

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

JUDGES 9-12

When **we** think of a judge what comes to mind is an officer of the court. A legal professional who sits at the bench, with gavel in hand, calling the court to order...

But after Joshua, judges in Israel were very different characters. They were more chieftains, vigilantes, even wild west sheriffs... In a day of anarchy and chaos, when *“everyone did what was right in his own eyes,”* God saved Israel by saying, *“here comes the judge.”*

God would raise up an informal sheriff, the judge would stand up - say, *“enough is enough.”* He or she took action to change the status quo of sin and idolatry and bring the Hebrews back to a reliance upon God.

The judges were colorful characters, often feeble and flawed, but the Spirit of God used them mightily.

Chapter 9 brings us to the sixth judge, Abimelech. *“Then Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) went to Shechem...”* Remember, it was Gideon’s tiny, thinned out army that took their torches, and lit up the Hill of Moreh. It confused and defeated the Midianites.

After the battle, Israel wanted to make Gideon their king, but he’d learned to keep his hands off the glory, **sort of!** He refused the throne, but took the gold, *the spoils of war*, and molded a priestly ephod. His golden image was probably a mechanical means of discerning God’s will, but it became a snare and idol to Israel...

Gideon also built a harem. His many wives birthed him seventy sons. And one was named *“Abimelech”* or *“my father is king.”* Gideon might have refused the crown, but he never renounced the desire to live like a king. And when he died, his son followed in his footsteps - not the brokenness and humility of his early life, but the pride and extravagance of his later life.

So Abimelech... *“went to Shechem, to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, 'Please speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal reign over you, or that one reign over you?' Remember that I am your own flesh and bone.”* Along with his many wives in Ophrah, 8:31 tells us, Gideon had a concubine in Shechem. Gideon had *a girl on the side*.

When he had business in Shechem this gal kept him company... **But girls on the side seldom stay there.** They end up demanding center stage... And such was the

case with this concubine's son. When dad dies Abimelech goes to the men of Shechem and recruits their support. Do they want to be governed by Gideon's sons in Ophrah, or by a *home boy* from Shechem?

And the Shechemites opt for the homie. They even make a campaign contribution to Abimelech from the coffers of their idol, Baal-Berith... And the fact Abimelech accepts the tainted offering reveals his lack of character. How can your heart be aligned with the one, true God if you accept money from a false god?

It should've been no surprise what Abimelech does with the money. Verse 4, "**With (it) Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men; and they followed him.**" He hires thugs - hit men - who'll now do his dirty work.

"Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, because he hid himself. And all the men of Shechem gathered together, all of Beth Millo, and they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar that was in Shechem." Imagine, the brutality of a man who kills 69 step-brothers. He's bloodthirsty, but the Shechemites still make him king.

Verse 7, **"Now when they told Jotham (Gideon's youngest son), he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and cried out."** Gerizim is south of Shechem, and overlooks the site of the coronation ceremony. So from the summit he shouts, **"Listen to me, you men of Shechem, that God may listen to you!** And Jotham challenges them with a parable. It's the first recorded parable in all the Bible...

Jotham cries out, **"The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them. And they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us!' But the olive tree said to them, 'Should I cease giving my oil, with which they honor God and men, and go to sway over trees?'"** Then they ask the fig tree... then the vine... and all three trees realize that *fruitfulness to God* is a higher calling than *sway over men*. The wise and godly men of Israel - the trees of the forest - know that God alone is king. Only a sinister, selfish bramble bush would ever try to take His place...

"Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us!' And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon!'" A bramble bears no fruit. It's worthless. It chokes out the fruit-bearing trees. And not only is it a barren bush, in the summer it's dry and flammable. It can start a forest fire... And Jotham here calls Abimelech that **"bramble."**

Little brother predicts the power play Abimelech and the Shechemites used against the sons of Gideon will backfire. They'll one day get burned themselves. This is a bold

parable for a kid brother. Jotham escapes to a city east of the Jordan to avoid Abimelech's retaliation.

Verse 22, "After Abimelech had reigned over Israel three years..." The honeymoon lasted just three years.

"God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, that the crime done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be settled and their blood be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who aided him in the killing of his brothers." The blood of his brothers was calling out for justice. And God will take vengeance by using "a spirit of ill will" to turn allies, Abimelech and the Shechemites, against one another.

So the chaos begins, "The men of Shechem set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was told Abimelech." Any interruption in trade created a crisis of confidence for the government. *The Shechemites are undermining Abimelech's rule.*

This reaches a crescendo when a rival ruler comes to town, a charismatic fellow named "Gaal." Verse 26, "the men of Shechem put their confidence in him..."

In fact, one night they all get drunk and start trash-talking Abimelech. In verse 28 Gaal says, "Who is Abimelech... why should we serve him? Gaal has the gall. He challenges Abimelech's rule and authority.

He says in verse 29, "If only this people were under my authority! Then I would remove Abimelech." So he said to Abimelech, "Increase your army and come out!" It's amazing how haughty you can get with a little booze under your belt... *Gaal calls out Abimelech!*

"When Zebul, the ruler of the city (a man still secretly loyal to Abimelech), heard the words of Gaal the son of Ebed, his anger was aroused. And he sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, "Take note! Gaal... and his brothers have come to Shechem; and here they are, fortifying the city against you." Zebul advises Abimelech to set up an ambush. Have his troops lie in wait in the fields outside Shechem, and in the morning when Gaal comes to the gate - attack him!

Verse 36, "When Gaal saw the people (Abimelech's ambush), he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the tops of the mountains!" But Zebul said to him, "You see the shadows of the mountains as if they were men." Gaal saw Abimelech's troops, but Zebul refutes his concern. "All you see are shadows."

"So Gaal spoke again and said, "See, people are coming down from the center of

the land, and another company is coming from the Diviners' Terebinth Tree.” Then Zebul (now revealing his true colors) said to him, "Where indeed is your mouth now, with which you said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' *“Alright, big mouth. You want to fight Abimelech, here’s your opportunity!”* “Are not these the people whom you despised? Go out, if you will, and fight with them.”

And over the next few days, in two skirmishes, Abimelech defeats Gall and sacks Shechem. In verse 45, Abimelech *“demolished the city and sowed it with salt* (a sign of distain).” Salted ground became barren.

Verse 46, *“Now when all the men of the tower of Shechem had heard that, they entered the stronghold of the temple of the god Berith.”* The last survivors of Shechem flee to a tower dedicated to the idol Baal-Berith. Abimelech now has them where he wants them.

He goes into the mountains and cuts logs, firewood. He stacks it against the tower, and lights a bonfire that incinerates the tower of Shechem. A thousand men and women are cremated alive... Jotham had warned the Shechemites if they followed Abimelech they would get burned... and now that is exactly what happened.

But what about God’s judgment on Abimelech?

Verse 50, *“Then Abimelech went to Thebez, and he encamped against Thebez and took it. But there was a strong tower in the city, and all the men and women - all the people of the city - fled there and shut themselves in; then they went up to the top of the tower. So Abimelech came as far as the tower and fought against it; and he drew near the door of the tower to burn it with fire.”* He tries the strategy used in Shechem... torch and set fire to the tower of Thebez.

“But a certain woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head...” An upper millstone was smaller than a lower millstone, but still probably two feet in diameter and a foot thick. Imagine, somebody dropping a small tombstone on your head from a window thirty feet high... As the Bible says, it *“crushed his skull.”*

It’s fitting, Abimelech is again crowned! Talk about a splitting headache - not even a BC powder will help. He’s dying from *a big head... in more ways than one.*

“Then he called quickly to the young man, his armorbearer, and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, 'A woman killed him.'” He’s dying, yet all Abimelech is concerned about is his image. *History might record that he was killed by a woman*, so he asks his armorbearer to do the deed. *“So his young man thrust him through, and he died.”*

Thus, the chapter ends, verse 56, *“God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which*

he had done to his father by killing his seventy brothers. And all the evil of the men of Shechem God returned on their own heads, and on them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.” God’s is faithful to enact justice *in His time* and *in His way*. *Bear fruit don’t be a worthless bramble.*

Chapter 10, “After Abimelech there arose to save Israel Tola the son of Puah, the son of Dodo, a man of Issachar; and he dwelt in Shamir in the mountains of Ephraim. He judged Israel twenty-three years; and he died and was buried in Shamir. Tola *“the son of Dodo” - a title that my three sons could have taken on at times.*

Actually, *“Tola”* means *“worm.”* Yet God is into using *“worms”* and even *“dodos”* to accomplish His purposes.

“After him arose Jair, a Gileadite; and he judged Israel twenty-two years. Now he had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys; they also had thirty towns.” And guess what jersey number he wore on his High School football team? He was a fullback... *No, he wore “45”...*

Jair’s thirty towns were *“called “Havoth Jair” (which means “towns of Jair”) to this day, which are in the land of Gilead. And Jair died and was buried in Camon.”* Tola and Jair judged Israel for a combined 45 years.

Verse 6, *“Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD...”* The cycle is repeated. After Jair, the Hebrews again sin and are forced into slavery.

“And (Israel) served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon.” Tyre and Sidon were chief cities of Phoenicia, a sea-faring people who settled on the coast of Lebanon. *And what do you call a visually impaired Sidonian? A Phoenician blind!*

Israel also served *“the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him.”* The Hebrews served everyone, but the one true God!

Which should be no surprise. It’s been said, *“Once a person rejects the truth there’s no end to the foolishness they’ll believe.”* Society today sees the holes in evolution. An ordered world could never have come into existence by accidental circumstances. Life necessitates a Life Giver. Creation requires a Creator... But rather than consider the God of the Bible, folks are more inclined to chalk up our origins to aliens from another world. They’d rather believe in science fiction, than in the biblical truth that there’s a Supreme Being to whom we’re actually accountable.

Israel also tried to shun the one, true God. Verse 7, *“So the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the*

hands of the people of Ammon. From that year they harassed and oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years..." They harassed the 2 1/2 tribes east of the river, and verse 9, "the people of Ammon crossed over the Jordan to fight against Judah also (west of the river), against Benjamin, and against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was severely distressed. And the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, saying, "We have sinned against You, because we have both forsaken our God and served the Baals!"

So the LORD said to the children of Israel, "Did I not deliver you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites and from the people of Ammon and from the Philistines? Also the Sidonians and Amalekites and Maonites oppressed you; and you cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their hand. Yet you have forsaken Me and served other gods. Therefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."

God was frustrated with His people. He's saying, "Every time I drive out your enemies you thank me by serving other gods. Well, let your false gods deliver you!" God was tired of Israel's ingratitude and betrayal.

And does this apply to us? *Have we ever cried out to God? He came to our rescue. And in short order we thanked Him by ignoring Him and brushing Him off for a few months; until the next crisis occurred...* Is God saying to you and me, "*Cry out to your television, or the job you worship, or the people you party with - let them help you in your distress.*" **The truth can hurt.**

In verse 15 Israel repents, "The children of Israel said to the LORD, "We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray." Real repentance not only turns from sin, but it accepts sin's consequences. It says to God, "Do to us what seems best to You." If we need to be punished, then punish us. Discipline us if necessary. Just don't let us die outside Your blessing. And I'm comforted by God's response. "So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel." This is so much like God... Yes, Israel frustrated and betrayed the Lord. But He's too loving to let *our sin* quench *His mercy*.

When I recall the ways I've taken God for granted, and abused His grace - it breaks my heart. But I can be sure the pain I've caused Him, hasn't stopped Him from loving me. *God's soul can't endure our misery.*

Recall the six-fold cycle that's repeated through the book of Judges? Israel **sins** and worships idols... A nation conquers them and **enslaves** them... They cry out to God in **supplication** and ask for His help... God raises up a **Savior**, or Judge, to deliver Israel... God empowers that Judge by His **Spirit** to overthrow the enemy... His victory

is then followed by a period of **serenity** and peace... Only to be interrupted by another round of *sin, servitude, supplication, savior, Spirit, serenity*... This cycle gets repeated seven times.

Yet the question arises, *how often has this pattern been repeated in your life?* Some folks it seems are always either *getting into trouble* or *getting out of trouble*... God wants us to walk in a consistent victory!

Verse 17, "Then the people of Ammon gathered together and encamped in Gilead. And the children of Israel assembled together and encamped in Mizpah." Battle lines were drawn. "And the people, the leaders of Gilead, said to one another, "Who is the man who will begin the fight against the people of Ammon? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

And Judges 11:1 answers their question, "Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty man of valor, but he was the son of a harlot; and Gilead begot Jephthah. Gilead's wife bore sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out, and said to him, "You shall have no inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman." Jephthah was a man of outstanding qualities, but they were overshadowed by his parentage. He was a bastard child, the son of a harlot. His half-brothers would always remind him. They were the legitimate children, not Jephthah.

Please understand, with God there are no illegitimate children. God is the giver of life, and every human is valued by Him. No one should ever be judged by the circumstances of his birth, or race, or the mistakes of his parents - *issues over which he or she has no control*. "Judge a man not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character..." Dr. King's comment should be expanded to also the legitimacy of our birth.

If you're born again, God looks past the birth certificate. It doesn't matter. He is the one, true equal opportunity employer! And here God *recruits* a man everyone else had *rejected*... His name was *Jephthah*.

Verse 3 "Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in the land of Tob; and worthless men banded together with Jephthah and went out raiding with him."

Jephthah was rejected by God's people so he turned to worthless men. And could it be the bars and brothels and bath-houses of Atlanta are filled with folks today who like Jephthah longed to receive acceptance and love from God's people, but were rejected? A need for fellowship drove him to hang out with "*worthless men*."

Remember, the Church is not *a hotel for saints*, but *a hospital for sinners*. We're *Grady Memorial not the Ritz-Carlton*. Our Lord Jesus was known as *a friend of sinners*. The despised and rejected flocked to Him. He embodied God's love. The

same should be true of us!

But back to the story... The Ammonites had taken over both banks of the Jordan River. Israel needs a brave leader. So the elders of Gilead make a call...

Verse 6, "Then they said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, that we may fight against the people of Ammon." The elders who'd shunned Jephthah, *now need him*. A fierce battle is ahead that will require a brave, skillful, daring leader. Suddenly, Jephthah's pedigree doesn't matter as much as *his strong character and steely nerves*. The elders summon him.

"So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me, and expel me from my father's house? Why have you come to me now when you are in distress?" And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is why we have turned again to you now, that you may go with us and fight against the people of Ammon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." In the heat of battle, or in the wake of a disaster, folks lay aside their prejudices and pettiness and pull together.

"So Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you take me back home to fight against the people of Ammon, and the LORD delivers them to me, shall I be your head?" In other words, *When the battle is over will you still want me as your leader?* "And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be a witness between us, if we do not do according to your words."

Then Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD in Mizpah." Verse 12, "Now Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the people of Ammon, saying, "What do you have against me, that you have come to fight against me in my land?" At first Jephthah attempts to avoid bloodshed and tries diplomacy, but the Ammonite king tells his messengers, "Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now therefore, restore those lands peaceably." And it's interesting that the Canaanites of old made the same claim as the Palestinians are making today. *We've been driven from the land we once owned and now we want it returned.*

But from verses 14-23 Jephthah rebukes the King of Ammon's claim with a history lesson and some logic. He recalls Israel's victory over the Amorites. Their land acquisition was earned in battle. Land was the spoils of victory. Israel took possession of land God enabled them to conquer. So follow the logic... verse 24...

Jephthah asks the Ammonite king, "Will you not possess whatever Chemosh your god gives you to possess? So whatever the LORD our God takes possession of

before us, we will possess.” The Canaanites need to apply their own rules to Israel. **Possession is 90% of ownership.** Chemosh was the god of the Ammonites, a false god - but to prove his point, Jephthah asks the king if his god had given him the victory wouldn't it be his right to take the spoils?

Likewise if Israel's God makes them victorious; then it's the winner's right to take possession... Follow that logic today and Israel would occupy more land than they do - the Sinai, West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights all the way to Damascus, even south Lebanon. Israel *has returned* land their God gave them in battle.

“And now, are you any better than Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever strive against Israel? Did he ever fight against them? While Israel dwelt in Heshbon and its villages, in Aroer and its villages, and in all the cities along the banks of the Arnon, for 300 years, why did you not recover them within that time?”

The Ammonite king is claiming land the Hebrews had occupied for three centuries. If they really thought it was theirs, why hadn't it been an issue before now?

Verse 27, “Therefore I have not sinned against you, but you wronged me by fighting against me. May the LORD, the Judge, render judgment this day between the children of Israel and the people of Ammon.” Of course, the diplomacy failed. “The king of the people of Ammon did not heed the words which Jephthah sent him.” And diplomacy has continued to fail for centuries.

Verse 29, “Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah (and it's God's Spirit that always makes *the difference*), and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and... advanced toward the people of Ammon.”

Jephthah is now marching to battle full of God's Spirit. He's about to do mighty deeds - yet sadly, his spiritual anointing won't make him immune to mistakes.

Realize, the power of God's Spirit doesn't stop Samson from lusting after women - or Barnabas and Paul from splitting over a dispute - or the Church at Corinth from petty divisions - and the power of the Holy Spirit doesn't stop Jephthah from making a rash vow...

We need the baptism of the Spirit to be bold and fearless, but it doesn't produce instant holiness. Godly living and moral purity is also a work of the Spirit, but it doesn't come instantly. It involves the submission of my will to God's will - the renewing of my mind with God's Word - the continuance of a repentant attitude...

In verse 30 Jephthah prays a prayer he will regret he prayed, “And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, “If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me,

when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."

Jephthah makes the mistake Christians make today. He goes on a works trip... *God, I'll do this or sacrifice that - if you come through!... God, if you bless me with this sale, or help me win the game, or receive the award - I'll return the favor...* In other words, I'll scratch God's back if He scratches my back. Folks love to play tit for tat with God. *But tit for tat ain't where he's at.* It's not biblical or wise. All God's gifts are prompted by grace! Rather than *barter*, God wants us to *believe*.

And look at what happens... "So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands. And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith - twenty cities - and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel." And I believe God would've given Israel this victory even if Jephthah had not taken a vow. God is gracious. He likes to bless us.

But Jephthah did take a vow - and good Hebrews keep their vows... Verse 34 is a tough pill to swallow, "When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter..." Daddy's little princess - his only child - was so happy to see him, she comes running out the house to greet him, and celebrate his victory...

She came out "with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter." And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes..." He'd taken a vow he couldn't break. He promised God the first object that came out of his front door... *and I'm sure at the time he vowed he was thinking a lamb, or a goat* - not his little princess.

"And (Jephthah) said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it." So she said to him, "My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon." Some folks suggest Jephthah offered his daughter as a literal burnt offering. He made a human sacrifice, but the Mosaic Law forbid human sacrifice. I doubt seriously if that happened. To me, it's far more likely that Jephthah enrolled his daughter in the full-time service of the Lord at the Tabernacle in Shiloh. She remained a virgin, and serve only the Lord.

This is why the sorrow she expresses in verses 38-39 concerns her perpetual celibacy - not a loss of life. "She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I." In essence, give me time to mourn - to bury all my little girl

dreams of marriage and family.

“So he said, "Go." And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man.” In essence, she entered a convent. The Catholic equivalent might be she became a nun.

The author adds, “And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.” It’s important to note, a life of virginity wasn’t God’s idea for his servants, it was the result of a man’s rash vow.

In Judges 12 civil war erupts between the tribes of Gad and Ephraim. “Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!”

The Ephraimites are at it again... In 8:1 they made the same complaint against Gideon... Why didn’t he include them in his fight against Midian? *There’re always folks who are brave after the battle...* Jephthah lived in Gilead, east of the Jordan, and led the Gadites against Ammon. Ephraim lived on the west bank. They’re now angry they were left out of the conflict.

“And Jephthah said to them, "My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands.” Jephthah had called, but they didn’t answer. The Ephraimites remind me of church folks today who show up after the ministry is over; and then pout, *“Why didn’t you call me? How come I never get to serve?”*

A true servant answers when the call is issued - when the need arises - not just when it’s convenient!

Jephthah says, “So when I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the LORD delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?” As a result of this squabble war broke out between the tribes of Gilead and Ephraim. Gilead eventually won and Ephraim headed home, back over the Jordan. But in the midst of the fighting Gilead took control of the river crossings.

Verse 5, “And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" The word meant *“flowing stream.”* And he (the escaping Ephraimite) would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then

they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time 42,000 Ephraimites.” All Israel spoke Hebrew, but tribes east of the Jordan and tribes west of the Jordan developed different pronunciations of certain words. It seems the Ephraimites struggled with the “sh” sound.

If you’re a Southerner you pronounce *r-o-o-f* as “roof.” But a Northerner will say “ruf.” Is it a *loy-er* or *lawyer*? Is it *car-mel* or *care-a-mel*? Is she your *aunt* or *ant*? Is it *pajamas* or *pa-jam-as*? It depends on where you’re from. Pronunciation can give away your identity.

The term “*shibboleth*” in English means, “a test for determining if you belong.” Over the years certain “*shibboleths*” have grown up in church life. *The way a person dresses... their pastimes... or musical tastes... or doctrinal nuances...* can all become a shibboleth!

And it grieves God’s heart when Christians use these various “*shibboleths*” to determine *who’s in* and *who’s out* - *who we’ll fellowship with and who we won’t*.

Rather than develop “*shibboleths*” to keep people out, we need to look for ways to take people in. By all means let’s stay focused on the commonality that transcends all our differences - our Lord Jesus Christ!

Verse 7 tells us Judge Jephthah led Israel six years. He died and was buried east of the Jordan in Gilead.

And in the last eight verses of Chapter 12 we're told of three more judges... "After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage (Imagine, paying for 30 weddings!), and brought in thirty daughters from elsewhere for his sons. He judged Israel seven years." And guess what jersey number Ibzan wore?... *30 of course*, "Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem."

"After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years. And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the country of Zebulun.

After him, Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys. He judged Israel eight years." He died, was buried in Ephraim... which bring us to the most famous of all the judges, Samson.