

Judges Chapters 10-12 – John Karmelich

1. I've debated for a few days whether or take these three chapters in one lesson or two. (One it is!) In the last three chapters, we finished the story of Gideon and his wicked son Abimelech. When we get to Chapter 13 we start the Samson story, which covers four chapters. Between those major characters are a handful of judges with not much information, another era of Israel worshipping a false god, and an unlikely hero who was the son of a prostitute. He became a mighty leader to win a war over foreigners who were oppressing Israel. If all that isn't strange enough, we'll also get a strange story about the daughter of the "prostitute's son" who was either sacrificed or at the least remained a lifelong virgin due to a dumb vow her father made. These chapters will finish as they start with some short comments about a few more good judges. My job is to explain why we should care about these stories and why they're here in the bible!
 - a) What God "laid on me" was the reminder of the dangers of getting to "comfortable" in the Christian life. What that means is God blesses the lives of believers, we start taking all of that for grant it and aren't drawing as close to Him as we used to. Remember what God is interested in more than anything else, a relationship with us! He'll do what it takes so we will draw close to Him. When we mess up, we turn back to Him. Does it excuse turning from Him? Of course not and there is always a penalty for sin.
 - b) The other danger is when we're grateful for something He's done for us, and then we try to please God by something foolish. That is what happens in Chapter 11.
 - c) These chapters are a mixture of both good and bad things. For example Chapter 10 opens with short stories of two good judges. Chapter 11 has the "son of the prostitute" reciting a little Israel history lesson despite the fact his family rejected him because of his mom's bad history. The underlying point of these chapters is when we're seeking God, He blesses us. When we turn from Him, He'll do what's necessary to draw us back to Him. When we do something foolish thinking it's pleases Him, we suffer the consequences as if He's saying, "I expect you to do be a living witness for Me, but when we try to please Me just based on human effort, we suffer the consequences."
 - d) So what do I call this lesson, "How to live like God desires and what's the consequences of ignoring that calling!" Yes we're going to cover a lot of verses in these three chapters. Yes, together they give us great lessons how God expects us to live as a witness for Him. We'll see the benefits of living as He desires, the dangers of letting our guard down because He is blessing our lives and the danger of trying to please Him by our efforts. We get a bunch of tough life lessons here, but they're necessary in order for us to live as He desires.
2. OK then, a quick overview of the three chapters and then we'll crank them out verse by verse!
 - a) We get a few lines about the next judge. We can learn a few things by studying the family names given, but not a lot is said about him. Then we get another short story of the next judge who had thirty sons who ruled in Israel with "dad". Again little is said about either of these two judges.
 - b) Then as the Israelites lived in peace from these two judges (think of God blessing our lives as we fail to appreciate how good life is) they turned to serve other gods. It's the danger of thinking, "Everything is going well, I can ignore God now and go do whatever I want".
 - c) After God tells them, "Go ask the gods you turned to for help", the Israelites then sincerely turn back to Him. He will always forgive if we seriously desire to have Him rule over our lives. Then comes the story of God raising up the least likely of judges, a prostitute's son. I like this story as it reminds us that no one is out of God's reach and it doesn't matter what we've done in our lives as we can always turn to Him in spite of that! He gets rejected by his family. When a strong leader is needed, the Israelites bring him back to be a leader!
 - d) Then we get a sad story of this judge making a foolish vow to offer the first thing to walk in the house. That's how his daughter either dies or is a virgin forever.

- e) The final story tells of the same "son of a prostitute" reciting some of Israel's history. It's an amazing thing to consider that this "reject" of the Israelite people knew his history so well. It is a reminder that when God raises us up to be one of His followers, He teaches us truth about the world that can't be denied. He defeats Israel's enemies who've harassed them as in times past. In effect his story ends with Israel returning to live as God desires. This will start the cycle all over again.
 - f) Chapter 12 ends with a few more very short stories of judges raised up to watch over that nation again. I think of the short stories to start Chapter 10 and the ones that end Chapter 12 as "bookends". It shows the repeat of the cycle of being blessed by God, then ignoring Him, suffering the consequences and then when they repent, being blessed by God again. When we start the story of Samson in the next lesson, it'll be a time when the Israelites did once again turn from God after being blessed by Him to end Chapter 12. The point is we see the pattern repeating over and over again in this section of the book.
 - g) The lesson for us as Christians is to avoid the danger of getting comfortable with God as He blesses our lives or the danger of trying to please Him on our own efforts. When we ignore those fatal mistakes God promises to bless our lives collectively. That's the stories we get in these three chapters. Speaking of which, it's time to start on them!
3. Chapter 10, Verse 1: After the time of Abimelech a man of Issachar, Tola son of Puah, the son of Dodo, rose to save Israel. He lived in Shamir, in the hill country of Ephraim. ² He led Israel twenty-three years; then he died, and was buried in Shamir.
- a) As I said, these three chapters open and close with short stories about men who judged in the nation of Israel. Little is said about this first judge except to give a family lineage and where he lived. There are some interesting little facts if you study what the family names mean. While it's interesting, I want to focus on the big picture of how God desires that we live as a witness for Him. So how does a good leader bless our lives?
 - i) Be grateful we don't have to be fighting in a war.
 - ii) Be grateful that they're not requiring all of us to serve Him full time and we're free to live as we desire.
 - iii) When our leaders seek God, and we pray for them (that's biblical (Romans 13)) as Christians are commanded to pray for our leaders whether we like them or not!
 - iv) My simple point here is God's blessing the lives of His people whether they realize it or not. It's easy to complain about our political leaders. The trick is to appreciate the good they're doing for our lives whether we realize it or not!
 - b) The commentaries I read said that this next judge Tola is related to Abimelech. It doesn't automatically make him a bad guy, just a relative. I could give some facts about what his name and family's name means, but I suspect you'd forget all of those facts fairly quickly. Again, I'm more concerned about the big picture. The big picture is last chapter had God punishing Abimelech because he murdered lots of innocent people to rise to power. God worked behind the scenes to bring Abimelech's life to an end as God never wanted him to be a judge in Israel. Since the Israelites suffered so much under him, God decided to bless Israel and give them good judges for almost fifty years. This is the first of those two. It is an example of God pouring His grace upon His people.
 - c) Before I get into "good judge #2", let me talk a moment about God's grace. The idea is for us to get something we don't deserve. Salvation alone is part of His grace because He did it just because He wants to and not because we deserve it. We may accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, but if we believe in a God that knows all things, He knew we would accept that fact even before we did. So is God's grace only salvation? Of course not? Here we see His grace being poured on the nation of Israel "just because God wants to".
 - i) OK, what about all the tragedies. Where's His grace there? God allows free will as part of our existence. If this life is all there is, it's very tragic. If we'll live forever as one of His and our job is to be a witness for Him, we must accept good and bad!

4. Verse 3: He was followed by Jair of Gilead, who led Israel twenty-two years. ⁴ He had thirty sons, who rode thirty donkeys. They controlled thirty towns in Gilead, which to this day are called Havvoth Jair. ⁵ When Jair died, he was buried in Kamon.
- a) These three verses give the second good judge in a row. Adding the time together of these two judges, Israel had 45 years without being persecuted by one of their enemies. You'd think by now, "they'd figure it out": Stick close to God and life will go well. Turn to other gods and problems occur. Unfortunately, temptation is well tempting! The desire to have more money, power and fame will always turn our hearts back to the things of this world. There is nothing wrong with success, fame or fortune. The danger's when we ignore Him or His desires for how He wants us to live in order to achieve those things. However, I'm getting ahead of the story. The latest "downhill slide" begins in Verse 6.
 - b) In the meantime, we got a good judge named Jair who had 30 sons. Probably had multiple wives, but that's speculation. That reminds me: One of the 10 commandments forbids the act of adultery. How is that possible with multiple marriages? The Jewish religion forbade a married woman to have sex with another man, but it was accepted as a compromise for a married man to have more than one wife. That view eventually changed so that both Christianity and Judaism formally forbid multiple marriages a long time ago!
 - c) Anyway, this judge had 30 sons who were his assistants. Nothing bad is said about them so it's assumed he was a good judge. After this period of time, Israel turned to other gods again. Was the fact of the 30 sons a factor? Who knows? We just know that during the 45 years of these two judges, the Israelites were not attacked by any foreigners. Enough good news, we're overdue for some suffering again in this book. ☺
5. Verse 6: Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines. And because the Israelites forsook the LORD and no longer served him, ⁷ he became angry with them. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites, ⁸ who that year shattered and crushed them. For eighteen years they oppressed all the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan in Gilead, the land of the Amorites. ⁹ The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin and the house of Ephraim; and Israel was in great distress. ¹⁰ Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD, "We have sinned against you, forsaking our God and serving the Baals."
- a) Notice the Israelites didn't just turn to one foreign god, but a whole bunch of them. It ties to the "motto" of the book of Judges (last line in the book) of "Everybody did whatever it is they wanted to do". So what's wrong with people doing what they want and worshipping who they want? In a free society, nothing. That's not the issue. God set aside the Israelites to be a living witness for Him to the world. Just as God set aside Christians to be a witness to be a witness to the world.
 - b) Quick side note: Ever wonder why the land of Israel "is where it is"? I mean why don't we read of God leading them to Greece or Italy? The answer is Israel was on the main path if one wanted to travel by foot from Asia or Europe to Africa. It is a natural land bridge and a good place to be a witness for God, which of course they weren't doing at the moment.
 - c) What we need to learn here is there's a price for disobedience. God demands we be a good witness for Him. When we fail we suffer the consequences. Examples? If we start a life of heavy drinking or drugs we suffer and those around us suffer. If we steal, we'll end up in jail let alone have a bad reputation. Yes they're simple examples, but it reminds us of what God calls us to do once we are called to live for Him.
 - d) Notice in Verse 8 the Israelites suffered for 18 years, at least the one's who lived east of the Jordan River. Since the Israelites on the "east" were losing, it emboldened the Amorites to attack west of the Jordan. (What Israel is as a land, today.)
 - e) Then once the Israelites started suffering they figured, "OK we messed up, time to go call on God for help again. However, just because they said "they're sorry" isn't enough...

6. Verse 11: The LORD replied, "When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines,¹² the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, did I not save you from their hands?¹³ But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you.¹⁴ Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!"
- a) When I went to Israel a few years back, my favorite T-shirt I saw in a store listed all of the nations and empires that have come and gone through the millenniums in that part of the world. Then the shirt said, "Yet Israel still stands". That's effectively God's message to the Israelites at the time of this story. It's God saying, "Hey, in the past Israel as a nation won battles against much more powerful forces around you because I am "God of god's" and if I say Israel is going to win, who are you to argue?"
 - b) After God "rubbed that fact in their face", He sticks it to them even harder and says, "Since you abandoned Me to go worship other so-called gods, why aren't you calling out to them at this moment?"
 - i) That leads to an important theological question: If we ignore God for some period of time, will He say to us, "Well you relied on "this or that", but now that you're in big trouble, why are you calling out to Me?"
 - ii) Let's say we converted from another religion and after practicing Christianity for a good period of time, "slipped back" in our old habits. Would God give us a similar statement? I'd say no, but let me give one more example.
 - iii) Let's say we ignore going to church for awhile and go back to just working and go back to just living life without God. Would He make a statement like this to us if in all sincerity we cry out for help?
 - iv) To answer, stop and think what God desires more than anything else, an intimate relationship with us. He wants to be in charge of our lives and use us to make the type of difference in the world that He desires. It's not necessarily grand scale, but it is the best way to have joy in this life to use it for His glory. Living that way will bring eternal rewards versus just living for ourselves is in the end a waste of a life.
 - v) So if all of that is true, why is God being so tough on the Israelites here?
 - a) To help them see the error of their ways. To encourage them not to turn in the future from Him. Yes God loves us, but He also demands obedience! It is the focus of this part of the chapter and an essential thing for us to grasp as those trusting in Jesus for our lives.
 - vi) The good news is the Israelites got that message, as shown in the next verse:
7. Verse 15: But the Israelites said to the LORD, "We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now."¹⁶ Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD. And he could bear Israel's misery no longer.
- a) Here are the Israelites saying, "We're really really sorry! We'll do whatever you ask. We're really tired of being oppressed by other nations. Just to prove they're willing to put "their money where their mouth is", they agree to destroy the idols they made to other gods. If you don't know what an idol is, think of it as a representation of what one worships. Yes I can think of "Mary statues", but even more, if one worships money, it's what we collect. If we worship fame, there will be signs for it. You get the idea.
 - b) When God saw they were serious, He promised to help. Did God know they'd mess up in the future? Of course. Still, there's nothing He wants more than a relationship with us, so He relented at this point.
 - c) So if we mess up, how do we "put our money where our mouth is?" Start with admitting when we sin it wasn't what God desires of our lives. If there is something to throw away, do it. Sometimes it starts with "small baby steps", and it's not about being perfect. I argue it's about a desire to live as God desires and making the effort to do so! Then I have seen God work in amazing ways no matter how low we sink in life!

8. Verse 17: When the Ammonites were called to arms and camped in Gilead, the Israelites assembled and camped at Mizpah. ¹⁸ The leaders of the people of Gilead said to each other, "Whoever will launch the attack against the Ammonites will be the head of all those living in Gilead."
- a) These last two verses lead well into the next chapter. The point is the enemy of day is the Ammonites and they lived east of the Jordan River in what is the country of Jordan today. That group camped west of the river in Israel and the Israelites were forming their group in a nearby city. The big question now is who will be the leader. That will lead into a big discussion to open chapter 11. (For my newcomers, there were no chapter breaks when it was written. Those were not added until roughly the time of the printing press!)
9. Chapter 11, Verse 1: Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead; his mother was a prostitute. ² Gilead's wife also bore him sons, and when they were grown up, they drove Jephthah away. "You are not going to get any inheritance in our family," they said, "because you are the son of another woman." ³ So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tob, where a group of adventurers gathered around him and followed him.
- a) Let's start here with noticing the connection with the city of Gilead. The Israelite gathered there as they're about to go to war with the Amorites. They're were thinking, who'll lead us? We're a bunch of farmers. We need someone experienced at warfare to fight against this group. What "hit them" was this guy named Jephthah.
- b) That transitions into the background story about Jephthah. Apparently he was the son of a prostitute and his father was Jewish. When he got older (whatever that means) he had to leave the family and settle in the land of Tob. That means is he lived out in the "sticks" as we say out here. There is an old joke in our profession: How do you know when you are living in the middle of nowhere? When you're standing outside naked and nobody's there to see you naked!
- c) Apparently Jephthah was a "Robin Hood" type of fellow. He had men who followed him. Not saying "he robbed from the rich and gave to the poor". I'm saying he got a reputation as a warrior and defeated the locals to survive. Apparently word got back to his family of how he lived.
- d) Notice how he was kicked out in Verse 2. His brothers effectively said to him, you do not deserve to be part of this family. Out on the street you go! Now that the rest of the family is in trouble, they're thinking, "Wait a minute, we need him back again!" You got to admit it's a strange way to be welcome back to one's family! That must have been an interesting reunion.
- e) Now let's think about this story from Jephthah's perspective. This was a man who's family rejected him. He's at least half Jewish (don't know about the mom), and we'll discover he knew enough about Israel's history to date and some of their laws to be a "good Jew". The 11th Chapter of Hebrews in the New Testament is known as the "Hall of Faith" as it gives lots of names from the Old Testament of people with great faith. My point is Jephthah is a person on that list! Therefore despite his shaky background, he was listed as a great man of faith. The fact he survived in the wilderness and lead others to victory was enough to teach his brothers that he'd be a good leader.
- f) That lecture leads to you and me. You can think, "I could never be a Christian. You don't know my background or the horrible things I've done. If God can use Jephthah for a great purpose, He can use you or me! I've seen God use "total rejects" and I've seen Him work with those from "normal Christian backgrounds". My simple point is no matter what we have done prior to accepting Jesus or no matter how much we've turned our backs to the life God wants for us, it's never too late to turn one's life and be used by God. I seriously doubt Jephthah ever thought he'd be a respected man in Israel again, let alone a "judge" or one of their leaders. We never know how God will use us in our lives. Meanwhile I'd say it's time to get back to the story:

10. Verse 4: Some time later, when the Ammonites made war on Israel, ⁵ the elders of Gilead went to get Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶ "Come," they said, "be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites." ⁷ Jephthah said to them, "Didn't you hate me and drive me from my father's house? Why do you come to me now, when you're in trouble?" ⁸ The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be our head over all who live in Gilead." ⁹ Jephthah answered, "Suppose you take me back to fight the Ammonites and the LORD gives them to me--will I really be your head?" ¹⁰ The elders of Gilead replied, "The LORD is our witness; we will certainly do as you say." ¹¹ So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them. And he repeated all his words before the LORD in Mizpah.
- Verses 4-9 are the "back story" of the Israelites asking Jephthah. It gives some of the facts we already discussed. The Ammonites (who lived in what is Jordan today) wanted a war with the Israelites and we'll discover the reasons later in this chapter.
 - We get the fact that the leaders in the city of Gilead were wondering, "Who's going to lead the battle?" They thought about it and remembered Jephthah. When he talked to the city leaders about him being in charge, he logically wondered, "Will you really accept me as a leader after all that's happened to me?" The city leaders swore they would and word was then spread around Israel that Jephthah is in charge, deal with it.
 - We will also find out a little later in the chapter that not all the Israelites agreed to this, but I'm jumping ahead of the story. He wasn't even considered a judge yet, just someone that the leaders in the city of Gilead was going to lead the army.
 - Since I gave a lecture a page back how any of us can be used by God like Jephthah, let's go on with the story and get a few applications in a moment.
11. Verse 12: Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: "What do you have against us that you have attacked our country?" ¹³ The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah's messengers, "When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably." ¹⁴ Jephthah sent back messengers to the Ammonite king, ¹⁵ saying: "This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. ¹⁶ But when they came up out of Egypt, Israel went through the desert to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh. ¹⁷ Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Give us permission to go through your country,' but the king of Edom would not listen. They sent also to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh. ¹⁸ "Next they traveled through the desert, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border. ¹⁹ "Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, 'Let us pass through your country to our own place.' ²⁰ Sihon, however, did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He mustered all his men and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel. ²¹ "Then the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his men into Israel's hands, and they defeated them. Israel took over all the land of the Amorites who lived in that country, ²² capturing all of it from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the desert to the Jordan.
- The first thing to say here is that Jephthah knew his history. If he recited this off the top of his head. I'm impressed. Even if he had notes or consulted the "Torah" before responding, it is still impressive. All these verses are essentially reciting stories from "Numbers" in the Old Testament. For those who don't believe the bible tells the true story of about 2 million Israelites leaving Egypt and working their way to Israel, realize this Israel "reject" who got "recalled to be the king" knew Israel's history to date and retold it well.
 - Next let me give you the good news. God's not going to quiz us in heaven and ask, recite accurately how Israel got from Egypt to Israel and what happened along the way. Yes it's a good thing to learn the bible and learn the stories, as they apply to our lives. What God is far more concerned about is we glorify Him by how we lives our lives for Him!

- c) With that said, let me recap the key points. When the Israelites traveled north from Egypt to Israel they traveled east of the Jordan. They never got into wars with Moab or Edom as they traveled through what is Jordan today. (When the Babylonians conquered that whole area many centuries later, they relocated all the residents. My point is modern Jordanians are not the Moabites or Edomites). Anyway, when the Israelites continued to travel north they did get into a fight with the Amorites because that group refused to let the Israelites travel through that area. The short version is Israel won and most of the Amorites died in that battle.
 - d) It's now 300 years later. As we'll discover, Jephthah's main point is "It's ancient history. It is a flimsy excuse to attack Israel now". As Hilary Clinton famously said, "What difference does it make now?" Jephthah went on to say, "We won, it's now ancient history and this is why you want to attack us now?"
 - e) OK, besides all the ancient history, why should I care about all this stuff? Thought you'd never ask. What we're going to discover is some people can't be reasoned with even if we tell them the truth. Sometimes God's got bigger purposes that require us to put up a fight for what is right. Yes solving problems by discussing them is always preferable to war. It is a matter of this foreign nation wanting to steal from God's people. Remember they had oppressed them for 18 years. Therefore, this is the Israelites standing up for what's right.
 - f) With that said, let's finish this little part of the story:
12. Verse 23: "Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? ²⁴ Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. ²⁵ Are you better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever quarrel with Israel or fight with them? ²⁶ For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn't you retake them during that time? ²⁷ I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites."
- a) Here Jephthah finishes his history lesson. Notice he knows who the Ammonite god is. It is an appeal to logic: "Hey why aren't you happy with what you got, why do you insist to attack what obviously, our god gave to us! The history lesson continues with the story of Balak a king of the Moabites a few hundred years earlier. If you're not familiar with that story, (from the book of Numbers), Balak hired a foreign prophet to curse Israel, but that prophet had the God as his "power source" and refused to curse the Israelites as he knew he had to preach whatever God told him to preach!
 - b) Bottom line, we get a history lesson as if to tell the Amorites, "Hey attacking us Israelites hasn't worked in the past. Foreign kings either lost or left us alone. So why stir up all of this trouble now". In a backhanded way, Jephthah is being a good witness for God as to imply He's "God of the Gods" and attacking us is attacking His name.
 - c) With that said, notice the results:
13. Verse 28: The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.
- a) We can make the most logical arguments that God is God and we should serve him. Still, people refuse to want to change their ways. They're more interested in getting all they can get in this life as opposed to doing His will, and will eternally suffer. I'm positive that God holds us accountable for what we do know about Him. Since this foreign king, lived near Israel, I'm positive God held him accountable for the fact he'd rather attack Israel in order to "get their stuff" then honor "The God" and not learn from an accurate history lesson.
 - b) Keep in mind, God expects us to be a witness for Him, no matter the situation. We got to give Jephthah credit for knowing his bible, he stood up for God (despite the rejection that he had from his family) and realized "God is God" and was a witness for Him. That is one key reason why Jephthah is listed in the New Testament "Hall of Faith" listed in Chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews. OK then, time for war...

14. Verse 29: Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.³⁰ And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands,³¹ 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."
- a) Here we read of Jephthah traveling through parts of Israel to take on the Ammonites in a battle. Then he made a foolish vow: "Dear God, if you give me victory I promise to give you the first thing that comes out of my house when I get home!"
 - i) A few thoughts on this. God wants to give us victory in life because He wants to! We don't have to earn His favor with vows. A great mistake Christians make is to think in order to be blessed by God, we must earn His respect. A perfect God loves us because He does, (our faults and all) and we don't have to earn it. Yes He wants obedience, but not to earn His love, but because then we're a good witness for Him as well as the fact it's the best way to live out our lives.
 - ii) The other problem with voluntary vows is God expects us to keep them! If we are going to be a good witness for Him, we must keep our word. Despite the fact the vow will be a mistake (coming up), God expects us to honor our voluntary vows!
 - iii) The specifics of this vow is Jephthah said, "whatever comes out of my house when I get home will be a burnt offering! I suspect he thought it'd be some animal! We'll come back to that vow in two verses. First "it's war time!"
15. Verse 32: Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gave them into his hands.³³ He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon.
- a) I suspect this is anywhere from a few days to a few months of warfare summarized in two verses. Israel won and twenty towns controlled by the Ammonites were destroyed by the Israelites. Besides killing them, it also meant the Israelites kept whatever "war spoils" did come from that battle. I suspect Jephthah became rich after that war!
 - b) OK then, back to the "dumb vow".
16. Verse 34: When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter.³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break."³⁶ "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites.³⁷ But grant me this one request," she said. "Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry."
- a) I'm going to spend a little time on this vow and discuss two main views. I suspect most of the conservative bible scholars both Jewish and Christian argue that his daughter actually was sacrificed (as in killed) for this vow. Before I argue my alternative point of view, I'm willing to say, there is a good possibility that I'm wrong in what I'm about to argue. With that disclaimer out of my system, here goes:
 - i) The daughter never says, let me go wail for awhile before you kill me! Instead she says let me "wail my virginity". Keep in mind that all Israelite girls were expected to have children and hopefully one will be the mother of the Messiah. Therefore it is a big deal to say, "let me wail for my virginity".
 - ii) The other thing to keep in mind is if Jephthah knew his bible (to date), he'd know that human sacrifices are forbidden. Therefore, I suspect along with many scholars that it wasn't a human sacrifice, but a loss of her virginity.
 - iii) Again, the majority of scholars disagree. If I meet her in heaven one day, I'd say I had the wrong view, I'll apologize and let it go at that.
 - b) The important point is God expects us to keep our vows, no matter what!

- c) Remember what God desires of us, to be a good witness for Him. We are only as good as our word. If we have a reputation of not keeping our word, what good are we? It's why a majority of conservative scholars argue that he did sacrifice his daughter in order to keep his vow to God, even though God didn't permitted human sacrifices!
 - d) Bottom line, Jephthah did a stupid thing. Notice how much his daughter loved him. She came to greet "her returning father the war hero" with dancing and playing a tambourine. The last thing she probably figured is "wow, am I in big trouble!" Notice she never said, it is not permitted for Jewish people to do that. She never said, "You promised to kill me, do I get a say in the matter?" Instead she accepted the fact that her father is in charge until a marriage day. Her only compromise is "let me wail for my punishment for a few months!"
 - e) Yes this is a sad story. It happened thousands of years ago. Why should I care? The issue isn't the details of the story. The issue is trying to please God by efforts not required of us by the bible. A great lesson of living the Christian life is we're free to do anything that we want to as long as we're not violating His laws or desires for our lives.
 - i) So what's wrong with going over and above what God expects of us? It can cost us dearly as it did for Jephthah here. If he said, "To prove my love for You God, I will offer an animal up when I get home" that's fine. It'd be like us saying we will give a little more at church out of gratitude for what you've done. The foolish thing is a vow of whatever the first thing we see we'll give up. That's the danger of doing the first thing that pops in our head. There's nothing wrong with making an offer out of gratitude to God. It's another to do something foolish based on that gratitude.
 - ii) The related idea is when we mess up, first we have to keep our word. Assuming it is nothing as "stupid as this", we confess our sin and move on. The reason He does expect us to keep our word, because our reputation as His witnesses is on the line.
 - iii) Now that I've beaten that topic to death, we can move on.
17. Verse 38: "You may go," he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry.³⁹ After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite custom⁴⁰ that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.
- a) Here we get the epilogue of this story. One thing I noticed is the daughter's name is not mentioned anywhere in the chapter. It could be a simple case that when it was recorded for us, the author chose not to give it. Maybe it hurt Jephthah so much he made this bad vow, he eliminated her name from the record. Since she was his only child, it also means that he had no one to carry on his name as well!
 - b) What's fascinating is because she "wailed her virginity" it became a custom for girls to go wail for her. I suspect that ritual is a reminder for parents not to make stupid vows! It is also a reminder for young girls to realize "what their parents say goes". That means we'd need to pray for our parents if we're living with them to make the right decision!
 - c) Again, I lean on the "never married" version, but I'll let it die and move on to Chapter 12.
18. Chapter 12, Verse 1: The men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, "Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We're going to burn down your house over your head."
- a) Jealousy is an amazing thing. One of the tribes of Israel instead of saying, "We're so happy you defeated the Ammonites, they oppressed us for a long time. We're grateful for the fact God used you in a mighty way!" Instead they said, "Why didn't you call us so we can get some of the glory too?"
 - b) Notice this isn't a light thing. The men of this tribe were a large group as we'll discover in a few verses. They threatened to burn down Jephthah's house "with him in it". This leads to the question of what's the best way to handle this situation? You might remember that a few chapters back Gideon had a similar situation and he appealed to their ego to calm it.

19. Verse 2: Jephthah answered, "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. ³ 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?"
- a) Jephthah is applying his own line of reason. He's saying, "hey I asked for your help when I had to battle these guys. When I never heard from you, I went after them myself with of course, others from Israel. So why stir up trouble now, that the war is over? That's a good question. If you're wondering why this debate is part of the bible, remember again what's the theme of "Judges". It is "everyone did what's right in their own eyes", meaning again, ignoring God and doing whatever they felt like. That includes fighting among themselves.
20. Verse 4: Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh." ⁵ The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," ⁶ they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.' " If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.
- a) Bottom line, we got a war amongst the Israelites. Since nobody had uniforms a way they would know who is on who's side is people from Ephraim couldn't properly pronounce a certain word. (For example some languages don't have the "sh" sound as a constant, so it is hard for some people to properly pronounce words like Sibboleth.)
 - b) Bottom line #2: Jephthah and the Gileadites killed 42,000 fellow Israelites.
 - c) So is this what God wanted? I'd argue it was God's intention for Jephthah to be raised up as a judge in Israel, but not this war. So why didn't God intervene and stop it? Just as He allows evil to play out due to free will, He let this play out if for no other reason, than for the Israelites to realize Jephthah is in charge as the latest judge so "deal with it".
 - d) I have to admit, I don't "live for politics" like some people do. I vote, I appreciate it when the people I vote for win and I get over it quickly when the other side wins. I recite this line, "I'm neither a Republican or a Democrat. I'm a monotheist and Jesus is my king".
 - e) Anyway, once this battle was over, I'm guessing the rest of Israel got the message that the judge of the moment is Jephthah and all of Israel must deal with it! Was he perfect? Not in the least (remember the whole thing with his daughter)? But he was the right man for the job of taking on a foreign army oppressing Israel. God doesn't raise up perfect people. He raises up the right person for the right job. God knew Israel was going through a time where people were not really interested in Him and "acted accordingly" still doing what He can to draw people close to Him.
 - f) As I said in the introduction, these three chapters form a "full cycle". They start with two good judges, then chaos, then God raising up a judge, some more chaos (this war) then it will end with a few more judges (that we're about to read about to end this section.) Then it'll start all over again, as the Philistines will be the next oppressor of Israel, but we'll get to that in the next chapter (next lesson). In the meantime, time to finish up this cycle.
21. Verse 7: Jephthah led Israel six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and was buried in a town in Gilead.
- a) He didn't live very long after that war. He in effect did his job and not only did he die, but he didn't have any children to speak of as his daughter died a virgin. All in all a sad story, with a ray of sunshine as he was brought back from being excommunicated to lead Israel to a victory over their enemies.
 - b) Final words on Jephthah. Why is he included in the "Hall of Faith" (Hebrews Chapter 11) that lists the great men of faith in the Old Testament? Because it shows God can take any "reject" and still use Him for His glory. It shows that despite his dumb vow, God wanted to raise him up to be a judge as God can use anyone willing to be available for His use!

22. Verse 8: After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem led Israel. ⁹ He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He gave his daughters away in marriage to those outside his clan, and for his sons he brought in thirty young women as wives from outside his clan. Ibzan led Israel seven years. ¹⁰ Then Ibzan died, and was buried in Bethlehem.
- a) This section finishes with comments about 3 more judges with little said about them. This one had 30 sons and 30 daughters (we know what he did all day!). He married all of them off and they assisted in ruling Israel. That covered seven years. The good news is the land had peace during all that time. Ok, onto #2 of 3.
23. Verse 11: After him, Elon the Zebulunite led Israel ten years. ¹² Then Elon died, and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.
- a) Here we get "#2 good guy in a row". All it says is where he's from and that he ruled a total of 10 years.
 - b) Let me add the last one, and I'll throw in some final comments.
24. Verse 13: After him, Abdon son of Hillel, from Pirathon, led Israel. ¹⁴ He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys. He led Israel eight years. ¹⁵ Then Abdon son of Hillel died, and was buried at Pirathon in Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.
- a) This last of the three lasted eight years. He had forty sons and thirty grandsons to help in his rule. When we read of these guys with all the children, we can assume multiple wives but it's not stated.
25. OK, what's the deal with the last three. Is this good or bad? To start, it's simply stating facts. God allowed a couple of good judges to rule and in effect kept Israel at peace with it's enemies and the Israelites could in effect "live in peace" and go about their lives. I'm sure they grumbled over their taxes like most people. I'm sure they said, "What kind of leader has 30 sons?" Still, God allowed it and the good news is they had peace during that time.
- a) This final group also shows the "circle" the Israelites went from obeying God to cycles that disobedience was common. Then they complained and God helped them. Then they went on with their lives and ignored God and the cycle started again, as it will again in Chapter 13 (the next one). The lesson for the Israelites is God demands obedience and the penalty to turn from Him means suffering.
 - b) That same lesson is for us Christians too. The danger of getting "lazy" in our faith is God's more than capable of "getting our attention" just as He did the Israelites back then. No we are not saved based on works. However, if we are saved, we're saved for a purpose. That's to use our lives to glorify God.
 - c) I admit I went quickly through these three chapters. I didn't give you a lot of the technical details or meanings of names, that I'd guess most of us would forget quickly. What I want us to see is the pattern of obedience and disobedience and the price one pays when we get "lazy" in our faith. The danger is to think, "I'm saved, now I can go do whatever I want as I'm saved, and that's that". We were saved for a purpose. That purpose is to glorify God in every aspect of our lives. When we fail to do that, we too can suffer so we turn back to God and "have to learn the hard way" to stay close to Him. Avoiding all that unnecessary suffering is God's desire. He wants to bless our lives. It doesn't mean we won't have any hard times. It means that God wants to guide us for His glory.
 - d) Which leads perfectly into my closing prayer for this lesson:
26. Heavenly Father, We thank You that You've separated us to make a difference for You. Help us so that we don't waste the most valuable thing you've given us, our time and our resources. May we use those things to make a difference for You. Those are the things that are eternal. May we be filled with Your Spirit, be embolden to make a difference for You and make it obvious what it is You desire of us at this time. May we surrender our will to Yours. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.