

# Jephthah

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Date: 18 August 2024

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[ 0 : 01 ] Good morning to you all. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this ongoing series on the book of Judges. I'm grateful to be able to speak this morning. Last week, Zach spoke on Abimelech in Judges chapter 9.

And this morning, our task is Jephthah in chapters 10 through 12. So that's about two and a half chapters. We'll skip along and make our way through it somewhat quickly.

Would you turn there in your Bibles, Judges chapter 10 verse 6. You can navigate there on your phone or if you're using the Pew Bible in front of you, it's on page 249. We're going to start in Judges 10 chapter 6.

One of the things that we've seen in this series so far is something that Mike showed us right in the very first sermon about this cycle that keeps repeating in the book.

You can see that there's, at least on this diagram, seven steps to the cycle. And it just keeps repeating as we go through each judge. In number four, the people cry out.

[ 1 : 14 ] In number five, God empowers a judge and he goes out and defeats the enemy. And then that brings relief. And in number six, there's peace in the land. But the problem is this pattern isn't static in the book.

Each time the judge defeats the enemy and the land goes back to rest, the people return to their sin in a worse way than they were before. So the sin keeps getting worse and they keep becoming more and more like the Canaanites.

And their repentance becomes less serious each time they get back around to number four. And there are more and more innocent victims caught up in the machinery of sin and chaos.

Last week, Zach talked about the people of Shechem who are slaughtered along with countless women who are just completely innocent. So it's not really like a wheel that just keeps rolling down the road in a static way.

It's more like a drain that is emptying. It's like a drain that's circling. And it just keeps getting lower and lower. Everything is degenerating in the nation. As we're getting to see what it looks like when people reject God and when they draw away from him.

[ 2 : 28 ] The people of Israel are getting worse and the judges are getting worse. The judges are personifications of the sin of the nation. So the first judge, Othniel, pretty good guy.

Very straightforward. He just goes out and saves Israel. The second judge, Ehud, he saves Israel. But it's not quite as clean because he uses deception. And remember, he plunges the dagger into the fat king.

Then you have Barak. He saved Israel too. But it's even messier because now he goes to Deborah. And he says, I'm not going if you don't go. And she says, okay. But then, you know, the victory is going to be given into the hands of a woman.

So it's just a little bit more messy. Then we get to Gideon. He lacked faith. And that story ended up in idol worship. And then his son Abimelech comes up. He's not even a judge. But he becomes the king.

And he puts himself in power. And then he's killing not Canaanites but Israelites. And now we come to Jephthah. And if this pattern holds in the book, we expect Jephthah to be the worst judge yet.

[ 3 : 28 ] And he is. This is a story that focuses on the consequences of bad leadership among the people of God. And maybe you're saying, oh, good.

Well, I'm not a leader. So this doesn't have anything to do with me. I can just sort of check out. But leaders are not just simply those that have titles. But those who have some kind of influence over other people.

Some leaders do have official titles like pastor, elder, deacon. Parents are the leaders of their children. Some leaders don't have any kind of a title.

But even kids can be leaders, right? Every elementary school teacher knows that it only takes one kid to wreck your year. Right? In some ways, all of us lead at different times.

And so this story does concern all of us. Last year, Forbes Media Company, you know, they've got a magazine and a website. Forbes Media Company published an article titled, Courageous Leadership Style, Is It Harming or Nurturing Your Company?

[ 4 : 36 ] Is Your Leadership Style Harming the Company? Or is it making it stronger? And this is what the article says. The leader you are has a ripple effect that radiates through your business and your employees into the market and to your customers, vendors, and stakeholders.

It can go even further than this. It is highly contagious. Whether you like it or not, you are either spreading rainbows or spreading thunderstorms, and sometimes both.

Leaders are in a position of influence to either bring great good to the people that look up to them or great harm. And we're going to see that Jephthah causes great harm, and that is going to serve as an important negative example for us.

So let's look at the story of Jephthah, and we're going to draw some conclusions at the end about leadership in the church and in our personal lives. The story unfolds in five scenes. The Lord withdraws.

Number one, the Lord withdraws. Number two, Israel recruits Jephthah. Number three, Jephthah's war against the Ammonites. Number four, Jephthah's evil vow.

[ 5 : 44 ] And number five, Jephthah's war with Israelites. Oops. Yeah, so we're going to move pretty quickly through these and just hit the high points. And I'd like to ask you to just follow along with me in your Bible.

We're going to kind of announce the verses as we go. And so here we go. Scene number one, if you're taking notes, this is in 10, 6 to 16. Chapter 10, verse 6 to 16.

Scene one, the Lord withdraws. Now our passage begins in verse 6 with the most detailed description yet of sin and idolatry among the people of Israel.

In the Othniel story, back at the very beginning, they served the Baals and the Asherahs. And that was bad. But now, it says in verse 6 and 7, they served the Baals and the Ashtaroth and the gods of Syria and the gods of Sidon and the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, the gods of the Philistines, and they forsook the Lord and did not serve him.

So they are just covering their bases. From the compass all the way around, north, south, east, and west, all the surrounding peoples are just gathering their gods in and worshiping them and forsaking the Lord.

[ 6 : 52 ] And now, because of their sin, look at what it says in verses 7 and 8, he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel.

For 18 years, they oppressed all the people of Israel so that Israel was severely distressed. 18 years of military and political oppression by these enemies.

So, verse 9, the Israelites cry out to the Lord, and it sounds pretty good. We have sinned against you because we have forsaken our God and served the Baals. That seems like pretty straightforward confession.

But surprisingly, this time, because now we're in Judges chapter 10, this time, the Lord does not take their repentance very seriously. You know, as a rule in the Bible, the Lord is so eager to show mercy and forgiveness.

He is just primed for grace. He is a God gracious and compassionate. It only takes a hint of repentance, and God's like, okay, I won't punish you. But here, he becomes angry and even sarcastic.

[ 8 : 04 ] He says, Did I not save you from the Egyptians and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites and the Philistines before? Haven't we been here before?

We've done this before. I am a God of mercy, but I will not be taken advantage of. There is a limit, right, to God's mercy. And now that the cycle has repeated itself one, two, three, four, five times, he's done.

He's out. God's going to sit this one out and just watch while the people continue to be afflicted. And he says at the end of verse 13, I will save you no more.

Go and cry out to the other gods that you've chosen and let them save you in the time of your distress. So the Israelites try to negotiate with God.

They say, We have sinned. Do to us whatever seems good to you. Only deliver us this day. Right? That sounds good. It sounds like they're finally submitting to him and that this time they're really sorry.

[ 9 : 08 ] But it's manipulative. The problem exists not because God isn't doing what seems good to him, but because he is.

This is judgment. And then unbelievably, in verse 16, they remove their foreign gods. Which means that they had not done so up until now, even though previously they had confessed and repented of their sin.

So in verse 10, they confess their sin, but they didn't actually get rid of anything because they're doing that now. And so it says at the end of verse 16, and God became impatient over the misery of Israel.

He's frustrated. He's impatient with their half-hearted, half-baked repentance. He's out this time, and they can deal with this problem on their own.

And now for the rest of the story, with one exception, God is absent. So we're going to get to see what it looks like when people just kind of make things up as they go.

[ 10 : 15 ] They're still being attacked by their enemies, and so now it's time for Israel to develop a strategic plan. It's time to set some goals. It's time to find the headhunter and do some recruiting and clarify their vision and purpose statements and get some new leadership.

And that brings us to scene two, which is chapter 10, verse 17 to 11. Chapter two, Israel recruits Jephthah. Now the Ammonites are on the move against Israel, so the Israelites scramble to find a leader.

In previous episodes in the book, the Lord has raised up the deliverer, right? He's the one that raised up Othniel and raised up Jephthah, but now he's checked out, and so they're going to have to go on their own.

And so they say in verse 18, who is the man who will begin to fight against the Ammonites? He shall be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead. And in verses 1 through 3 of chapter 11, we're introduced to Jephthah.

Number one, we learn that he's a warrior, so it makes sense that he would be the one to go out and lead the troops. Number two, we learn that he's the son of a prostitute, and therefore he's not a rightful heir of the family, and he's not really even a full member of the family.

[ 11 : 37 ] And so his brothers drive him out of the home, and they say in chapter 11, verse 2, you shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.

And so he runs away, and he joins a gang of worthless fellows. It says in verse 3, this term worthless fellows is the same word that describes Abimelech's hoodlums back in chapter 9 that helped him kill his 70 brothers.

They're scoundrels. These are worthless guys that are up to no good. So it's probably a reflection on Jephthah because that's who he's hanging out with. So, so far, nothing about Jephthah gives us any confidence that he is going to be the right kind of leader.

But hey, he's a good warrior, so he's going to get the job done, and that's what they need. So when the Ammonites attack, they go to recruit him, and this is why the background in verses 1 through 3 of chapter 11 is important.

It tells us that the people of Gilead have already kicked him out because he's a, he's kind of a reject, and he doesn't belong to the family, and, but now they come groveling to him.

[ 12 : 52 ] Not because he's suddenly of good character, but because they need someone to lead them into battle. And so he agrees, and they make it official. And that's scene 2. The Lord has checked out.

They're on their own. But instead of doing what it takes to make things right with God, instead of properly submitting themselves to God and really repenting this time to fix that relationship, they just raise up their own deliverer to fight for them.

And he may be a scoundrel, and he may be surrounded by scoundrels. He may not really be leadership material. He's opportunistic, and he's self-serving. He agrees to work for them so that he can be their boss at the end.

There's no indication that he has any of the right motivations. But the Ammonites are attacking, so what do you do? Scene 3.

Okay, here's scene 3, chapter 11, verses 12 to 28. Jephthah's war with the Ammonites. In chapter 11, verse 12, it says, Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, What do you have against me that you have come to me to fight against my land?

[14:12] Well, this is a curious way to start for a couple of reasons. First of all, notice here how he is elevating himself. Why have you come against me?

You've come to me to fight against my land. That's interesting self-centeredness. It's also strange that he's trying to negotiate with the enemy instead of destroying them.

That's not typically how things happen in the book of Judges. And he doesn't show any awareness that the Ammonites have come to attack as judgment from God that God has sent them.

It's like he's just kind of starting from scratch here with these negotiations. But he'll give peace a chance. He'll see if he can talk himself out of this one. And what follows in verses 13 to 27 is a prolonged negotiation with multiple sets of messengers back and forth between the Ammonites and Jephthah.

And in verse 13, the Ammonites say, Well, it's a land dispute. And then in verse 15, Jephthah says, We haven't taken your land. And then in verses 16 to 22, Jephthah recounts Israel's history and he says in verse 26, Look, you've had 300 years to come and take back this land.

[15:25] Don't bother me with it now. And finally, finally the Ammonites send word that the negotiations are over. They're just not going to deal. And it says in verse 28, But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the words of Jephthah that he had sent to him.

This is all crazy. This is not what happens in the book of Jephthah. The deliverer goes out in the power of the Spirit of God and slaughters the enemy. And Jephthah's just sort of like having these long negotiations about land disputes.

And in fact, if you count the words in the original Hebrew, Jephthah's negotiations with the Ammonites are 390 words long. But the entire story to this point has only been 278 words.

So he's just talking and talking and talking and the messengers go back and forth. Jephthah is really trying diplomacy here. But it doesn't work.

They're coming anyway. You know, this is what the headhunter found Jephthah for. This was his big employment contract to run the show.

[16:33] He's a leader. He's a big man. He's going to get it done. But compared to the early judges like Othniel and Ehud, this is pretty lame. What is he negotiating here?

But he's going to have to go to war. All right, scene 4. This is chapter 11, verses 29 to 40. Scene 4. This is Jephthah's evil vow.

Here we come to kind of the climax of the story. In verse 29, there's a surprise that as Jephthah goes out to fight against the Ammonites, the Holy Spirit comes to empower him.

That's a little bit of a surprise because it turns out God is not entirely checked out. This sounds a little bit more like the pattern in the book of Judges. At this crucial moment, God steps in and he is willing to empower Jephthah to have victory here.

And yet, Jephthah can't stop negotiating. He just can't stop negotiating. And so he makes a vow to the Lord. Look at verse 30. Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.

[17:53] I mean, first of all, he does not need to make this vow. We've already been told that the Holy Spirit is upon him to empower him to victory. So this is completely extraneous.

But he's still trying to do things his way. He's still trying to manipulate God further to force the issue to try to find a way to get God onto his side even more.

And so he vows that when he gets home from the battle, whatever comes out of his house, he will kill that thing, that person, that animal and offer it up as a burnt offering.

That does raise the question, what is he expecting here? What does he think will come out of his house? Well, this is an artist's reconstruction from archaeology of an ancient Israelite home.

And you can see here that it was very often that the animals did live inside the house, you know, cows and chickens and goats and things like that. And the people slept upstairs and so on cool nights the warmth from the animal, and probably their smells too, would waft up and keep the people warm up on the second floor.

[ 19 : 02 ] So I suppose it is possible that Jephthah is just being completely foolish here and he's thinking to himself, well, maybe an animal will come out and I will, there's a young goat and I will sacrifice it to the Lord.

But I actually think that he has in mind a person, a member of his family and I've got three reasons for thinking that. Number one, in the structure of the book, we expect him to be worse than Abimelech and worse than Gideon and those are bad guys.

Number two, this gift to God would have to be extravagant because he is trying to force God to help him even though God already said he would. And number three, there are other biblical texts and there are actually other extra-biblical texts that describe exactly this, extraordinary, painful, human sacrifice as a statement of serious devotion to a God to try and get that God to do what you want him to do.

Well, maybe you object and you say, well, surely not. Surely, Jephthah doesn't intend human sacrifice. Certainly, human sacrifice isn't in view here. How could Jephthah mean that?

But I think that is exactly the point. Jephthah either doesn't know or doesn't care what God has said about human sacrifice in his word.

[ 20 : 33 ] He is being completely reckless here. It's a reckless vow. He's intending here to make God an offer that he can't refuse. And this is what happens when a leader is not submitting to God and just makes things up as he goes along.

Now, Jephthah goes out to war against the Ammonites and the narrator doesn't care too much about this battle. It's not that important to him and so he sums the whole thing up in verse 33. He struck them from Aror to the neighborhood of Minith, 20 cities and as far as Ebo-Kerimim with a great blow. Okay, all you need to know is that Jephthah won that battle.

All the details are not important. The focus here is on what happens when Jephthah gets home. It says in verse 34, then after the battle Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah and behold his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances.

She was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And now the great negotiator has found himself in a trap of his own making.

[ 21 : 48 ] It wasn't his second cousin that came out of the house. It wasn't his uncle. It wasn't his wife. It was his only daughter.

And in her innocence she comes out of the house singing and dancing to celebrate her father's victory in battle. And it says in verse 35, as soon as he saw her he tore his clothes and said, Alas, my daughter, you have brought me very low and you have become the cause of great trouble to me for I have opened my mouth to the Lord and I cannot take back my vow.

Well, it sounds a little bit like he's blaming her. You have brought me very low. You have become the cause of my sorrow. But in verse 39 it says, At the end of two months she returned to her father who did with her according to his vow that he had made.

She had never known a man. So he did kill her and he did offer her up as a burnt offering to the Lord and it's important that she had never known a man because that means he did not have a grandchild and that means his family line is dead.

So it's a tragedy but it's not just a tragedy. It's a tragedy filled with irony. She is coming out to celebrate her father's victory but it only causes her own death.

[ 23 : 16 ] She is making music and dancing to celebrate but it brings her father grief. Jephthah, because he was the son of a prostitute, had been thrown out of his own family home and now a child has come out of his home.

He had no share in his father's inheritance and now his own family line has come to an end. His daughter will die a virgin and she does.

Jephthah had meant to secure victory in the present but it cost him his future. This is what it looks like when leaders wing it, when they are so detached from the character and the word and the will and the wisdom of God that they just wing it and they just make it up as they go, it ends in disaster, even personal disaster for Jephthah.

Jephthah has damaged himself and his innocent daughter has been swept up in the mess that he created and has become a victim and unfortunately this is not the last one, it's not the first, or the last innocent woman in this book that is going to be sacrificed as victims by ignorant, evil, Israelite men who are becoming more and more like the Canaanites around them.

Scene 5, this is the last scene, this is in chapter 12, 1 to 7. Jephthah's war, not with the Ammonites, but with the Israelites. This story just keeps getting crazier and crazier.

[ 24 : 54 ] Jephthah has just killed his only daughter and now he's going to have more trouble on his hands because soldiers from the neighboring Israelite tribe of Ephraim are angry. Now these are Israelites.

Look at chapter 12, verse 1. The men of Ephraim 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.

Interestingly, this is another occurrence of the word house, right? He had been kicked out of his house and his daughter came out of his house and now the Ephraimites are going to burn down his house because they're so mad.

And look what Jephthah says in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 12. And as I read this, listen to all the references to I and me and how self-centered he is.

Jephthah said to them in verse 2, 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.

[ 26 : 04 ] Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me? Boy, talk about a narcissist. Everything revolves around this guy, right? 13 references to himself in two verses.

He is completely self-centered. It's all about his own power. But he's not going to take this insult from these neighboring Israelites and so he gathers his men and he goes to war against the Israelites in the Civil War and he strategically, he's good at this, he strategically cuts off their escape and then he identifies them by their Hebrew accent and kills them and actually the word in the original Hebrew is slaughter.

He slaughters them. This is not typical warfare. This is not taking a strategic position on a hill. This is hunting down the Ephraimite tribe and slaughtering them and wiping them out.

And in chapter 12 verse 6 it says that he killed 42,000 of these Israelites from Ephraim. Now think about the comparison between that and what he had done with the Ammonites.

With the Ammonites he negotiates, there's long negotiations, you know, 390 words. The battle's very simple and straightforward. It was probably a strategic victory. But here, against the Ephraimites, short negotiations, tempers flaring.

[ 27 : 27 ] Jephthah wins the battle but that's not good enough because he hunts them down and slaughters them. And the narrative, the story concludes in chapter 12 verse 7. Jephthah led Israel six years, then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in a town in Gilead.

And what's interesting here is it does not say, as it has said earlier in the book, that the land had rest. What a mess. What an absolute disaster this has been.

Okay, let's put all this together. We've got a lot of moving pieces here but let's put this together with six observations and then three aspects of application. Okay, we've got nine parts to go here, six observations and three aspects of application.

These are going to go pretty quick. First of all, six observations of key details in this story. I just want to summarize where we've been. Observation number one, the proper application of the book of Judges is not the sin and leadership problems in the United States or in your business.

Okay, I know some of us are thinking like, oh, I know politicians like that. No, the proper application of the book of Judges is the church because this is about the people of God and in the Old Testament the people of God were in Israel in the covenant relationship with the Lord and now the people of God are located in the church.

[ 28 : 50 ] So we need to be thinking about the church and our own personal spiritual lives.

Observation number two, the narrator is very clear at the beginning of the story that God checks out.

He wants us to see all the chaos and all the selfishness and all the cruelty that comes when people just do whatever they want without submitting to God.

Observation number three, Jephthah is a skilled leader. He is pretty good at what he does. He's a warrior and he does know how to negotiate and he does win his battles.

And that blinds the people to his character flaws. See, that's the temptation, right? That is the central temptation in this story.

That the skill of the leader and his ability to get things done is what blinds people to his character. Observation number four, Jephthah is motivated by power.

[ 29 : 58 ] He agrees to lead because they promise him more authority. Observation number five, Jephthah attempts to solve leadership problems with purely human strategies.

The fact that God had empowered him with his Holy Spirit is kind of beside the point, isn't it? I don't even know, does that even factor in? I don't know. purely human strategies of negotiating, manipulating, and harsh vengeance.

Observation number six, the story ends in disaster. Jephthah has killed his own daughter, his family line is ended, he has started a civil war, and he has slaughtered 49,000 other Israelites.

You know, when we consider all the details of this complex story, and we think about its relationship to the rest of the book of Judges, here is how I would articulate its point in one sentence.

It's not rocket science. A leader of God's people who is not led by God causes great harm. But that's not what leaders are supposed to do.

[ 31 : 19 ] Leaders are supposed to do the opposite of that. They're not supposed to bring great harm, they're supposed to create an environment for flourishing and health and growth. But unless the leaders of God's people are themselves led by God, they bring disaster and pain and trouble.

Now let's talk about the application of this in three aspects, three groups, in the church, in the family, in our personal lives, three groups, and I'm going to try and be specific here as I kind of brainstorm this.

What does this look like in our lives? Group number one. These are the leaders that we think of first in the church. These are the leaders that have official titles like pastor, elder, and deacon.

God has placed these leaders over us for our good. They commit themselves to leading us in our relationship with the Lord. They sacrifice their time.

They carry our burdens. They worry about us. They hear our confession of sin. They visit us when we are sick.

[ 32 : 34 ] They preach and teach God's word faithfully. They create opportunities for us to grow in our faith. They have incredible potential to strengthen our faith and redirect us, and confront us over sin and teach us what is right.

And I have good news. I have good news. Now that I've stepped off the elder team, I can say this without any conflict of interest. We have wonderful pastors and elders and deacons at this church. They are the real deal. And I can tell you that as someone who's been on the inside. They are godly men and women with hearts that seek after God and we are really, really blessed here to have these people in leadership over us.

But if pastors and elders and deacons are not led by God, it is possible to continue in unrepentant sin, to lose confidence in God's word, to seek after power, to mistreat people, and then to just keep right on going with ministry.

You know that's true. You can be the worst person with the worst character, the most godless individual with all of that hidden sin, and you can just keep right on rolling through ministry.

[ 33 : 57 ] It's very easy to do. There's a form of ministry, there's a form of leadership, it looks Christian, it sounds Christian, but it's lifeless and godless.

There's no spiritual power in it because no one is actually listening to God and his word. These leaders talk about him, they refer to God, all the usual language is in place.

On the surface it looks like spirit-empowered ministry, but they're really just doing their own thing. They are leading God's people, but they themselves are not being led by God.

And here's the catch, here's the trick, and I think this comes up in the story of Jephthah, that ministry might thrive. the church might grow, the budget might get bigger, they might have to go out and build a new building because it's getting so big.

But all of those gifts of leadership and networking and communicating clearly are probably leading the people of God toward the wrong thing. and the gifting and the skills that they have are only making that leader more more effective at doing damage.

[ 35 : 21 ] Like Jephthah, he was a skilled leader, but he brought disaster. Let me ask you this question. Let's think hypothetically here. Would Jephthah's daughter have been better off under the rule of the Ammonites or in her father's house?

That's an easy answer. Here's another question. If you were an Ephraimite, who is the bigger threat? The foreign pagan Ammonites pastor or Jephthah?

A pastor or someone who has an official position of authority at a church who is not led by God has the potential to do incredible damage. God is absent.

There is no submission to his word, but the leaders just keep on leading and the ministry just keeps on growing until eventually it crashes and burns. And we've all heard stories like this. It's tragic.

All right, number two, let's talk about a second group, and that is parents. Parents, God has placed us in authority over our children for their good.

[ 36 : 35 ] No one has the ability to influence our children like we do. We are ingrained in our children's hearts and minds in a way that can never be replaced by someone else.

We have incredible power to help them grow and develop and thrive. We can teach our kids to be good conversationalists and to have a variety of interests and to do well in school and to eat healthy and to play sports and to set them up for a successful life.

We can give them a sense of safety and security and a knowledge that they're loved, and that is just going to give them a great foundation for launching off into life.

And we, more than anyone else, are in an influential position to point them toward Jesus. There's a reason that God calls himself our father.

Because dads, we are a daily picture of God to our kids, and we can help them love him. But listen, if we are not ourselves led by God, we can be skilled parents in many ways.

[ 37 : 49 ] But then we can use the great influence that we have over our children to destroy their faith. The problem with Jephthah was not that he was unskilled, it's that he was skilled, and that was why Israel chose him.

The problem with Jephthah was that he was self-centered, interested only in power, he was proud, and he was harsh. And I'm just going to speak to myself here.

If we are not being led by God, parents, we can do incredible damage to our kids. We can teach our children that church is not that important by prioritizing other things on a regular basis.

We can teach our kids that sins should be hidden and ignored rather than be models of confession, apology, and repentance. We can teach our children to be cruel toward other people when we ourselves laugh at what is wrong.

we can give our kids entertainment that is dark and violent and impure and that will harden their hearts to the things of God.

[ 39 : 10 ] We can teach our kids that God is untrustworthy and unsafe when we are unreliable and unfaithful faithful and harsh and when we mistreat them.

As parents, we are in leadership over our kids. That has been given to us by God and they depend on us and they learn from us day after day in close quarters and it's impossible to fake it.

So we have to be dependent on the Lord and to be people of character who do things God's way. Finally, let's talk about a third group of leaders and here I'm going to cheat and just include everyone.

Everyone has influence in certain situations. It doesn't matter who you are. There is someone who looks up to you. There is someone who hopes that you will step up and take the lead in doing what is right.

God has given us to each other to lead in various capacities and at different times and in different ways for our good. And in the church and in our daily lives, we have the opportunity, all of us, to use that influence to benefit other people and to point them toward the Lord.

[ 40 : 28 ] We have a responsibility to use whatever influence and resources we have to make it easier for the people around us and in the household of faith to love and obey God and to make it harder for them to become discouraged and to fall into sin.

We can be leaders in protecting the vulnerable and standing up for those who are weak and need extra support. Jephthah came from a difficult background.

His mother was a prostitute and that meant that he was probably very poor. He had been rejected, probably socially, but certainly by his family. But he had leadership ability and the problem was that instead of caring for the vulnerable and the poor, he exploited them.

He used his influence to secure his own power to increase his own power no matter what it cost the people around him. teenagers.

There are other kids your age who look up to you. You have some kind of influence. There is a popularity system.

[ 41 : 49 ] I know about it. We know. There are other kids who look up to you. What are you doing with that influence? What are you doing with that influence? Are you leading the way to stand up for the kid that everyone picks on and makes fun of?

Are you encouraging others in your school or in your youth group to do what is right? Or are you using your influence, like Jephthah, to gain even more popularity no matter how much the people around you get hurt?

Actually, those are pretty good questions for adults too. Because every time we walk into a room, we look around and we say, who here is greater than I am? And who here is less than I am?

And how can I angle in order to influence, in order to increase my influence and power? It's a constant temptation for all of us. When people look up to us, that is a kind of power.

And we should say to the Lord, Lord, this is a resource. What do you want me to, who do you want me to encourage? Who do you want me to protect? Who do you want me to confront?

[ 43 : 02 ] Who do you want me to organize so that we can all serve you more effectively? How can I use the influence that I have, as small as it may be, in this family of faith and in my personal life in order to honor you?

Or am I just using my own influence to just gain more power? No matter who gets trampled in the process. Now, let's just finish with this, some good news.

The Jephthah story is pretty dark. But God is still there. He is there. And as we watch the book of Judges just disintegrate and degenerate into moral disaster, God is still there.

He's still there in the background, no matter how much Israel sins and rejects God. In fact, it's about to get worse. Samson is worse than Jephthah, and then after that, it really gets dark.

And yet, God is always there. And in fact, the worse things get in the book of Judges, the better God looks by comparison. He is loving. He is patient.

[ 44 : 11 ] He is gentle. He's forgiving. He leads us like a kind shepherd. He lifts us up when we're weak and gives us strength instead of exploiting us.

And that is a model for us as we discern how we can use our influence in the lives of other people. God is worthy of our trust, and it is important that we be led by him.

And then that we lead other people in a way that honors him as well. Let's pray. Father, thinking about all these things just reminds us again that we need you.

We need your Holy Spirit to empower us to do what is right, to point out our blind spots, to help us to see things in a new way.

We know that the story of Jephthah is a negative example, but Lord, we thank you that we serve a God who leads us so well, so kindly and gently, and has provided grace in Jesus Christ for those times when we have not measured up.

[ 45 : 22 ] We know that in our church, in our families, in our parenting, in our ministries, we have a lot of responsibility, and it's hard to always get it right.

And so we pray for your help. In Jesus' name, amen.