

Disunity, Destruction

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. Special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community. And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good. They don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word. We're continuing this morning our series in the book of Judges, and you'll remember that the book of Judges is about many things. It's about the need for constant renewal and revival among God's people. It's about the need for a true and faithful king, a king who can do what no human can do, which is to change the hearts of men.

It's about the power of Spirit-filled leadership, and it's about God's mercy to hard-hearted people, people like you and me. We've been taking a look at the story of Jethwa in three parts, and we're now to the third part, the very end. Last week, we saw the most tragic portion of Jethwa's story. We were reminded that Jethwa doesn't know anything. He was ignorant of God's Word and His ways. This morning, as we end Jethwa's story, we're going to come back to a theme that has shown up over and over again throughout chapters 8 through 10, which is the sorry state of Israel, that groups and individuals are loyal only to themselves. We'll see the havoc that that tribalism, that ego has on God's people. And so I invite you with that to turn with me in God's Word.

We're now in Judges chapter 12. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your worship guide. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word, and God tells us that His Word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold, and it's sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb. And so that's why we read now Judges chapter 12, starting at verse 1. The men of Ephraim were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jethwa, Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire. And Jethwa said to them, I and my people had a great dispute with the Ammonites. And when I called you, you did not save me from their hand. And when I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hand and crossed over against the Ammonites. And the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me? Verse 4. Then Jethwa gathered all the men of Gilead and fought with Ephraim. And the men of

Gilead struck Ephraim because they said, You are fugitives of Ephraim, you Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and Manasseh. And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, Let me go over, the men of Gilead said to him, Are you an Ephraimite?

When he said no, they said to him, Then say Shibboleth. And he said Sibboleth, for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time, 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell. Jethwa judged Israel six years. Then Jethwa the Gileadite died and was buried in his city in Gilead. Verse 8. After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had 30 sons and 30 daughters that he gave in marriage outside his clan, and 30 daughters he brought in from outside for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.

[4 : 08] After him, Elon the Zebulonite judged Israel, and he judged Israel ten years. Then Elon the Zebulonite died and was buried at Eijilin in the land of Zebulon. Verse 13. After him, Abdan the son of Hillel, the Pirithonite, judged Israel. He had 40 sons and 30 grandsons who rode on 70 donkeys, and he judged Israel eight years. Then Abdan the son of Hillel, the Pirithonite, died and was buried at Pirithon in the land of Ephraim in the hill country of the Amalekites. I invite you to pray with me as

we come to this portion of God's Word. Our Father in heaven, we praise you again that you give us your Word, that you teach us, that you instruct us. And we confess again that we need your help, that unless your Spirit is with us, we will not be able to understand and believe and apply what you have here for us. And so we ask that you would give us that help, that most of all you would use this passage to show us Christ, that he would be more and more beautiful and glorious and lovely to us. We ask these things in the mighty name of him, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

For us to understand what's happening in this passage before us in chapter 12, it's important for us to remember briefly what has come in the last several chapters. You'll remember back in chapter 10, things were getting so bad in Israel that we were told they were not just worshiping some of the idols, that's what they had done before, but in fact they were worshiping all of the idols. The judges' cycle, some call it judges' spiral, continues as the judges go deeper and deeper into sin and rebellion. And so God says, look, you have not repented, I'm not going to help you. But then they cry out, God has mercy on them, he raises up Jephthah to save them from the Ammonites. And that's what we saw last week. Jephthah, in fact, saves them from the Ammonites.

And so we would expect at this point for there to be some peace in the land, right? There would be celebration of some sort. Israel would come together. Maybe they would thank Jephthah, right, for all the good that he's done for them. But instead of that, at the very beginning, verse 1, we encounter the opposite. The Ammonites are done, we should expect peace. But no, there is an army that shows up on the doorstep of Jephthah. The men of Ephraim, this is verse 1, were called to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house over you with fire. They don't send a diplomat. They don't send a representative to say, hey, we're upset. No, this entire army crosses from the heartland of Israel in the west across the Jordan River to a city on the east so that they can tell Jephthah that it is time for his house to be burned down. There's a whole military force that comes, and we find out later in verse 6 how big this force is. Jephthah ends up killing 42,000 of them.

The men of Ephraim roll thick. They are here to let him know how mad they are. And their response is what we would call a disproportionate response. Their ego has been damaged, and so they're going to respond by wrecking Jephthah and his people. This is pretty extreme to state the obvious. Things are getting out of control in the land of Judges. Now, as I mentioned during our confession of faith, we've seen this same issue before. The men of Ephraim were angry back in chapter 8. They were angry at Gideon because Gideon did not invite them. What they didn't do there, though, was threaten to destroy anything. And so their anger, their response is becoming worse and worse. Where does this anger come from? Well, we know from last time they were mad at Gideon back in chapter 8 because they were not invited, and Gideon is able to calm everything down by stroking their egos. Remember, Gideon says, you guys are so great. In fact, what I did is nothing in comparison to what you did. You know, the men of Ephraim are the best. And so that seems to calm them down. Not so this time. Gideon stroked their ego Jethro. Jethro does not have Gideon's diplomacy. Remember, Jethro is a wild man. And so he does what wild men do. He starts a fight. And what a fight it is. And so we need to see and remember and understand here that this is worse than ever. We are continuing in the free fall of God's people in the book of Judges.

[9 : 29] Verse 4, they have this fight. It is blue on blue. Gilead versus Ephraim. Israelites versus Israelites. Turns out that Ephraim's talk is bigger than their game. Jethro makes quick work of them.

And then he decides it's not enough to make quick work of them. They're in a tight spot. He's going to make it even tighter. Remember, I told you they've crossed over the Jordan River. They brought this entire army with them into a different land, the place where Jethro's people are, the place of Gilead.

So what are they going to have to do if they want to escape? Well, they're going to have to cross back over. Jethro realizes this. Remember, we know that Jethro's a great warrior. He's a great tactician.

And so he decides, look, I know exactly what to do. I'm going to get rid of these men of Ephraim. We're going to take the fords. So that when they try to cross back over from the east to the west, they're going to have to go through what we've set up.

In a sense, he's telling Ephraim this. Two can play this game. You want to be tribalistic? I'll be tribalistic. You want to make a big deal about honor? I'll make a big deal about honor.

[10:55] Game recognizes game. And it turns out there's some sort of linguistic difference between these two groups. His people are able to pronounce Shibboleth with the H. Their people are able to pronounce it without the H. And so this has become a cultural term that of a Shibboleth is a test to know if someone belongs in your group. And of course, again and again, and this is what we see in verses five and six, they fail the test. That's how Jethwa is able, verse six, to take out 42,000.

Jethwa here goes beyond what self-defense allows. Jethwa is not just defending himself. No, he is purging and cleansing. Jethwa is out for revenge.

Remember, I told you when we first came to Jethwa, hard times call for hard men. And Jethwa is nothing if not a hard man for better or for worse.

After all of this happens, verse seven, we're told Jethwa judged Israel six years. And there is an absence here of what we've been told in the past.

In the past, when we've seen a judge and we're told how long he judged, we are also told, and the land had rest. The land had peace for however many years.

[12:38] We don't hear that here with Jethwa because the land has no peace. The violence within Israel increases more and more.

So the point of the story is this. The selfishness and the tribalism and the violence of Israel has reached a new low.

Things are worse than they've ever been. And this draws us to the overarching theme of the previous few chapters and the chapters to come, which is that more and more what we're seeing in the nation of Israel is that they look just like the nations around them.

That's what we saw last week, right? Jethwa is acting as if Yahweh was a pagan god. He brings this human sacrifice because that's what the nations around them do. Here the same thing is happening.

What is it that's true of the nations around them? Well, that nothing and no one is greater than me and my tribe. My ego is of ultimate importance.

[13:58] Nothing is more important than protecting and defending that. If it requires revenge, I'll take revenge. If it requires violence, there will be violence.

If you attack my honor, I will attack your honor. Israel is cannibalizing itself. God doesn't even need to send in the other nations at this point.

They are doing a great job destroying each other. They have lost all perspective, all sense of unity because tribalism and self-interest rule the day.

They rule the day for Ephraim as they come to attack Jethwa for not giving them the honor they believe they deserve. They rule the day for Jethwa as he slaughters his brothers rather than seeking peace.

Now the text hints at this in verse 7. It is not just Jethwa who dies. It is Jethwa the Gileadite.

[15:10] And in case you think that's just a mistake, remember how the last chapter ended. Verse 40 of chapter 11. The daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jethwa, the Gileadite.

Jethwa is a Gileadite first. The men of Ephraim are men of Ephraim first.

God's people have lost their unity together. In fact, as we talk as a church about what it means for us to have thick community, the kind of community that goes beyond simply knowing someone's name and saying something pleasant, but being deeply invested in each other's lives, it is this that is one of the greatest threats.

You may have seen this on page 3 of your worship guide. Israel shares no higher allegiance. Judges provides for us a warning.

[16:47] As we think about the need for constant renewal and revival among God's people, this particular passage reminds us of our need for this, our need not to lose the big picture out of concern for personal honor.

Not to value what is good for us rather than what is good for the community. And yet the temptation, the pull, the draw, the lie is constant.

That shows up in the person who doesn't get the attention he wants, so he creates drama to get it. It comes in the person who doesn't get the attention he wants, It comes in the woman who congratulates herself that everything would fall apart except for me.

It comes in the man who's outraged that he doesn't receive the honor and the praise that he believes he deserves.

It comes in the person who only thinks about what is best for me and my clique, my constituency, rather than what's going to bring the whole community together.

[18 : 05] It comes in the person who complains that no one helps, and yet loves to be seen doing everything. God's people are meant to be one people on one mission.

They're not meant to be different people on different missions. God's people are one people with one mission, not different people with different missions. And that the Bible reminds us again and again that we have ultimately two options.

We can go on a mission with each other, or we can go on a mission against each other. We can go on a mission with each other.

We can go on a mission against each other. That's our warning from Judges 12. Our warning not to become like the nations around us, not to be dragged in to the petty bickering and tribalism that characterizes so much of our world.

And Judges also reminds us that left to ourselves, that is exactly where we will go. And so we need to remember the words of our Lord Jesus.

[19 : 32] Remember, I've told you before, Jesus tells us, Luke 10, verse 20, as disciples come back, they're so excited about the success they've experienced in ministry. And Jesus tells them this, Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

How do we avoid the fate of Israel? How can we run away from the temptation of the men of Ephraim?

It's to remember that our glory comes from God and God alone. Our honor is that our names are written in the book of life.

The praise and thanks we get is not worth comparing to following and serving our Lord Jesus.

The honor that we seek after is hearing, well done, good and faithful servant. That is what is great.

[20 : 50] Joy and contentment and honor come from that and that alone. Remember I mentioned during our confession of faith, our solution to seeking our glory over God's glory is to remember how great God is.

It is the difference between climbing a 14er and making a 14er. You think you have glory? Check out God's glory.

You think you have power? Check out God's power. You think you're impressive? God is impressive.

In fact, it's we see God as great that we abandon our own delusions. And so it's not just that God gives us glory.

It's not just that we rejoice that our names are written in heaven. It is that God's glory eclipses ours. That is how we follow Jesus as one people together.

[22 : 10] We will not and we cannot abandon our own agendas and pride and ambition until we see how great and glorious God is.

we will not and we cannot rest from our own agenda until we see how glorious and great God's agenda is.

we will not and we cannot turn away from our individual missions until we have caught the vision of God's mission.

It is God's beauty and power and glory and majesty and mercy and grace and authority that causes everything else to pale.

it is great things that give us perspective on small things. I recently re-read The Hobbit by J.R.R.

Tolkien and if you're a Gandalf shows up one day and he recruits Bilbo to this adventure this adventure to go out with the dwarves and the dwarves need to go on adventure because the dragon smog has taken over their home.

[23 : 55] You'll remember that they have the lonely mountain or at least they had the lonely mountain at one point the dragon has driven them out and it's even worse than that it's not just that he's driven them out he is also sitting sleeping napping on top of all of their treasure.

And so the dwarves have lost their home and they have lost their gold. Now the dwarves have great doubts about Bilbo. It's unclear to them whether he is an asset or a liability and there's tension ongoing between him and them.

In fact he proves himself to be a liability at multiple points. They go out onto their adventure what does Bilbo do? He sleeps in. He gets up late he has to race to catch up with them. They run into some trolls. What does Bilbo do? Bilbo almost gets them killed. Gandalf has to show up to the rescue at the last minute to protect all of them.

Sometimes maybe many times the dwarves regret bringing Bilbo. In fact at one point you'll remember Bilbo disappears and the dwarves have this conversation with Gandalf where they say hey why don't we just leave him behind?

[25 : 12] We don't actually need him. Right? Bilbo for his part dreams constantly of returning to his hobbit hole. And yet Bilbo also ends up being an asset at some points.

Bilbo saves them later on from the spiders. He saves them from the wood elves. Bilbo goes first against the dragon smog. In the midst of all these tensions and egos Thorin the head dwarf has an ego.

Gandalf by the way shows his ego a few times. what is it that holds all of them together? Why do the dwarves not leave Bilbo behind and why does Bilbo not run home?

It's because they're all seeking the treasure. They are different people with one mission.

And so they have to work together and they have to partner together to make it to the end. Brothers and sisters God has given us his greatest treasure in the gospel.

[26 : 29] God has given us his greatest treasure in his son. And when and as we are tempted to be concerned about our own honor and praise and success and glory we are reminded again and again of the true mission that we are on.

We're reminded again and again that honor and ego pale in comparison to what God has for us.

And so in the midst of human imperfection and sin we work together we partner together to make it to the end because God's treasure is greater.

Gandalf jumps in and out of the hobbit. Sometimes he's with them sometimes he's not. At one point he is with them for a time when they're in Mirkwood Forest. He walks with them all the way to the forest.

He's sort of this protective presence and then he has to leave them. he reminds the dwarves how important Bilbo is to their adventure even as they consider leaving him behind.

He encourages them to have faith in him and then he reminds them to persevere and his exhortation his words to them are this think of the treasure at the end.

[28 : 04] Christian think of the treasure at the end. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven we praise you and thank you for your word which encourages us and also warns us.

We thank you for the warning of the men of Ephraim and we ask that you would be at work us individually and as a community that you would pull us together as different people on one mission that we wouldn't be concerned about our power and honor and praise and glory because we would know that it comes from you and that your glory is so much greater than our glory.

But that would free us. It would give us peace to worry not about our standing but simply to follow you in faith. We thank you that we haven't earned or deserved these things and so we simply ask them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.