
IT'S IN THE BIBLE

SERVANTS OF GOD

Study Guide / Lesson 11

JEPHTHAH: THE JUDGE

Commentary on Judges 9 - 12

After Gideon's death the Israelites did not drift into apostasy and sin—they leaped into it (8:33)! Although Gideon was an honorable servant of God, he was not perfect, as we saw when he created the golden ephod that became a snare to Israel. He had many wives and at least one concubine, a Canaanite whose son Abimelech caused the eventual downfall of most of Gideon's heirs as well as the nation of Israel. Abimelech lived in Shechem, an idolatrous Canaanite community allowed to exist in Israel contrary to God's command. Desiring to rule over the land, Abimelech rallied Shechem's citizens to his cause. With the money they gave him from the temple of Baal, he hired thugs to murder his seventy half-brothers (9:1-5), who would normally have been in Gideon's line of succession. Jotham, Gideon's youngest son, escaped. On Mount Gerizim Jotham told the Shechemites a story to point out their folly in backing Abimelech, called down a curse on them if they had acted wrongly toward Gideon's family, and then fled (9:7-21).

Abimelech governed Israel for three years, but was not considered a judge by biblical writers. His rule was chaotic, marked by a bloody civil war that ended in his death. This period in Jewish history is summarized in the last words of Chapter 9: *"God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them"* (9:57). After that, Tola, from the tribe of Issachar in Ephraim, led Israel twenty-three years (10:1-2). Jair followed; he ruled Israel for twenty-two years, and had thirty sons who rode their own donkeys and controlled thirty towns, indicating wealth and power (10:4). Like Samuel, Tola and Jair were inter-tribal arbitrators or circuit judges (1 Samuel 7:15-17).

"Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (10:6) by worshiping false gods: Baals; Ashtoreths; gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab; Molech, god of the Ammonites (Leviticus 20:2ff.); and gods of Philistia—Dagon and Baal-zebub (16:23; 2 Kings 1:2-3). Chapter 10 identifies seven nations God then used to punish Israel. In verses 7-8, it was Ammonites and Philistines who chastened her for lusting after heathen gods and forsaking her God. In distress, Israel appealed to God (10:10). He reminded her of His past faithfulness in delivering her from many nations, and said: *"Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you!"* (10:14). Although Israel had turned to other gods, she knew the only real source of help was from the one true God.

The nation confessed their sin to God, saying: *"Do with us whatever you think best"* (10:15). Israel knew what was needed; they *"got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD"* (10:16). When they showed their sincerity by their right action, God acted on their behalf, even though He knew they would soon fail Him again. Let us, with the Israelites, confess our sins to the Lord. He knows each one we have committed. The sooner we confess them to God, the sooner we will be forgiven and cleansed by Him (1 John 1:9). Let us, with the Israelites, give ourselves fully to Him, allowing Him to *"Do with us whatever [He] think[s] best."* Let us permit Him to mold and make us according to His perfect plan.

Think About It: The Israelites sinned profoundly yet God always helped when they turned to Him in distress. He helps us too in our hard times. He walked this earth as a man, experiencing the same trials we face. He can help us because He did not succumb to them as we often do: *“we have [a high priest] who has been tempted...yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace [and] receive mercy and find grace to help us in our...need”* (Hebrews 4:15-16).

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In Chapter 11 we meet Jephthah, a *“mighty warrior,”* whose name is from a Hebrew word that means “God opens the womb.” From the sub-tribe of Gilead, this illegitimate child of a prostitute (11:1) had been scorned and driven away by his half-brothers, who refused to share their inheritance. The Hebrew word *gharash* means “put away, stripped of any privileges.” Jephthah then fled to Tob where he recruited a band of adventurers (11:3), showing the leadership capability that would one day make him Israel’s national hero.

God could bear Israel’s misery no longer. When Israel grew desperate as the Ammonites warred against her, the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. *“Come...be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites”* (11:6), they said to the man they had once rejected. From then on, Jephthah assumed the mantle of leadership and showed his knowledge of and trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He knew that only God could bring victory (11:9), and led the elders to Mizpah to take an oath before the Lord (11:11b). His frequent references to God (11:9-10, 21, 23-24, 27) show his strong faith. He was empowered by God’s Spirit (11:29).

The rest of Chapter 11 records Jephthah’s tragedy. He had vowed that if God gave him victory, *“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”* (11:31). The one who came out to meet him upon his return from victorious battle was his daughter—his only child (11:34). He apparently offered her as a sacrifice, though it broke his heart (11:35). Human sacrifice was typical of the Canaanite religion (Leviticus 20:1-3), but God hated it. He never asks such a thing from us. When Abraham took Isaac to Mount Moriah, God was testing Abraham’s attitude toward Him. The record states that God kept Abraham from killing Isaac (Genesis 22:1-2, 9-12). Jephthah erred badly by making a vow of human sacrifice to the very God who holds men responsible if they take human life (Genesis 9:6). He knew enough about God to realize that to break his vow would be a sin. Many scholars think he could have saved his daughter’s life by throwing himself on God’s mercy in regard to the broken vow. Better yet, if he had asked a priest of God for advice, he might have learned that he could redeem his daughter by giving the amount of money stipulated in the Law (Leviticus 27:1-8).

The Ephraimites had resented Gideon because he did not include them in a battle (8:1-3). Now, with Jephthah back from war and mourning his daughter’s death, they threatened to burn his house down (12:1). These men felt they deserved honor in Israel as descendants of Joseph, and they hated to be left out of any event that might involve glory and victory. Jephthah made it clear that he had begged their help but they had refused (12:2-3). Unlike Gideon, he dealt harshly with the Ephraimites, sending 42,000 to their deaths. We cannot begin to understand Jephthah’s cruel actions born out of his culture, but God knows and He judges correctly. Jephthah led Israel for six productive years. He served the Lord, who worked through him to deliver Israel from her oppressors. He was used of God, and since he was human, he failed God, too. We *all* fail God; the question is: are we His servants?

**Personal Summary:** God’s word is trustworthy. Is ours? When we say that we will or will not do something, do we carry through on our word? We are accountable to Him whenever we give our word to anyone about anything (Matthew 5:33-37). God’s word is truthful. Is ours? Do we say what we mean and mean what we say? We must carefully consider the meaning of our words before we speak (Ecclesiastes 5:2). As believers in Christ, we are called to be honest and sincere whenever our word is given. God’s word reveals who He is. The more we read and study His word, the more we know about Him and His plan for us. Jesus is called *“the Word,”* for He manifests to us all that God is (John 1:1, 14). Our word also conveys who and what we are, for *“out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”* (Matthew 12:34). What do our words disclose about us? Does the giving of our word reflect and honor the One who lives within us? When we speak, do others hear the goodness of our indwelling Treasure (Matthew 12:35)? May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God (Psalm 19:14).

## HOME STUDY QUESTIONS

### COMMENTARY REVIEW: Jephthah: The Judge

- 1) Share lecture or commentary thoughts in which you were instructed or inspired by
  - a. the Israelites' appeal and response to God, and His response to them.
  
  - b. Jephthah's example.

### QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 11: Samson: The Judge — Judges 13 - 16

Please record Scripture verses where your answers are found. Questions marked with an asterisk (\*) may require extra thought and/or additional Bible knowledge.

#### Manoah's Wife Has A Special Visitor — Judges 13:1-7

- 2)
  - a. What is happening yet again in Israel to cause their oppression?
  
  - b. A historical cycle surrounded the period of the judges (see Lesson 8, p. 1). What part of that cycle is missing this time? Is anything similar happening in our society? Explain.
  
- 3)
  - a. Who tells Manoah's wife she is going to have a baby?
  
  - b. How could this birth be considered a miracle?
  
  - \*c. Name other families in the Bible told by a heavenly messenger that they would have a baby.
  
- 4) What special instructions are given to Manoah's wife? Why? (See also Numbers 6:1-8.)

#### The Promise Is Fulfilled: Samson Is Born — Judges 13:8-25

- 5)
  - a. What three things does Manoah ask God to reveal to him about his son (vv. 8, 12)?
  
  - b. How does the angel answer him?
  
  - \*c. What does this suggest to you when praying for your children (or other children)?
  
- 6)
  - a. What three things occur that reveal the messenger's divine identity (vv. 15-20)?
  
  - b. What is the reaction of each parent?
  
  - c. Who of those we have recently studied had a similar reaction?
  
- 7)
  - a. From verses 24-25, how does God minister to Samson?
  
  - b. Has God worked in your life to "bless" or "stir" you? Please share with your Core Group.

#### Samson Marries A Philistine — Judges 14

- 8)
  - a. Why is Samson determined to marry a Philistine?
  
  - \*b. How is this similar to Israel's spiritual apostasy?

- c. What is the response of his parents?
  - d. How does God intend to use Samson's marital relationship?
- 9) a. Where does Samson get his strength to kill the lion?
- \*b. Why can he not tell his parents where the honey comes from?
  - c. Compare Samson's physical strength and his spiritual weakness.
- 10) Describe how Samson's marriage celebration turns into treachery, murder, and anger.

### **Samson Slays The Philistines — Judges 15**

- 11) a. What does Samson do when he finds out his wife has been given to another?
- b. What does he acknowledge about his retaliation?
  - c. What action is taken by the Philistines?
- 12) What do verses 9-13 reveal to you about the spiritual condition of the tribe of Judah?
- 13) Describe Samson's victory.
- 14) a. When Samson cries out to God (v. 18), how does he acknowledge (1) that the victory belongs to God, and (2) that he needs further help?
- b. How does God answer, and what comfort do you receive from His response?

### **Delilah Uses Her Wiles To Weaken Samson — Judges 16**

- 15) From what you have read in this lesson, what do you think is Samson's major weakness?
- 16) a. Describe how Delilah weakens Samson.
- \*b. Why do you think Samson does not stop her nagging?
  - c. Are any "Delilah's" in your life leading you away from your source of power in Jesus?

**Personal Thought:** An inability to say "no" can weaken us to the point of exhaustion. In this condition, we cannot fight temptation. Is anything draining your effectiveness as a Christian?

- 17) a. What are the physical evidences of Samson's defeat?
- b. What do you think are the spiritual consequences of his defeat?
- 18) a. What is the purpose of the Philistine gathering?
- b. Why is Samson called?
  - c. What is his prayer, and how is his death a victory?

**Personal Thought:** We can only guess how different Samson's story might have been if he had lived his life for God in spiritual strength. But despite his failures, he was a man God used for a specific purpose. Despite our failures, we can serve God if we believe in Him and surrender our lives to Him. We do that by crucifixion—dying to ourselves (Galatians 2:20)!