?

Were they chickening out of the fight? Were they departing from God's purposes? In fact, they were involved with the rest of the nation in conquering the land and went back east after the battle.

[13 : 33] But it's very easy to rewrite history to fuel what is really a contemporary issue. Geography, tribal loyalties, past history, a powerful cocktail, fueling what is in fact a contemporary issue that Ephraim likes to think of themselves as better than the Gileadites.

Do I need to observe, brothers and sisters, that we live in times of enormous fragmentation and pride and tribal loyalty and hostility fueled by historical grudges that has greatly undermined the greater good in our nation?

Our current political climate is dominated by precisely those things. Who we don't like, who we don't want to be associated with, who we think inferior to us, who we don't want to live side by side.

On a trivial level, at our sporting occasions, we now sing, O Flower of Scotland, when will we see your like again?

What like was that? Well, the likes of those who beat Edward II in a great battle, who gave the English a good kicking.

[15 : 06] The last verse of that, I was going to say hymn. The last verse of that song starts, those days are past now, and in the past, they must remain, yeah, but not so in the past that we forget about them.

Why? Because we'd quite like to do it again today here on the sports field. How long ago are we remembering? 1314.

700 years ago. And we sing it at the beginning of every sporting occasion. It's a small thing, a trivial thing, somewhat humorous, but there are bigger rifts, aren't there, than those in our national life.

We become increasingly defined by who we don't like rather than what we are doing. And of course, churches often take on the characteristics of the climate in which we live.

We've looked then at how geography determines identity, how tribal loyalties often eclipse the greater good. Third, and perhaps most prominent in this story, how human leadership often fails to rise above personal interest.

[16 : 22] I've already mentioned how Jephthah is a seriously, seriously capable leader. And yet here, his self-interest dominates his response. Let me read from verse 2.

Notice the personal pronouns. I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites, and although I called, you didn't save me out of their hands.

When I saw that you wouldn't help, I took my life in my hands and crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave me the victory over them. Now, why have you come up today to fight me?

He does mention God, doesn't he? But him, his people, his struggle, his life, his hands, his victory, these things are uppermost in his mind.

And it's so tragic, really, because he's a massively gifted person, and God has greatly used his gifts, but here, his self-obsession and his personal insecurities prevent him from doing what would be good for his nation, namely, brokering peace with the proud Ephraimites for the sake of the national good and the purpose of God.

[17 : 40] And so Jephthah, who has the gifts to be a leader that the whole nation unites behind, is referred to all the way through these two chapters as merely the Gileadite.

Look at chapter 11, verse 1, please. It's how he's introduced Jephthah, the Gileadite. His beginnings were unpromising.

Verse 2, he was rejected by his people. Eventually, verse 11, he became the leader of the Gileadites. But in chapter 12, we see that his vision never really extended beyond that little part to the nation.

Chapter 12, verse 2, I and my people. Which people? The Gileadites, not the Israelites. All his actions in verse 4 following are driven by his identity as a Gileadite, not an Israelite.

who will he fight? Not the enemies of Israel now, but the people of Israel when they won't speak like Gileadites do.

[18 : 58] Verse 7 sums the whole thing up, the whole story. Jephthah led Israel. He did lead Israel for six years.

Yet he was always Jephthah the Gileadite who died and was buried in a town in Gilead. A leader with the gifts to lead a nation who never really got beyond the insecurities relating to his position in his own tribe.

It's a tragic failure. And again, this is timeless. It's not hard to find examples in national life and in church life of people who have the ability to do things that could be of massive significance but are forever hampered by personal insecurity.

You may be working with people like that in your place of work. The person who just can't bear not to be at the top of everything all the time. The person who can't bear not to be the center of attention.

You may find yourself struggling with this personally in your own area of responsibility in work or in church life. You have the ability to invest in other people who could in the end be better than you are and yet personal insecurity prevents you from stepping out of the limelight and investing in others.

[20 : 30] So there's a timelessness about this episode isn't there? geography tribal loyalty pride personal insecurity these things are true of human beings in every age.

Insuperable forces so much of the time. So let me ask a couple of more situational questions. First why is this episode in the book? When the writer of the book of Judges put this book together why did this episode get in?

Well the book of Judges charts a tragic downward spiral in the life of the people of Israel. Israel was not a random collection of geographically defined tribes.

This was a nation God had rescued from slavery in Egypt in order to fulfill his great rescuing purposes for the whole world. This was a people rescued by him in order to be light to the world.

A people intended to live under his loving rule to show his character to the world and yet here Israel's behavior is driven not by God's loving rule but by those merely earthly forces of geography tribal pride loyalty personal insecurity.

[21 : 47] Here the rescued people loved by God hate each other and kill each other. Why is this episode in this book? Well, it's a turn further down the downward spiral.

A foretaste of the full-blown civil war that comes later on in the book of Judges. What does it add to the story? Well, it's a development of the expose of the human problem that is so rich in this book that on their own a nation who's been on the receiving end of a wonderful rescue and given brilliant leadership and a wonderful role in the world on their own such people will end up hating and killing one another.

And one of the questions the book of Judges raises is can anything ever change anything for human beings? Can God's purposes for this world ever be fulfilled?

Will anything change? So why is this episode in the Bible? Well, those are such huge questions. Can anything stop the downward spiral?

Can God's purposes for the world be fulfilled? These are such huge questions. Of course, we still ask them. We've asked the question already this morning how timeless those issues of geography and loyalty and historical upsets really are as powerful in our own age as they ever were.

[23 : 29] Turn on to the very end of the book to chapter 21. The book closes on a slightly wistful note. Chapter 21 verse 25 In those days Israel had no king.

Everyone did as they saw fit. Can anything change the downward spiral? Well, maybe a king could.

Maybe a king would help. And later on in the Bible story there are kings who make a difference particularly David and Solomon whose reigns are good for the nation and good for the world but in the end they turn out to be no better men than Jephthah was.

We meet no one in the Old Testament story not one who really manages to transcend these issues of geography and tribal loyalty of self-interest and personal insecurity.

So with that in mind let me turn you onwards a thousand years to Philippians chapter 2 page 1179 to that passage which was read to us earlier on in fact.

[24 : 51] Philippians chapter 2 page 1179 Paul writing to the church in Philippi urging them to have their church life dominated by the attitude of the Lord Jesus.

Verse 5 In your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that's above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and earth and under the earth and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

we have someone quite different here not the son of a prostitute who died in the end after a moderately impressive military career but rather verse 7 one who chose to be born one who came from outside one not defined by his place of birth or his tribe one who verse 8 chose to die voluntarily humbled himself to death not verse 6 a person desperately clinging on to what he could gain for himself not a self interested person not one who felt compelled to make his mark on the world though he did not one driven by the desire to make a difference one born in very humble circumstances but not ruled by feelings of insecurity one hated and despised but not motivated by revenge

Father forgive them they don't know what they're doing one able and powerful enough verses 9 and 10 to be the center of everything which he is and will be and yet not rushing now to be seen to be the center of everything which he is and will be and why so that his enemies can have the opportunity to become his friends there's simply no one like him just a word to you if you're here investigating Christianity for yourself for the first time so glad you're here this morning the Bible is often a rather intimidating book if you're new to it because it's a big book and a long story and has many different kinds of writing and many perplexities but the way the whole story works is to shine the spotlight on Jesus and if you're new to

Christianity he is where to direct your attention he is just brilliant imagine thinking about the subject matter of today's passage imagine being under the care of one who has all power but wields it consistently for the good of others not to boost his own ego imagine imagine how liberating it would be to be owned and served and ruled over by one like that he's so different if you're an old hand at Christianity there's a sharp reminder in Judges chapter 12 of what we are able to descend to geography tribal loyalty historical grudges pride personal insecurity so often these things drive church life in ways that they should not if we belong to this great king such things are not to be our motivators

[29 : 33] Philippians 2 verse 5 in your relationships with one another yet to have the same mind as he did all powerful but not self interested hated mistreated but not vengeful so often history and geography do drive us and personal slights often have massive impact on us you find yourself offended by a Christian brother or sister offense taking offense is the refuge of the proud hearted it's not what he did and it's not what we should do let's pray together just a moment to respond in the quiet to what God has said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer perhaps you might like to consider those you are divided from suspicious of hostile towards that you ought not to be perhaps to consider those we speak badly of that we should not those we avoid associating with that we should associate with we thank you gracious

God that you have in the end given to us from outside this world one quite different from us one not driven by self interest by historical feuds by suspicion by insecurity but one who gave himself for the good of others if we've not yet trusted in him please help us to do that this morning and to rejoice that we can be ruled over by one such as this and if we have we pray that we might increasingly reflect his attitude in the way we relate to one another we ask this in his name amen