

Judges Chapter 12 Part 1

The Holy Spirit sometimes reminds me of questions asked while I was teaching. There was one question about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. “Why should we study about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament?”

That is a good question. Why indeed? So I came up with three reasoned answers.

1. History. We learn from history. The Holy Spirit, as God, acts throughout history. And what we can learn from history answers the important questions of humanity: a) Where did we come from? b) Why are we here? c) What happens when we die. Human history is the narrative of God’s actions from creation to the cross to ultimate glorification of Jesus Christ. History has a purpose. God acts through men, many empowered by the Holy Spirit to accomplish God’s purpose. Of all the books in the Old Testament, Judges is a book in which there is considerable action by God the Holy Spirit. So, what do we learn from the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.
2. Grace. Grace is all that God can do based upon the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Observing the history of the Old Testament and the New Testament we learn that the enablement from the Holy Spirit increased from the Old Testament to the New Testament. We know this by observing the limits of the enablement in the Old Testament and then comparing it to what we have as Christians. Take some of the ministries of the Holy Spirit at salvation. Church Age believers are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. This is new in the Church Age. Every Church Age believer has the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit, making us “a

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temple.” Whereas in the Old Testament Yahweh dwelt in a physical temple made of stone, we are temples with the indwelling of Jesus Christ made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. We are positionally in Jesus Christ as a result of the Baptism of the Spirit placing us in Christ. The Holy Spirit seals us. This grace that we have in the Church Age is much grater in terms of spiritual assets. I haven’t even mentioned spiritual gifts and the empowerment that each believer in the Church Age has.

3. Motivation. Knowing how great a salvation we have, we should be motivated to serve God by walking by faith dependence on the Holy Spirit. We are witnesses via the Old Testament of what believers could do with their spiritual assets. How much more we should be motivated to let the Holy Spirit work through us. Hebrews chapter 11 shows what Old Testament believers accomplished through faith, some specifically mentioned as empowered by the Holy Spirit. How much more should we be able to accomplish?

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

Hebrews 12:2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

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Hebrews 12:3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So, the history of grace should motivate us because we know. And we know because we studied the history of God's actions, his grace in action.

Now the book of Judges moves into a civil war within the sons of Israel. Here is a good introduction by Thomas Constable:

“The writer's emphasis now shifts from Jephthah's foolishness to Ephraim's arrogance. Like Gideon, Jephthah had to deal with disgruntled Ephraimites, but in Jephthah's case the result was a costly civil war.”

“The Ephraimites ("sons of Ephraim") were the Gileadites' neighbors to the west. They resented the fact that Jephthah had not requested their assistance in the war with the Ammonites, probably for both economic (loss of plunder) and social (honor-shame) reasons. We noted earlier that the Ephraimites considered themselves superior to their brethren in some respects (cf. 8:1). Now they foolishly threatened to punish Jephthah for this affront (v. 1)”

Judges 12:1 Then the men of Ephraim were summoned, and they crossed to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the sons of Ammon without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you.”

The men. There is a subtle shift in the vocabulary in this chapter. No longer is Israel referred to as “sons of Israel” or sons of a tribe. No, here

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in this chapter they are now referred to as the “men of Ephraim” and the “men of Gildead.” If we didn’t take notice of it before, now we see that the “sons of Israel” are now contending one against another. Previously Ephraim complained against Gideon because he didn’t call them sooner to join the fight against the Midianites. Then Gideon took action and thrashed the men of Succoth and killed men of Peniel. It may have been understandable as there was cause. But still, these were sons of Israel. Now, in Judges chapter 12 an outcast band of the sons of Israel led by Jephthah are threatened by the “men” of Ephraim. This leads to a massacre of the tribe of Ephraim. As we will see, 42,000 men of Ephraim will be slain.

One note on the term “one thousand” as in 42 thousand. There is debate whether this should be taken literally as 1,000 or whether in a military context it refers to a “unit” of undetermined size.

Summoned. This is the first word in the Hebrew sentence. There are some complexities that I didn’t delve into previously. This word is among those complexities. I bring it up now because it figures into the actions which follow.

There are two issues that are intertwined: There are two meanings of this word (summon/call/cry and gather). These different meanings are related to the stem of the verb *qal* or *niphil*. And the *niphil* can have two emphases either passive or reflexive. Not only that, but this word has “dual orthography.” This means that it is spelled two different ways. All of these come to play in this word in this verse.

I mention this because different translations go in different directions. You may wonder, why did the King James translate it one way but the NASB and NIV translate it differently. Here, I would prefer the way the KJV translated it. But once again, “context, context, context.”

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Judges 12:1 (NASB 1995) Then the men of Ephraim were summoned,...(Passive, who summoned them?)

Judges 12:1 (NIV) The Ephraimite forces were called out ...(Passive, who called them out?)

Judges 12:1 (King James Version) And the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, ...(Reflexive, they summoned themselves, hence they gathered themselves)

The TDOT explains both usages:

“The major emphasis of the basic meaning of the root (of this word) falls on the loud and agonized “crying” of someone in acute distress, calling for help and seeking deliverance with this emotion-laden utterance.”

This meaning (in the *qal*) was employed in chapter 4.

Judges 4:3 The sons of Israel cried to the Lord;

The other meaning is explained:

“The Hebrew verbs take on a specialized meaning in the politico-military sphere, where they refer to the summoning of all able-bodied men (and chariots) to muster as an army before the onset of battle ...and before its end...”

In Judges 12:1, the Ephraimites are gathering themselves together in preparation for fighting against Jephthah. If you translate this “summon,” the natural question is, who summoned them? If, however, you translate this as they gathered themselves (reflexive instead of passive) then you understand that the Ephraimites are doing this of their own accord. And

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when you understand that they are angry at Jephthah for not calling them to battle (read booty and plunder) and are going to threaten Jephthah's life because of it...Warning lights should go off. Have you ever heard a recording of a verbal warning given pilots when something goes wrong with a plane he (or she) is flying? Warning! Warning! When this word is combined with the rest of the text of verse one, that is exactly what this word (they gathered themselves) does. Jephthah did not summon them to battle. God did not summon them to battle. They have summoned themselves to battle against a fellow Israelite. Warning! Warning!

So, here in Judges 12:1, the word is used in the *niphal* and is *reflexive*. It means they gathered themselves, or using a technical military term, they mustered for war.

It is like someone in current events calmly ordering a unit to go on high alert. We might not think much of it in the current context until we realize he just put his NUCLEAR forces on alert. WHAT! Warning! Warning!

I mentioned above that this word has “dual orthography.” It is spelled two different ways. One of those ways is in Judges 12:1. The other way is used in Judges 12:2 suggesting a play on words. More on that when we get to verse 2.

They crossed. Uh Oh. As we have seen, when troops “cross” a border or a river, bad things are in store for someone. The troops from the tribe of Ephraim cross over the Jordan to fight against Jephthah. But he is kinsman, even if he is the son of a prostitute. Jews are not supposed to fight against Jews. This is a sad day. Warning! Warning!

Why did you cross over. Jephthah crossed the Jordan to fight the Ammonites. Ephraim is claiming that Jephthah did not call them and got

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all the glory in defeating the Ammonites. If you will remember, something like this happened before with the tribe of Ephraim.

Judges 8:1 Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they contended with him vigorously.

This very tribe, the tribe of Ephraim, is doing it again. Complaining after the fact that they had not been allowed to share in the glory and the booty.

According to Trent Butler, “The emphasis in Judg 12:1 is on the “us” in the disjunctive clause: literally “but to us you did not call to go with you.”

I remember an officer during Desert Shield who wanted to be in theater for just a day or so. That would mean he would get medals and ribbons for participation. That would help him get promoted. He wasn't particularly interested in being in harm's way. He just wanted the glory. So the tribe of Ephraim.

And don't forget how poorly Ephraim was while fighting for their own land.

Judges 1:2 Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them.

So they may not be particularly good fighters although they did fight for Barak (Judges 5:14).

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There is an interesting play on words here in Judges 12:1. The men of Ephraim gathered themselves together/called themselves together and crossed over the Jordan. They asked Jephthah why he crossed over and didn't call them (a different word than used of Ephraim).

Ephraim gathered themselves – crossed over
Jephthah crossed over and didn't call them to gather together.

Are the men of Ephraim glory hounds? After the fact, they wanted to be in the fight. Of course, the victors in a battle take plunder from the dead corpses of the enemy. Jephthah did what was right. The men of Ephraim are about to do evil.

We will burn your house down on you. Based upon how this is worded, they are threatening to kill him by burning up his house while he is inside. It could also mean that he and his family would be inside. We will get rid of your bloodline.

Judges 12:2 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.

Engaged in a great struggle. The word for struggle is the word that is often used of a legal case as in the Lord has a legal case against you (*rîb*). This was part of Jerubbaal/Gideon's name. Gideon was able to contend (*rîb*) with Ephraim and prevent tribal war. Here Jephthah was contending (*rîb*) with the Ammonites. He first tried the negotiation route, contending with the enemy verbally. Then he had to fight and kill them. Here is an interesting comment from Trent Butler. “Thus Block can conclude that “whereas Gideon's self-deprecating comments are known to contradict his heroic actions, Jephthah's heroic self-laudation flies in the face of the narrator's silence regarding any specific acts of heroism””

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I called you. Ah ha! Apparently Jephthah did initially call the men of Ephraim but they didn't save Jephthah out of the hands of the Ammonites.

The point of the warning here is that it shows how Israel is going down hill. Now they are fighting tribe against tribe. And this is a warning that it will happen again later on in the book of Judges. Israel will almost wipe out one of the 12 tribes!

Judges 12:3 When I saw that you would not deliver me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the sons of Ammon, and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"

They were an unreliable ally.

Judges 12:4 Then Jephthah gathered (not the word used previously in Judges chapter 12) all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim; and the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You are fugitives of Ephraim, O Gileadites, in the midst of Ephraim and in the midst of Manasseh."

Per Trent Butler, "Finally, the narrator shows the basic source of the quarrel: Ephraim has been taunting the people of Gilead, claiming they do not have independent identity. They live totally dependent on Ephraim and Manasseh, the two Joseph tribes." And then the narrator will use this very word to describe the remnants of the tribe that try to cross the Jordan.

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Just an observation. Jephthah, and perhaps other of his “worthless” band had fled their homes because they were chased out. Jephthah became a fugitive because his father had him by a prostitute. Were the men of Ephraim making an oblique reference to his heritage? And more generally to the Gileadites who are not called the sons of the tribes of Joseph that they came from?

Judges 12:5 The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan opposite Ephraim. And it happened when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead would say to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he said, “No,”

Judges 12:6 then they would say to him, “Say now, ‘Shibboleth.’” But he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it correctly. Then they seized him and slew him at the fords of the Jordan. Thus there fell at that time 42,000 of Ephraim.

Shibboleth. Lets take this by points:

1. This word means “ears” as in ears of wheat or ears of corn. It can also mean “stream.”
2. This word is being used as a “password” to verify you are who you say you are.
3. But why can’t the men of Ephraim pronounce it correctly? The sons of Israel have apparently started to drift apart so much so that they now are developing dialects. This is another significant indicator that the individual tribes are drifting away from a unified “Israel” and becoming

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separate political entities. None of them appears to be clinging to Yahweh as king. Instead, they repeatedly abandoned Yahweh.

4. There are some languages that do not have the “sh” sound. Greece is one of those. So many Greeks will mispronounce my name “Sheehan” as “Sirhan.” That sometimes leads to an interesting conversation.

5. English picked up this word, “shibboleth” meaning “a word or saying used by adherents of a party, sect, or belief and usually regarded by others as empty of real meaning.” (Merriam-Webster) There are several other related meanings. Here is a comment by Merriam-Webster

“The Bible's Book of Judges (12:4-6) tells the story of the Ephraimites, who, after they were routed by the Gileadite army, tried to retreat by sneaking across a ford of the Jordan River that was held by their enemy. The Gileadites, wary of the ploy, asked every soldier who tried to cross if he was an Ephraimite. When the soldier said "no," he was asked to say shibbōleth (which means "stream" in Hebrew). Gileadites pronounced the word "shibboleth," but Ephraimites said "sibboleth." Anyone who didn't pronounce the initial sh was killed on the spot. When English speakers first borrowed shibboleth, they used it to mean "test phrase," but it has acquired additional meanings since that time.”

**Judges 12:7 Jephthah judged Israel six years.
Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was
buried in one of the cities of Gilead.**

Comment on Ephraim from Trent Butler:

“The progressively deteriorating picture of Ephraim from Ehud to here indicates otherwise. The tribe who could not drive out the residents of Gezer (1:29) followed Ehud’s leadership (3:27) and Deborah’s (5:14). They then obeyed Gideon (7:24) but then complained at not being the first ones called (8:1). Having to face

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the Ammonites proved a major obstacle for Ephraim and other tribes (10:9), but then Ephraim became distressed when not called to face the Ammonites (12:1), leading to a civil war and the almost complete destruction of the tribe (12:4). Finally comes the religious heresy of an Ephraimite and a Levite (chaps. 17-18) and the Ephraimite Levite of chap. 19. One finds it difficult to see the Ephraimites holding any right view in the perspective of storyteller, author, or reader/listener.”

This tells us some of the “bad” stuff concerned with the tribe of Ephraim in the book of Judges. But Ephraim may have had a superiority complex because of the history of the tribe. Here is some helpful insight from Merrill Unger:

“The first incident in Ephraim’s history is the blessing of his grandfather, Jacob. Contrary to the intention of Joseph, Ephraim was preferred to Manasseh by Jacob, and upon him was conferred the birthright blessing (Gen. 48:17-19).”

“The representative of Ephraim among the spies was the great hero, “Oshea, the son of Nun,” whose name was changed by Moses to the more distinguished form (Joshua) in which it is familiar to us.

So, Jephthah was a judge. But, did God appoint him as judge or did he assume the role based upon his status as victorious military commander and “chief?” The narrator does not tell us. And it was only for six years.

Was buried in one of the cities of Gilead (NASB). There is a textual problem with where he is buried. The Young’s Literal Translation brings this out.

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Judges 12:7 ...and is buried in [one of] the cities of Gilead.

It is literally in/among the cities (plural) of Gilead. Hence, translators insert “one of.” The other alternative is that they dismembered his body and sent pieces to the different cities which is not likely. Yet, exactly that will happen later on in the book of Judges.