

CHAPTER 12

In this chapter we have,

I. Jephthah's rencounter with the Ephraimites, and the blood shed on that unhappy occasion (v. 1-6), and the conclusion of Jephthah's life and government (v. 7).

II. A short account of three other of the judges of Israel: Ibzan (v. 8-10), Elon (v. 11, 12), Abdon (v. 13-15).

JUDGES JUDGES 12:1-7

DISPLEASURE OF THE EPHRAIMITES

Here Is,

I. The unreasonable displeasure of the men of Ephraim against Jephthah, because he had not called them in to his assistance against the Ammonites, that they might share in the triumphs and spoils, v. 1. Pride was at the bottom of the quarrel. Only by that comes contention. Proud men think all the honours lost that go beside themselves, and then *who can stand before envy?* The Ephraimites had the same quarrel with Gideon (~~JUDGES~~ Judges 8:1), who was of Manasseh on their side Jordan, as Jephthah was of Manasseh on the other side Jordan. Ephraim and Manasseh were hearer akin than any other of the tribes, being both the sons of Joseph, and yet they were more jealous one of another than any other of the tribes. Jacob having crossed hands, and given Ephraim the preference, looking as far forward as the kingdom of the ten tribes, which Ephraim was the head of, after the revolt from the house of David, that tribe, not content with that honour in the promise, was displeased if Manasseh had any honour done it in the mean time. It is a pity that kindred or relationship, which should be an inducement to love and peace, should be ever an occasion (as it often proves) of strife and discord. *A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, and contentions among brethren are as the bars of a castle.* The anger of the Ephraimites at Jephthah was,

1. Causeless and unjust. Why *didst thou not call us to go with thee?* For a good reason. Because it was the men of Gilead that had made him their captain, not the men of Ephraim, so that he had no authority to call them. Had his attempt miscarried for want of their help, they might justly have blamed him for not desiring it. But when the work was done, and done effectually, the Ammonites being subdued and Israel delivered, there was no harm done, though their hands were not employed in it.

2. It was cruel and outrageous. They get together in a tumultuous manner, pass over Jordan as far as Mizpeh in Gilead, where Jephthah lived, and no less will satisfy their fury but they will burn his house and him in it. *Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce.* Those resentments that have the least reason for them have commonly the most rage in them. Jephthah was now a conqueror over the common enemies of Israel, and they should have come to congratulate him, and return him the thanks of their tribe for the good services he had done; but we must not think it strange if we receive ill from those from whom we deserve well. Jephthah was now a mourner for the calamity of his family upon his daughter's account, and they should have come to condole with him and comfort him; but barbarous men take a pleasure in adding affliction to the afflicted. In this world, the end of one trouble often proves the beginning of another; nor must we ever *boast as though we had put off the harness.*

II. Jephthah's warm vindication of himself. He did not endeavour to pacify them, as Gideon had done in the like case; the Ephraimites were now more outrageous than they were then, and Jephthah had not so much of a meek and quiet spirit as Gideon had. Whether they would be pacified or no, Jephthah takes care,

1. To justify himself, v. 2, 3. He makes it out that they had no cause at all to quarrel with him, for,

(1.) It was not in pursuit of glory that he had engaged in this war, but for the necessary defence of his country, with which the children of Ammon greatly strove.

(2.) He had invited the Ephraimites to come and join with him, though he neither needed them nor was under any obligation to pay that respect to them, but they had declined the service: *I called you, and you delivered me not out of their hands.* Had that been true which they charged him with, yet it would not have been a just ground of quarrel; but it seems it was

false, and, as the matter of fact now appears, he had more cause to quarrel with them for deserting the common interests of Israel in a time of need. It is no new thing for those who are themselves most culpable to be most clamorous in accusing the innocent.

(3.) The enterprise was very hazardous, and they had more reason to pity him than to be angry with him: *I put my life in my hands*, that is, “exposed myself to the utmost peril in what I did, having so small an army,” The honour they envied was bought dearly enough; they needed not to grudge it to him; few of them would have ventured so far for it.

(4.) He does not take the glory of the success to himself (that would have been invidious), but gives it all to God: “*The Lord delivered them into my hands*. If God was pleased so far to make use of me for his glory, why should you be offended at that? Have you any reason to *fight against me*? Is not that in effect to fight against God, in whose hand I have been only an unworthy instrument?”

2. When this just answer (though not so soft an answer as Gideon's) did not prevail to turn away their wrath, he took care both to defend himself from their fury and to chastise their insolence with the sword, by virtue of his authority as Israel's judge.

(1.) The Ephraimites had not only quarrelled with Jephthah, but, when his neighbours and friends appeared to take his part, they had abused them, and given them foul language; for I adhere to our translation, and so take it, v. 4. They said in scorn, “You Gileadites that dwell here on the other side Jordan are but fugitives of Ephraim, the scum and dregs of the tribes of Joseph, of which Ephraim is the chief, the refuse of the family, and are so accounted among the Ephraimites and among the Manassites. Who cares for you? All your neighbours know what you are, no better than fugitives and vagabonds, separated from your brethren, and driven hither into a corner.” The Gileadites were as true Israelites as any other, and at this time had signalized themselves, both in the choice of Jephthah and in the war with Ammon, above all the families of Israel, and yet are most basely and unjustly called *fugitives*. It is an ill thing to fasten names or characters of reproach upon persons or countries, as is common, especially upon those that lie under outward disadvantages: it often occasions quarrels that prove of ill consequence, as it did here. See likewise what a mischievous thing an abusive tongue is, that calls ill names, and gives scurrilous language: it *sets on fire the course of nature, and is set on fire*

of hell (^{<3086>}James 3:6), and many a time cuts the throat of him that uses it, as it did here, ^{<3668>}Psalms 64:8. If these Ephraimites could have denied themselves the poor satisfaction of calling the Gileadites *fugitives*, they might have prevented a great deal of bloodshed; for *grievous words stir up anger*, and who knows how great a matter a little of that fire may kindle?

(2.) This affront raises the Gileadites' blood, and the indignity done to themselves, as well as to their captain, must be revenged.

[1.] They routed them in the field, v. 4. They fought with Ephraim, and, Ephraim being but a rude unheaded rabble, smote Ephraim, and put them to flight.

[2.] They cut off their retreat, and so completed their revenge, v. 5, 6. The Gileadites, who perhaps were better acquainted with the passages of Jordan than the Ephraimites were, secured them with strong guards, who were ordered to slay every Ephraimite that offered to pass the river. Here was, *First*, Cruelty enough in the destruction of them. Sufficient surely was *the punishment which was inflicted by many*; when they were routed in the field, there needed not this severity to cut off all that escaped. Shall the sword devour for ever? Whether Jephthah is to be praised for this I know not; perhaps he saw it to be a piece of necessary justice. *Secondly*, Cunning enough in the discovery of them. It seems the Ephraimites, though they spoke the same language with other Israelites, yet had got a custom in the dialect of their country to pronounce the Hebrew letter *Shin* like *Samech*, and they had so strangely used themselves to it that they could not do otherwise, no, not to save their lives. We learn to speak by imitation; those that first used *s* for *sh*, did it either because it was shorter or because it was finer, and their children learnt to speak like them, so that you might know an Ephraimite by it; as in England we know a west-country man or a north-country man, nay, perhaps a Shropshire man, and a Cheshire man, by his pronunciation. *Thou art a Galilean, and thy speech betrays thee*. By this the Ephraimites were discovered. If they took a man that they suspected to be an Ephraimite, but he denied it, they bade him say *Shibboleth*; but either he *could not*, as our translation reads it, or he did not heed, or frame, or direct himself, as some read, to pronounce it aright, but said *Sibboleth*, and so was known to be an Ephraimite, and was slain immediately. *Shibboleth* signifies a *river or stream*: “Ask leave to go over Shibboleth, the river.” Those that were thus cut off made up the whole number of slaughtered

Ephraimites forty-two thousand, v. 6. Thus another mutiny of that angry tribe was prevented.

3. Now let us observe the righteousness of God in the punishment of these proud and passionate Ephraimites, which in several instances answered to their sin.

(1.) They were proud of the honour of their tribe, gloried in this, that they were Ephraimites; but how soon were they brought to be ashamed or afraid to own their country! *Art thou an Ephraimite?* No, now rather of any tribe than that.

(2.) They had gone in a rage over Jordan to burn Jephthah's house with fire, but now they came back to Jordan as sneakingly as they had passed it furiously, and were cut off from ever returning to their own houses.

(3.) They had upbraided the Gileadites with the infelicity of their country, lying at such a distance, and now they suffered by an infirmity peculiar to their own country, in not being able to pronounce *Shibboleth*.

(4.) They had called the Gileadites, unjustly, fugitives, and now they really and in good earnest became fugitives themselves; and in the Hebrew the same word (v. 5) is used of the Ephraimites that escaped, or that fled, which they had used in scorn of the Gileadites, calling them *fugitives*. He that rolls the stone of reproach unjustly upon another, let him expect that it will justly return upon himself.

III. Here is the end of Jephthah's government. He judged Israel but six years, and then died, v. 7. Perhaps the death of his daughter sunk him so that he never looked up afterwards, but it shortened his days, and he went to his grave mourning.

~~<712>~~ JUDGES 12:8-15

JEPHTHAH'S SUCCESSORS

We have here a short account of the short reigns of three more of the judges of Israel, the first of whom governed but seven years, the second ten, and the third eight. *For the transgression of a land, many are the princes thereof*, many in a short time, successively (~~<100>~~ Proverbs 28:2),

good men being removed in the beginning of their usefulness and by the time that they have applied themselves to their business.

I. Ibzan of Bethlehem, most probably Bethlehem of Judah, David's city, not that in Zebulun, which is only mentioned once, ^{<0915>}Joshua 19:15. He ruled but seven years, but by the number of his children, and his disposing of them all in marriage himself, it appears that he lived long; and probably the great increase of his family, and the numerous alliances he made, added to his personal merits, made him the more fit to be either chosen by the people as Jephthah was, or called of God immediately, as Gideon was, to be Israel's judge, to keep up and carry on the work of God among them. That which is remarkable concerning him is,

1. That he had many children, sixty in all, a quiver full of these arrows. Thus was Bethlehem of old famous for increase, the very city where *he* was to be born whose spiritual seed should be *as the stars of heaven*.

2. That he had an equal number of each sex, thirty sons and thirty daughters, a thing which does not often happen in the same family, yet, in the great family of mankind, he that at first made two, male and female, by his wise providence preserves a succession of both in some sort of equality as far as is requisite to the keeping up of the generations of men upon earth.

3. That he took care to marry them all. His daughters he sent abroad, *et maritis dedit*, so the vulgar Latin adds — *he provided husbands for them*; and, as it were in exchange, and both ways, strengthening his interest, he *took in thirty daughters from abroad for his sons*. The Jews say, Every father owes three things to his son: to teach him to read the law, give him a trade, and get him a wife. What a difference was there between Ibzan's family and that of his immediate predecessor Jephthah! Ibzan has sixty children and all married, Jephthah but one, a daughter, that dies or lives unmarried. Some are increased, others are diminished: both are the Lord's doing.

II. Elon of Zebulun, in the north of Canaan, was next raised up to preside in public affairs, to administer justice, and to reform abuses. Ten years he continued a blessing to Israel, and then died, v. 11, 12. Dr. Lightfoot computes that in the beginning of his time the forty years' oppression by the Philistines began (spoken of ^{<0730>}Judges 13:1), and about that time Samson was born. Probably, his residence being in the north, the Philistines

who bordered upon the southern parts of Canaan took the opportunity of making incursions upon them.

III. Abdon, of the tribe of Ephraim, succeeded, and in him that illustrious tribe begins to recover its reputation, having not afforded any person of note since Joshua; for Abimelech the Shechemite was rather a scandal to it. This Abdon was famous for the multitude of his offspring (v. 14): he had forty sons and thirty grandsons, all of whom he lived to see grown up, and they rode on seventy ass-colts either as judges and officers or as gentlemen and persons of distinction. It was a satisfaction to him thus to see his children's children, but it is feared he did not see peace upon Israel, for by this time the Philistines had begun to break in upon them. Concerning this, and the rest of these judges that have ever so short an account given of them, yet notice is taken where they were buried (v. 7, 10, 12, 15), perhaps because the inscriptions upon their monuments (for such were anciently used, ^{<12317>}2 Kings 23:17) would serve for the confirmation and enlargement of their story, and might be consulted by such as desired further information concerning them. Peter, having occasion to speak of David, says, *His sepulchre is with us unto this day*, ^{<4123>}Acts 2:29. Or it is intended for the honour of the places where they laid their bones, but may be improved for the lessening of our esteem of all worldly glory, of which death and the grave will stain the pride. These judges, that were as gods to Israel, died like men, and all their honour was laid in the dust.

It is very strange that in the history of all these judges, some of whose actions are very particularly related, there is not so much as once mention made of the high priest, or any other priest or Levite, appearing either for counsel or action in any public affair, from Phinehas (^{<0718>}Judges 20:28) to Eli, which may well be computed 250 years; only the names of the high priests at that time are preserved, ^{<1366>}1 Chronicles 6:4-7; and ^{<1573>}Ezra 7:3-5. How can this strange obscurity of that priesthood for so long a time, now in the beginning of its days, agree with that mighty splendour with which it was introduced and the figure which the institution of it makes in the law of Moses? Surely it intimates that the institution was chiefly intended to be typical, and that the great benefits that seemed to be promised by it were to be chiefly looked for in its antitype, the everlasting priesthood of our Lord Jesus, in comparison of the superior glory of which that priesthood had no glory, ^{<4810>}2 Corinthians 3:10.