

**DOWNWARD SPIRAL, PART 10: “GOD IS NOT AN IDOL”
JUDGES 10:6-12:15**

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 10 of our sermon series called “Downward Spiral,” where we're going through the book of Judges together.

And today's sermon is titled: “God Is Not An Idol.”

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

“Choose this day whom you will serve,” whether the LORD or idols (Josh. 24:15).

This was the famous ultimatum that Joshua gave the people of Israel before they entered into the promised land—right before the book of Judges.

The choice seems simple enough—choose *God* or choose *idols*—but the problem is that we all naturally have *idolatrous* hearts. It's been said that the heart is an “idol factory” (John Calvin).

Our natural disposition is toward *idolatry*, so that *even* when we choose *God*, we often treat him as just another *idol* (cf. Exod. 32:4-5)—and the consequences are devastating.

And that's what we're going to see more in today's passage.

The One Thing

Choose God over idols, but don't treat God as just another idol.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Judges 10:6-12:15.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open to this passage and look down at verses that are referred to throughout the sermon. It will help you follow along much more easily.

I'd highly recommend using a physical Bible, but if you don't have one, you can download the ESV Bible app, or just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

By way of reminder, “judges” here doesn't refer to judicial or court judges, but these judges were *military* leaders that God raised up to deliver his people from an oppressor. They were *not* kings over all of Israel, but they were more like clan or tribal leaders.

We're in the main body of the book, which tells the narratives of 12 judges (6 major judges and 6 minor judges).

And the general pattern of the downward spiral all throughout the book of Judges is that...

- Israel *rebels* against the Lord by turning to *idolatry*,
- the Lord *hands* them over to their *enemies* as an act of *discipline*,
- the people *cry out* to God for mercy,
- the Lord responds by *raising up a judge* to deliver his people from their enemies and give them *rest*,
- the judge eventually *dies*,

- the people *return* to their wickedness, but it's even *worse* than before,
- and then *repeat*, so that by the end of the book, the people of Israel look more like the *pagan* Canaanites than the people of *God*.

Last time we were in the book of Judges, we looked at the rise and fall of one of the major judges, *Gideon*—and then we looked at the ruin and retribution experienced by Gideon's son, *Abimelech*, who was *not* a judge but who schemed to make himself king.

And today, we turn to the story of another major judge, Jephthah, as well as three minor judges at the end.

So that's where we are as we begin today's passage.

Scripture Reading

Since this is a longer passage, we'll read and summarize *portions* at a time and unpack them as we go.

Overview

We'll look at this passage in five parts, each of which can be summarized in 2-3 words:

- I. "Sorry God..." (10:6-16)
- II. "Sorry Jephthah..." (10:17-11:28)
- III. "I swear..." (11:29-40)
- IV. Say "Shibboleth" (12:1-7)
- V. So many kids! (12:8-15)

I know that these words may seem somewhat random right now, but as we unpack this longer narrative, hopefully they'll make more sense along the way and give you handlebars for each section.

I. "Sorry God..." (10:6-16)

Chapter 10, verse 6 says this:

^{10:6} The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him.

This is the beginning of *another* downward spiral, as the people of Israel "again" rebel against the Lord by turning to idolatry.

But what stands out here is that the Israelites are no longer just turning to the Baals and Ashtaroath, which were the gods of the *Canaanites*, but they're turning to seemingly *any* god except the one true God, the LORD.

There are *seven* so-called gods mentioned here, and in the Bible, the number seven is the number of completion and fullness. So the Israelites are completely and fully entrenched in their idolatry.

Verse 7 then says this:

⁷ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites,

The downward spiral continues, as the Lord hands Israel over to their enemies as an act of discipline.

But it's not just *one* nation, but *two* nations are now simultaneously oppressing the people of Israel in different regions.¹

Look at verses 8-9.

¹ Later, chapters 13-16 will deal with the *Philistines*, but here in chapters 10-12, we're dealing with the *Ammonites*.

[⁸ and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. ⁹ And the Ammonites crossed the Jordan to fight also against Judah and against Benjamin and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed.]

For the last 18 years, the Ammonites have been oppressing the people of Gilead, which was made up of the tribes of Gad and Manasseh *east* of the Jordan River. And the Ammonites are now *crossing* the Jordan River to oppress the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim.

So as the people of Israel are “crushed and oppressed” and “severely distressed” by the Ammonites, what do they do?

Verse 10 says this:

¹⁰ And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, “We have sinned against you, because we have forsaken our God and have served the Baals.”

Again, the downward spiral continues, as the people cry out to God for mercy. They essentially say, “Sorry God....”

And what we *expect* will come next is that the Lord will respond by raising up a judge to deliver his people from their enemies and give them rest, but instead, see how the Lord responds to them.

Look at verses 11-14.

[¹¹ And the LORD said to the people of Israel, “Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and from the Philistines? ¹² The Sidonians also, and the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you, and you cried out to me, and I saved you out of their hand. ¹³ Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. ¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress.”]

Since the exodus, the Lord has delivered his people from *seven* nations. In contrast to their complete and full *idolatry*, the Lord has been completely and fully *faithful* to them.

And yet, they have once again *returned* to their idolatry with even greater vigor. And so, the Lord says to them these chilling words in verses 13-14: “I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let *them* save you in the time of your distress.”

The Lord knows that this “sorry God” isn’t genuine. This isn’t true repentance.

The people of Israel don’t like the *consequences* of their sin, but they’re not really sorry for their sin against *God* himself. They just want him to get them out of their distressing situation at the moment.

They’ve turned to all these other idols, and *none* of them have been able to help them, so they *finally* turn to the LORD as their last-resort idol.

But the Lord will *not* just be another idol that they’ll easily discard after he delivers them like they’ve repeatedly done before.

<pause>

Now, at this point, a helpful question to ask ourselves is this: “Do I turn to God as my last-resort idol, or do I turn to him first and always as my only God?”

In general, whom you turn to *first* is whom you trust the *most*.

So what do you instinctively do when you’re anxious and distressed?

- Do you turn to yourself—your reasoning, your resources, your work ethic—and try to think of all the ways that you can fix the problem?
- Do you turn to distractions, comforts, and pleasures to try to ignore or escape the problem?
- Do you turn to family, friends, or so-called “experts” to diagnose and treat the problem for you?

At what point does turning to *God* in his Word and in prayer come in for you?

<pause>

Going back, how do the people of Israel respond to God’s shocking rebuke?

Verses 15-16 say this:

¹⁵ And the people of Israel said to the LORD, “We have sinned; do to us whatever seems good to you. Only please deliver us this day.” ¹⁶ So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel.

Previously, the people were just trying to *do* the right things and *say* the right words to *make* God respond, as if he were just another idol they could manipulate.

But here, we see *genuine* repentance. How do we know that?

First, they’re not just saying “sorry God,” while still holding on to their idols, but now in verse 16, they’ve gotten rid of their idols and are serving the Lord. It’s not just *empty* words anymore, but it’s genuine repentance *evidenced* in their lives.

Second, in verse 15, they’re no longer just saying, “God, we want you to *deliver* us,” but now they’re saying, “God, we want *you*, *regardless* of whether or not you deliver us, but please deliver us.”

Do you see the difference?

In the first instance, they don’t really want *God*, but they want *deliverance*, and God is simply the *means* to get what they *really* want. This is still the heart of *idolatry*.

In this second instance, they really want *God*, *regardless* of whether or not they get deliverance, though they still ask for deliverance. This is the heart of genuine *love* for God.

<pause>

Look at the last part of verse 16: “and *he* [that is, *God*] became impatient over the *misery* of Israel.”

This is another way to speak about the Lord’s *compassion* for his people. Even though, in this case, it was *deserved* misery due to their *own* sin, he was *so ready* to show them compassion.

Notice here what *drives* his deliverance. You would think that it was his people’s genuine *repentance*, but that’s not quite right.

Yes, repentance is a *condition* that God has required for salvation, but repentance is not the *cause* of his salvation. Rather, it’s his own *compassion* and *love* for his people.

“This is love: *not* that we loved God, but that he *loved* us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10 NIV).

“For God so *loved* the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 NIV).

God’s *love* is the *cause* of his salvation for sinners—and that is very good news for us!

If our *repentance* is the *cause* of God's salvation, then our focus would be on how we need to repent *harder* to somehow *cause* God to save us. But that is nothing other than a works-based salvation—it all depends on *us*.

Yes, we *must* repent, but we are not anxiously wondering if our repentance is good enough; rather, our focus is on the *compassion* and *love* of God that *causes* him to act to save his people. Our focus is on how God *first* loved us. Our focus is on how he has *freely* given us everything necessary for our salvation in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We rest and rejoice in the fact that the *cause* of our salvation is in *God* himself.

<pause>

So first, “Sorry God...,” and second...

II. “Sorry Jephthah...” (10:17-11:28)

Look at verses 17-18.

[¹⁷ Then the Ammonites were called to arms, and they encamped in Gilead. And the people of Israel came together, and they encamped at Mizpah. ¹⁸ And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said one to another, “Who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”]

The Ammonites are getting ready in Gilead to go to war again, so the leaders of Gilead begin looking for a judge-deliverer to lead them into battle.

And that scene is *paused* for a moment to introduce us to a new character—Jephthah.

Chapter 11, verses 1-3 say this:

^{11:1} Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. ² And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, “You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.” ³ Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob, and worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him.

Here, we get a bit of Jephthah's backstory.

He was a “mighty warrior,” which is reminiscent of what the angel of the LORD called the previous judge, Gideon (6:12), so that's a *good* sign.

But then, we find out that he was the “son of a prostitute,” which was *not* his fault, but he *still* experiences the negative effects of his *father's* sin.

His half-brothers don't want to share their inheritance with him, so they drive him out of town, and he flees to Tob, where he gathers and leads a group of “worthless fellows.” This reminds us of Abimelech who earlier *hired* a band of “worthless and reckless fellows” to *kill* his brothers (9:4).

So Jephthah likely *became* a “mighty warrior” as he led a group of mercenaries in Tob.

And that's the end of Jephthah's backstory, and the narrative resumes.

Verses 4-11 say this:

⁴ After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. ⁵ And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ And they said to Jephthah, “Come and be our leader, that we may fight against the Ammonites.” ⁷ But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's

house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?”⁸ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “That is why we have turned to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the Ammonites and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead.”⁹ Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “If you bring me home again to fight against the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head.”¹⁰ And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, “The LORD will be witness between us, if we do not do as you say.”¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and leader over them. And Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

Now, does this relationship between the leaders of *Gilead* and *Jephthah* sound somewhat familiar?

Interestingly, it mirrors almost exactly the interaction that the people of *Israel* had with *God* earlier in chapter 10 verses 6-16.

- *Both* the LORD and Jephthah were initially rejected (10:6; 11:1-3)
- *Both* the people of Israel and the leaders of Gilead say, “Uh, sorry, please come help us!” (10:7-10; 11:4-6).
- *Both* the LORD and Jephthah respond, “You’ve *rejected* me, and *now* you come to me in your distress?” (10:11-14; 11:7).
- *Both* the people of Israel and the leaders of Gilead respond, “Yes, *you* will be our head and leader” (10:15-16a; 11:8).
- And *both* the LORD and Jephthah agree to act (10:16b; 11:9-11).

So, as you can see, the leaders of Gilead were treating *Jephthah* as just another idol as well.

When they had no use for him, they discarded him. When they needed something from him, they came to him as their last-resort idol.

<pause>

But we’re *not* called to *use* people like idols but to *love* them as God loves them.

And how we interact with *God* will shape how we interact with *people*.

It’s been said that *idolatrous* people see relationships in terms of either “vehicles” or “obstacles” (Paul Tripp).

Idolatry leads us to view *God* as either a “vehicle” to advance our *own* agendas and desires, or an “obstacle” that gets in the way of *our* plans and happiness.

And when we view *God* that way, we’ll also view *people* as either “vehicles” that we *use* to get what we want, or “obstacles” that we *remove* to get what we want.

But the gospel re-centers us away from *ourselves* and onto *God*.

From start to finish, the gospel—or the good news of Jesus Christ—is all about *God*.

- God created us, but we sinned against him.
- God ought to punish us for our sins in hell, but he came in the person of Jesus Christ as our substitute. He obeyed God’s Word perfectly, he bore all our sins on himself as he died on the cross, and he resurrected three days later, never to die again.
- And he now offers salvation from sin and satisfaction in him to all who would repent and believe in Jesus alone as their Lord and Savior.
- And even to *recognize* this as good news and *respond* in faith is his Spirit at work in us.

So from start to finish, *God* does everything necessary for us to be saved. We contribute absolutely *nothing* to our salvation except the sin we need to be saved from. *He* created, *he* came, *he* substituted, *he* obeyed, *he* died, *he* resurrected, and *he* saves.

And when we recognize how *God* has treated us in the gospel, we cannot continue looking at people as “vehicles” to *use* or “obstacles” to *remove*, but as those to *love* and *serve*—for that is what *God* has done for us in Christ.

That'd be something good to reflect on later. How should the *God*-centeredness of the gospel of Jesus Christ reorient me away from *myself*—and how should that affect how I treat *others*?

And if you're here today and are not yet trusting in Christ, I pray that you would repent of your sins and believe in him as your Lord and Savior today. Trust that he has done everything necessary for you to be *forgiven* of your sins, *accepted* as his child, and *assured* of his love now and forever.

<pause>

Going back, we should note that there are clear *differences* between the LORD and Jephthah, which will become very apparent later on.

But even here, notice that what makes the *LORD* act is his own *compassion* for his people's *misery*, but what makes *Jephthah* act is his own *self-interest* to be the *head* of the Gileadites.

This was Jephthah's opportunity to go...

- from being known as the son of a prostitute to the head of the Gileadites,
- from being a discarded outcast to being a needed leader,
- from losing his father's name and inheritance to gaining the name and respect of all the people of Gilead.

And so, he agrees to lead *not* out of *compassion* but out of his own *insecurity* and *self-interest*, which will become clearer later on.

<pause>

Look now at verses 12-28:

[¹² Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What do you have against me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" ¹³ And the king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel on coming up from Egypt took away my land, from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." ¹⁴ Jephthah again sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites ¹⁵ and said to him, "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, ¹⁶ but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. ¹⁷ Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let us pass through your land,' but the king of Edom would not listen. And they sent also to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh.

¹⁸ "Then they journeyed through the wilderness and went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab and arrived on the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon. But they did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was the boundary of Moab. ¹⁹ Israel then sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon, and Israel said to him, 'Please let us pass through your land to our country,' ²⁰ but Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory, so Sihon gathered all his people together and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. ²¹ And the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his people into the hand of Israel, and they defeated them. So Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites, who inhabited that country. ²² And they took possession of all the territory of the Amorites from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the wilderness to the Jordan. ²³ So then the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? ²⁴ Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the LORD our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess. ²⁵ Now are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever contend against Israel, or did he ever go to war with them? ²⁶ While Israel lived in Heshbon and its villages, and in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities that are on the banks of the Arnon, 300 years, why did you not deliver them within that time? ²⁷ I therefore have not sinned against you, and you do me wrong by making war on me. The LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon." ²⁸ But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he sent to him.]

Here, we see a long, complex dialogue between Jephthah and the king of the Ammonites.

In verse 12, Jephthah asks him why he's fighting against him.

In verse 13, the king says it's because Israel took his land when they came out of Egypt, and he demands that they return it peaceably.

In response, Jephthah makes *three* points: one historical, one theological, and one practical.

In verses 14-22, Jephthah makes his *historical* point. He says, "This land *never* belonged to the *Ammonites*, but it belonged to the *Amorites*; and Israel wasn't even trying to take it, but the Amorites attacked us, so the LORD defeated them and gave us their land."

In verses 23-24, Jephthah makes his *theological* point. He says, "We simply received what *our* God gave us, and you should simply receive what *your* god gave you."

In verses 25-26, Jephthah makes his *practical* point. He says, "Nobody else had a problem with us being in this land for 300 years. Why are you only *now* doing this?"

Finally, in verses 27-28, Jephthah claims the *moral* ground and basically says, "Let's go to battle and let the *LORD* decide whose land this really belongs to." The king of the Ammonites *ignores* Jephthah's words, and so, they go to war.

<pause>

So first, "Sorry God..."; second, "Sorry Jephthah..."; and third...

III. "I swear..." (11:29-40)

Now, the LORD hasn't explicitly said or done anything since we were told that he was moved by *compassion* for his people's *misery* earlier in chapter 10 verse 16.

And for the first time, the text doesn't say that the *LORD* raised up someone as the judge-deliverer, but the *leaders* of Gilead chose their *own* judge to deliver them.

So we're kind of left wondering, "So is Jephthah *really* the judge that God will raise up?"

The answer comes in verse 29, which says this:

²⁹ Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites.

The LORD affirms and empowers Jephthah as his appointed judge-deliverer (cf. 2:18), and Jephthah rallies troops from Gilead and Manasseh to fight against the Ammonites.

And so, with the LORD's affirmation and empowerment from the Holy Spirit, we know what to expect next. According to the general pattern, Jephthah is supposed to deliver his people from their enemies and give them rest.

But something *unexpected* happens to interrupt all this.

Verses 30-31 say this:

³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹ then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

Jephthah makes a *vow* to the LORD. And not only is this completely *unnecessary*, but we realize that this vow is completely *pagan*.

He vows that, if the LORD will give the Ammonites into his hand, then *whatever* (or *whoever*) comes out of the doors of his house to *meet* him when he returns home, he will offer *it* (or *him* or *her*) to the LORD as a burnt offering.

It may not be readily apparent, but it's clear that Jephthah has a *human* sacrifice in mind here.

He is prepared to sacrifice someone who will come out to “meet” him, which is most naturally understood as a *person*.²

Throughout Scripture, human sacrifice was practiced in *pagan* idolatry, but it was strictly *forbidden* by the LORD (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut. 12:31; 18:9-12; 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:13; Jer. 19:5; Ezek. 20:30-31; 23:37, 39).

The LORD *hates* human sacrifice, but Jephthah somehow thinks that this would be *desirable* for the LORD.

<pause>

Now, two questions come to mind.

First, how in the world could Jephthah think that the LORD would *want* this?

Even though he knows the history of Israel, Jephthah *still* thinks of the LORD as just another idol who operates like any other idol.

And if the pagan idols all want human sacrifice, then surely the LORD would want human sacrifice.

You sacrifice something *valuable* to the LORD, and he'll do something *great* for you.

But the LORD does *not* operate like an idol. You don't negotiate or bargain with the LORD. You simply *trust* him and *receive* everything from him as a *free* gift, and then you *praise* him for who he is and *thank* him for all that he generously gives.

Any attempt to *barter* with God is *not* praiseworthy; it is pagan *idolatry*.

<pause>

Second, why would Jephthah even make this kind of vow?

To sacrifice a human being was no small deal even in pagan idolatry. You must *really* want something if you're willing to sacrifice another *person* for it.

So what could Jephthah want so badly to make this vow?

Remember *why* Jephthah agreed to the leaders of Gilead's offer in the first place.

It was *not* out of compassion but out of his own insecurity and self-interest.

Jephthah—who was once stripped of his father's name and inheritance, and discarded as an outcast—is now *desperate* to secure a name for himself, to be someone, to be respected, to be a successful leader of the Gileadites.

This means *everything* to him in the moment—and so he makes this foolish vow.

² Additionally, the language he uses doesn't limit what he has in mind to animals, which the ESV footnotes make clear; and if we look at what Jephthah does later, he actually sacrifices a person. If he only meant to sacrifice an animal, he would have kept waiting until an animal came out to meet him.

So what happens next?

Look at verses 32-33.

[³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. ³³ And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.]

The entire battle and victory against the Ammonites is described in just *two* verses.

But notice what's *missing*. In all the previous accounts with the major judges, once the foreign oppressor is defeated, it says that "the land had rest" (3:11, 20; 5:31; 9:28). But that's *not* said here or anywhere in the rest of the narrative.

And we're about to find out why.

Verses 34-35 say this:

³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. ³⁵ And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow."

Jephthah returns home and his *daughter*—his *only* child—comes out to "meet" him with tambourines and with dances (cf. Exod. 15:20).

His daughter comes out *rightly* celebrating the LORD's deliverance, but in contrast, Jephthah tears his clothes and half-blames his daughter for the consequences of his vow. And his focus is completely on *himself*: "*you* have brought *me* very low, and *you* have become the *cause* of great trouble to *me*."

And then he says something that is blatantly *false*: "I cannot take back my vow."

The LORD is so gracious that he actually made an explicit provision in the Law to take back these kinds of rash vows (or oaths).

Leviticus 5:4-6: or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

So, Jephthah *could* have recognized that, when he said to God, "I swear...", it was a rash oath, and he *could* have taken back his vow and made an *animal* sacrifice instead.

The LORD has made a *merciful* provision to take back his vow because he *knows* how foolish we can be at times.

But it seems that Jephthah doesn't know God's *Word* very well, and therefore he doesn't know *God* very well.

Still, even if we follow Jephthah's *pagan* thinking, he would rather sacrifice his *daughter*—his *only* child—than he *himself* be struck dead for breaking his vow.

Any way you look at it, Jephthah is just terrible here... but is he so different than many of us?

<pause>

The *twin* problems that led Jephthah to do such a foolish thing were:

- first, he was more influenced by his pagan culture than he probably realized, and
- second, he didn't know God's Word as well as he should have.

And those twin problems are *related*. We are either being shaped by God's *Word* or being shaped by our *worldly* culture; and if we're not *intentionally* putting ourselves in positions to be shaped by God's *Word*, we're probably being more shaped by our *worldly* culture than we realize.

If you're not sure how you've been shaped by our worldly culture, two helpful questions you can ask yourself are these:

- "What do I find my worth in?" and
- "How do I determine what is right or wrong, wise or foolish?"

If you're a follower of Christ, then the *obvious* answers are "I find my worth in *Christ* and *his* perfect work on my behalf," and "I determine what is right and wrong, wise and foolish, on the basis of *God's Word*."

But if we're honest with ourselves, it's often not as straightforward in our own hearts.

We feel the tug of our worldly culture saying that our worth is in what we produce, what we achieve, what we have, who we know, how we feel, where we work, how competent we are, how much we know, how we look, whether we're married, whether we have kids, how our kids turn out, and on and on.

We feel the tug of worldly culture saying that right and wrong, wise and foolish, are determined by what we feel, what others are doing, what is legal, what we can get away with, what's socially acceptable, what will make the most money, what will please the most people, what will produce the fastest and greatest results, and on and on.

And in those moments, what once seemed to be so simple—that our worth is in *Christ* alone and that *God's Word* alone defines what is right and wrong, wise and foolish—become the less obvious choices.

We start viewing *God* through the lens of our *worldly* culture—and we begin to convince ourselves that *God* is just like the *idols* of this world and the *idols* of our hearts, that how *God* operates is really how the *world* operates, and what *God* wants is really what this *world* wants.

<pause>

Kids, this doesn't just suddenly happen when we become adults, but the world is trying to shape you from a young age to be more like the world. What you see on social media, what your peers are watching and doing, what is seen to be popular or cool—not always but oftentimes, these are things that go *against* God and his Word.

Parents, these would be good discussions to have with your kids from a young age. You should be the first person to teach them about what God's Word says about God's good design for gender, sex, and marriage. Cultivate a relationship with your kids, where they know they can talk to you about *anything*—and you won't freak out, but you'll listen to them, love them, ask them good questions, and help them to know and apply God's Word to whatever they're going through.

For all of us, this would be a good discussion to have with one another later today: What are some of the worldly cultural values of our day that have shaped your thinking? And how do they run *against* what God's Word teaches?

But don't stop there. We're called to be *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:14-15). We don't have a choice about being *in* the world; we all are. But the only way to not be *of* the world is to be regularly *in* God's Word.

So ask one another what they're reading and learning in God's Word. Make that a normal part of what you talk about with fellow members in the church. And if you're not reading through books of the Bible

right now, ask others what *they* do to incorporate that habit into their everyday lives. I know that many here would love to help you in whatever way they can.

<pause>

Going back, what does Jephthah's *daughter* think about all this?

Look at verses 36-40.

[³⁶ And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites." ³⁷ So she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions." ³⁸ So he said, "Go." Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. ³⁹ And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel ⁴⁰ that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.]

Amazingly, she simply accepts her fate.

If her *father* doesn't understand God's Word and thinks of God like a pagan, then unfortunately, that was *her* conception as well.

And just like *Jephthah* suffered for his *father's* sin of engaging a prostitute, his *daughter* suffers for his *own* sin of pagan thinking and self-interest.

But she asks for two months to mourn her virginity with her companions. This was not so much mourning about how she never got married, but more so about how she would never have children—which *meant* that her family line, along with *Jephthah's* family line, would be cut off.

No land or inheritance to pass on. No remembrance in genealogies. No name or legacy to be carried on.

So in order to *secure* a name for himself, Jephthah ironically and tragically *ensures* that his name is forever cut off from history.³

But the unnecessary tragedies are not over, as we'll see next.

<pause>

So first, "Sorry God..."; second, "Sorry Jephthah..."; third, "I swear..."; and fourth...

IV. Say "Shibboleth" (12:1-7)

Look at chapter 12, verse 1:

[^{12:1} The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire."]

The men of Ephraim are upset with Jephthah that he didn't call them out to join him in battle against the Ammonites, and they say they'll burn his house over him with fire.

This is not the first time they've responded this way. This is very similar to what the Ephraimites said earlier to *Gideon* after he defeated the Midianites (8:1-3).

³ Given that we are at the second to last major judge in this downward spiral through the book of Judges, it shouldn't surprise us that Jephthah does this horrible deed of offering his daughter as a burnt offering.

Ephraim was one of the strongest tribes economically and militarily, and they seemed to want all the other tribes of Israel to know that.

So how does Jephthah respond?

Look at verses 2-4.

[² And Jephthah said to them, "I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites, and when I called you, you did not save me from their hand. ³ And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?" ⁴ Then Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of Gilead struck Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh."]

We should note that Jephthah previously had an *extensive* negotiation with the king of the *Ammonites* before going to war with them, but he doesn't seem to negotiate at all with his fellow *Israelites* here.

In verses 2-3, he just says, "What do you mean I didn't call you? I *did* call you, but you just didn't come help." And then he gathers all the men of Gilead and strikes the Ephraimites down.

Why? Verse 4 says that it's "*because* they said, 'You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh.'"

Translation? "You Gileadites are *nothing* compared to the people of Ephraim and Manasseh."

Once again, Jephthah's insecurity and self-interest are pricked as he is now the *head* of the Gileadites. After being an outcast, he *literally* sacrificed his daughter to identify himself with the Gileadites again, and now the Ephraimites are calling all his people *nothing*? He wouldn't stand for it.

And so, he struck the Ephraimites down. But winning the battle wasn't enough.

Verses 5-6 say this:

⁵ And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," ⁶ they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell.

Previously, the *Ephraimites* had captured the fords (or the shallow places) of the Jordan River, so that Israel's *enemies* could not escape (3:27-29; 7:24-25). But now, the tables have turned.

The *Gileadites* have captured the fords of the Jordan, so that *Ephraimites* could not escape.

Anyone who tried to cross was asked to say "Shibboleth." But because of their Ephraimite accent, they couldn't make the "sh" sound, so they could only say "Sibboleth." And so, they showed themselves to be Ephraimites, and Jephthah had them killed.

In total, in the battle and from killing those fleeing, Jephthah killed 42,000 Ephraimites.

So like Gideon, we once again have a judge killing his own *fellow* Israelites.

And the once mighty Ephraimites *never* recovered. The tribe of Ephraim would never again be in a state of prominence throughout the rest of Israel's history.

<pause>

Notice that this civil war among the Israelites was entirely caused by *pride*.

It's *Ephraimite* pride vs. *Gileadite* pride—or we could say, it's Ephraimite *idolatry* vs. Gileadite *idolatry*. Both groups were idolizing their *own* tribe or people—all the while, they were actually on the *same* team.

They were all fellow *Israelites* who were all being oppressed by the *Ammonites*, and they've all been *delivered*.

They should be *celebrating* together, but they're too busy fighting each other to prove that they're really "somebody."

<pause>

Verse 7 then says this:

⁷ Jephthah judged Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead.

Note that he's called "Jephthah the *Gileadite*." He spilled a lot of blood to identify as a Gileadite. He killed countless Ammonites, his own daughter, and 42,000 Ephraimites to claim that name.

I wonder what Jephthah thought on his deathbed. Was it all worth it? Was all that bloodshed worth it to be "somebody"—to be "Jephthah the *Gileadite*"?

As you examine your own life, what idols of pride are you trying to secure or defend in order to be "somebody"? And when you're on your deathbed one day, about to give an account to your Maker, what will it really matter to you then?

<pause>

So first, "Sorry God..."; second, "Sorry Jephthah..."; third, "I swear..."; fourth, Say "Shibboleth"; and fifth....

V. So many kids! (12:8-15)

Look at verses 8-15.

[⁸ After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. ⁹ He had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he gave in marriage outside his clan, and thirty daughters he brought in from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. ¹⁰ Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.

¹¹ After him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel, and he judged Israel ten years. ¹² Then Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

¹³ After him Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. ¹⁴ He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys, and he judged Israel eight years. ¹⁵ Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.]

Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon are the last three minor judges in the book of Judges, and we don't have much information on them.

A couple things stand out though.

First, none of these judges are said to have saved the people of Israel from any foreign oppressor. This hints that Israel's greatest enemy is not foreign but domestic, not external but internal. It's *themselves*. Their sin and idolatry are their biggest problems.

Second, Ibzan and Abdon have so many kids! The only way you can have thirty sons and thirty daughters, or forty sons, is to have multiple wives or concubines. So like Gideon, they're acting like *kings* with a *harem* of women.

And look at what Ibzan and Abdon are *doing* with their children and grandchildren. They're making marital alliances with families outside their clan to expand power and control, and they're parading their children and grandchildren around on donkeys as if they were kings (1 Kings 1:38-39; Zech. 9:9)

Now, it's *not* wrong to have a lot of kids. In fact, God's Word says it's a *blessing* to have a lot of kids (Ps. 127:3-5).

But what was wrong here is *how* they had a lot of kids (through many wives) and *what* they were doing with their kids (they were setting up *dynasties* for themselves).

They were acting like *kings*, when the LORD *alone* was to be their king (8:23).

Even with the last three minor judges, the downward spiral is only going deeper.

And next week, we'll begin to see the *last* major judge, who is the *worst* of them all.

Conclusion

Perhaps some of us are feeling heavy and discouraged by the bleakness of this narrative.

But that is part of the *point* of this narrative. We are *meant* to see the *devastating* consequences of not only choosing *idols* over God but also of treating *God* as just another idol.

Still, as we close, we need to turn our eyes towards *God*, who is our only hope.

- Whereas Jephthah acts out of self-*interest*, God acts out of *compassion*.
- Whereas Jephthah saves his people by *selfishly* sacrificing his *daughter*, God saves his people by *selflessly* sacrificing *himself* in the person of Jesus Christ.
- Whereas Jephthah suddenly *kills* the people he saved, God forever *adopts* those he saves as beloved children.
- Whereas Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon were all *sinful* judge-deliverers who all *died* and could *not* provide rest, God came as the *sinless* Jesus Christ to be the *perfect* judge-deliverer who died and *resurrected*, never to die again, to provide us *eternal* rest.

No idol and no judge could ever compare with our God.

God means to make the choice crystal clear for us: choose *God* over idols, but don't treat God as just another idol.

So may we choose, trust, and enjoy our God forever, and may we worship him *rightly* as he's revealed himself in his Word.

Let's pray.