

A Hero Will Rise

The Book of Judges

Text

Judges 12:1-15

Topic

Because in their dialect they could not pronounce the **SH** sound, the men of Ephraim were identified and killed by fellow Israelites as they attempted to retreat

Title

“SH-ibling Rivalry”

Introduction

Does anyone really say, “po-tah-to?”

I ask on account of the old Ella Fitzgerald song,

*You like potato and I like potahto
You like tomato and I like tomahto
Potato, potahto, tomato, tomahto
Let's call the whole thing off*

Ahead of our trip to Kentucky in May, I practiced my pronunciation of *Lou-Ah-Vul*.

City names can be tough. One of the brothers in our fellowship once told me he was going to Ge-la Bend, Arizona.

George W. Bush was made fun of for saying “nuk-u-lar,” instead of *nuclear*. Jimmy Carter was also guilty of mispronouncing it, sometimes saying “nuk-u-lar,” sometimes drawling, “nukeer.”

While we’re on that word, I didn’t know this, but former President Dwight Eisenhower and Edward Teller, the father of the H-bomb, also said “nuk-u-lar.”

In the episode of *Seinfeld*, “The Chinese Restaurant,” George Constanza is waiting for a call from his girlfriend. The maitre d calls out, *Cartwright* several times, which George obviously ignores. When he asks if a call came for *Constanza*, the maitre d says, “Yes, I called out, *Cartwright, Cartwright*, just like that, nobody came up, I hung up.”

Mispronunciation was no laughing matter in the story we are going to read today in the Book of Judges. After picking a fight they wouldn't win, the men of the tribe of Ephraim tried to retreat home by crossing the fords of the Jordan. The Gileadite army of Jephthah controlled the crossing and was out for blood.

Jdg 12:5 The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites *arrived*. And when *any* Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "*Are you an Ephraimite?*" If he said, "No,"

Jdg 12:6 then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce *it* right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan. There fell at that time forty-two thousand Ephraimites.

As we will see, this was a terrible sibling rivalry. It was brother versus brother, to the death.

Christians are brothers and sisters in the Lord. Is the church free from sibling rivalry? Hardly.

Writing to the Christian brothers and sisters in Corinth, the apostle Paul said,

1Co 3:3 for you are still carnal. For where *there are* **envy, strife, and divisions among you**, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere men*?

Envy, strife, and division characterized the tribes in our verses. They can characterize us, as the church.

We're not going to see a solution as the men of Gilead murder the Ephraimites. It serves as more of a warning.

However, twenty-three years later, God raises-up a judge from the tribe of Ephraim, demonstrating for us His desire for unity among His people.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points (that are going to be a pronunciation nightmare for me): #1 Don't Divide Over Your Personal Shibboleths, and #2 Do Unite Despite Your Personal Sibboleths.

#1 Don't Divide Over
Your Personal Shibboleths

(v1-7)

“Shibboleth” means *stream* in Hebrew. Because of this incident in Judges, it has come to mean, “a custom, principle, or belief distinguishing a particular class or group of people.”

You and I can, and do, have our shibboleths. Some are essential points of biblical doctrine and practice. But others are things we can agree to disagree agreeably on.

There **are** things worth fighting for in the church. Jude, in his letter, encourages us to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (v3). There are essential doctrines that we cannot compromise.

Of course, by “contend earnestly,” Jude did not mean we murder nonbelievers.

And we are to “contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints,” which I would take to mean essential doctrines.

Let me give you an historical example of a shibboleth failure on the part of the church. I’m quoting from an article titled, *Persecution of the Anabaptists*.

The term "Anabaptist" was used to describe and define certain Christians during the Reformation era. These Christians rejected infant baptism, choosing instead believer's baptism. Since many of them had been baptized in their infancy, they chose to be baptized as *believing* adults. So their enemies called them *Anabaptists* - "re-baptizers." For their "crime of believer's baptism," Anabaptists were heavily persecuted during the 16th century and into the 17th, by both Roman Catholics and Protestants.

We are, in practice, Anabaptist. We would therefore have been severely persecuted by Reformers like Martin Luther.

What kind of persecution? **Anabaptism was declared a capital offense.** You could be executed by beheading or drowning. The article goes on to say, “Thousands sealed their faith with their blood. When all efforts to halt the movement proved vain, the authorities resorted to desperate measures. Armed executioners and mounted soldiers were sent in companies through the land to hunt down the Anabaptists and kill them on the spot without trial or sentence.”

- Baptism as a doctrine is a shibboleth we must contend for - but not by murder.
- The method of baptism, and whether it be infant or believer’s, is worth disagreeing over agreeably.

Don’t get me wrong: I’m totally convinced that the Bible teaches believer’s baptism. But I’m not going to divide over methods of baptism with sincere Christians.

Having said all that, as we work through the story, be listening to the Lord to identify your personal shibboleths - the nonessential ones that cause envy, division, and strife.

Jdg 12:1 Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!"

Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons born to Joseph in Egypt. Even though Manasseh was the firstborn, when it came time for Grandpa Jacob to pronounce the patriarchal blessing upon him, he blessed Ephraim first. The tribe of Ephraim would therefore be greater than Manasseh.

There are times in the Bible where the northern ten tribes of Israel are collectively called Ephraim. They were a mighty tribe, and it seemed to go to their heads.

Earlier in the Book of Judges, we saw the men of Ephraim upset with Gideon because they weren't called to the battle. Gideon was able to resolve the conflict with diplomacy.

This time they were upset with Jephthah and the men of Gilead. They seem pretty worked up, threatening to "burn [their houses] down on [them] with fire."

Why the angst? There may have been some sibling rivalry. You see, the region of Gilead was in the territory inherited by Manasseh. Big brother Manasseh who was passed over by Jacob got the glory over the Ammonites, and little brother Ephraim with the blessing was envious.

A spiritual heart-exam would have revealed that the men of Ephraim thought more highly of themselves than they ought.

Have you ever been overlooked in the church? Do you think you're being overlooked right now? Did someone else get chosen, or recognized, instead of you?

If you think you are Ephraim to their Manasseh, then you were probably overlooked so that God could show you your heart.

Jdg 12:2 And Jephthah said to them, "My people and I were in a great struggle with the people of Ammon; and when I called you, you did not deliver me out of their hands.

Jephthah thought he had sent a call out to Ephraim. From his perspective, they didn't answer, so he proceeded without them.

It may have been a serious, but simple, misunderstanding. I submit to you that many, if not most, church conflicts are serious, but simple, misunderstandings.

Love believes all things. That's a Christian way of saying that we give others the benefit of the doubt - but with more emphasis on believing the best of them, and not the worst.

Jdg 12:3 So when I saw that you would not deliver *me*, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the people of Ammon; and the LORD delivered them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day to fight against me?"

In Proverbs 18:17 we read, "The first *one* to plead his cause *seems* right, Until his neighbor comes and examines him."

Jephthah's side of the story seemed compelling. He clearly had no malice. The Ephraimites were totally overreacting.

Problem resolved? Hardly.

Jdg 12:4 Now Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. And the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, because they said, "You Gileadites *are* fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites *and* among the Manassites."

We don't know when they insulted the Gileadites. If this is chronological, it seems that this was their response to Jephthah's explanation.

It revealed an underlying cause for their confrontation. It wasn't that they weren't called to fight. It was that they believed Jephthah and his men were trailer-trash.

Remember that Jephthah was the son of a prostitute. His father took him in, and raised him as his own, but once dad died, Jephthah's family ran him off.

In Gilead, Jephthah attracted an army of similar misfits.

The description by the men of Ephraim was somewhat accurate. It should have been praiseworthy to see that God had used Jephthah and his men despite their social status. Do we not rejoice at some of the odd characters God saves by His grace?

They intended it to hurt. It did; and Jephthah, who we've seen as quite a diplomat, abandoned diplomacy in favor of conflict.

He may have had no choice. After all, the Ephraimites came to "fight" - meaning they were armed.

Both sides fueled the fire.

As I indicated earlier, there are no principles here for how to avoid open conflict. It serves more of a warning at the terrible consequences of envy, strife, and division.

I mentioned Paul's rebuke of the Christians in Corinth. One of the ways they were fighting one another was by litigation. They were suing one another. He said, in part,

1Co 6:1 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?

1Co 6:5 I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?

1Co 6:6 But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!

1Co 6:7 Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather *let yourselves* be cheated?

1Co 6:8 No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and *you do* these things *to your* brethren!

Did you catch what the apostle counseled? To the one suing he said, "Accept wrong... Let yourself be cheated."

To the "cheater," he said, "you yourselves do wrong."

Admit you are wrong; or allow yourself to be wronged. Whatever you do, **do not go to court.**

If you must pursue the issue, do so in the church. Let believers judge the situation, and give their abiding counsel.

Jdg 12:5 The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites *arrived*...

This tells us that the men of Ephraim were defeated, and retreating.

Jdg 12:5 The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites *arrived*. And when *any* Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?"

In *We Were Soldiers*, Mel Gibson portrays Lt. General Hal Moore in the Battle of Ia Drang in Vietnam. I recall the General being masterful at strategy - anticipating everything the enemy would do.

Jephthah, or one of his lieutenants, had the foresight to cut-off the Ephraimite's escape route.

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The Ephraimites had insulted the parentage of Jephthah. Now the Ephraimites had to deny their own heritage in order to live.

But it was a trap, because they were asked to pronounce something that no Ephraimite could.

I Googled "U.S. Dialects," and found a map showing 24 regions of American English.

In *Jaws*, Chief Brody is a city boy transplanted to Amity. His wife corrects his pronunciation of the word "yard," saying, "In Amity, you say, *yahd*."

He replies, "There in the *yahd*, not too *fah* from the *cah*."

Jdg 12:7 And Jephthah judged Israel six years...

That's not long at all. We can't read anything into it, however, because Jephthah served at the Lord's will, not his own.

Are you able to identify any personal shibboleths?

Remember, as Christians we do have shared shibboleths. They are the foundational doctrines of biblical Christianity.

One theologian suggested, "A reasonable list of fundamentals would necessarily begin with these doctrines explicitly identified in Scripture as non-negotiable: the absolute authority of Scripture over tradition, justification by faith alone, the deity of Christ, and the Trinity.

The apostle Paul explained,

1Co 15:1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,
1Co 15:2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you - unless you believed in vain.
1Co 15:3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
1Co 15:4 and that He was buried and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

The good folks over at gotquestions.org list the following as "the essentials of the Christian faith": (1) The deity of Christ, (2) Salvation by grace through faith, (3) Salvation through Jesus Christ alone, (4) The resurrection of Jesus Christ, (5) The Gospel, (6) Monotheism, and (7) The Trinity.

Michael Svigel, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, said this:

The Greek original of our word “orthodox” means *correct opinion*. In Christian theology it refers to the correct views on the essential truths of the Christian faith and the proper observance of central Christian practices. As a rule of thumb, orthodoxy is that which has been believed and practiced “everywhere, always, and by all.” Orthodoxy thus means the right opinion about crucial doctrines and practices in keeping with what true Christians have always believed about these things. Some of the beliefs that pass the general rule of what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all include: (1) The triune God as Creator and Redeemer, (2) The fall and resulting depravity, (3) The person and work of Christ, (4) Salvation by grace through faith, (5) Inspiration and authority of Scripture, (6) Redeemed humanity incorporated into Christ, [and] (7) The restoration of humanity and creation.

We contend earnestly for these, and other essentials, and must divide from any who do not hold to them.

But back to the question: **Are you able to identify any personal shibboleths?**

One example is Sabbath worship. There is no prohibition to worshipping on the seventh day. It’s easily provable that the early Gentile church worshipped on the first day of the week - on Sunday. But if you want to worship instead on Saturday, go for it.

It becomes a personal shibboleth when sabbatarians say you *must* worship on Saturday, and that to worship on Sunday is sin.

Often shibboleths are not doctrinal at all. They are your personal behavioral standards that you demand other believer’s meet in order for you to fellowship with them. They have to do with music and movies; piercings and priorities. Things like that.

Richard Baxter's famous saying is still appropriate: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

#2 Do Unite Despite Your Personal Sibboleths

(v8-15)

Three judges of whom we know little bridge the gap between Jephthah and Samson.

Jdg 12:8 After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel.

Jdg 12:9 He had thirty sons. And he gave away thirty daughters in marriage, and brought in thirty daughters from elsewhere for his sons. He judged Israel seven years.

Jdg 12:10 Then Ibzan died and was buried at Bethlehem.

There's an immediate contrast to Jephthah, who had only one daughter who lived-out her life as a virgin in living sacrifice to God.

Ibzan is a stark contrast to Jephthah. Where Jephthah had only one daughter, Ibzan had thirty, besides thirty sons; and he acquired thirty daughters in marriage. This tells us that God can use us despite our personal circumstances. The way the apostle Paul once put it, we learn how to serve God whether we are abased or abounding:

- Many a believer lives a life that is abased. Maybe they can't have children; or they have an affliction. They've made mistakes. Their upbringing was horrible. Well, you're a Jephthah, who is called to serve.
- Many a believer lives a life that is abounding. You've got a wife, and kids, and grandkids; a career that's demanding but going

well. You're an Ibzan with no excuse for not stepping up to serve the Lord.

Jdg 12:11 After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years.

Jdg 12:12 And Elon the Zebulunite died and was buried at Aijalon in the country of Zebulun.

Come on, God! Give me at least one thing Elon did; one episode.

It doesn't mean his service was insignificant. He is, after all, in the Bible.

I'll tell you what I glean from Elon. Publicity breeds notoriety, which brings scrutiny. Most of us are better off being obscure. We couldn't handle the pressures of the spotlight.

I'm sure a few of the men and women we meet in the Bible wish there were fewer details about their failures.

Jdg 12:13 After him, Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel.

Jdg 12:14 He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy young donkeys. He judged Israel eight years.

Let's call him Grandpa Abdon. As far as I researched it, he is the only judge who is noted for his grandsons.

His sons and his grandsons rode around on seventy donkeys. My dad was a Shriner. He was part of a precision go kart troupe that performed in local parades.

I wonder if these sons and grandsons were a precision donkey troupe, riding through Israel performing at farmer's markets and fairs?

Doubtful... But who knows?

Jdg 12:15 Then Abdon the son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mountains of the Amalekites.

Ah. Abdon was an Ephraimite. That brings us full circle - at least with regard to the verses we've read today. After the Ephraimites were nearly wiped-out, twenty-three years later one of them is God's choice to be Israel's hero.

He was a sibboleth guy, who might have harbored a deep resentment, but God saw him as able to judge - and that meant he was able to unite where there had once been envy, strife, and division.

We can think of Christianity as having a multitude of dialects. I'm not talking about languages, although that's true, too. I'm talking about differences in how we worship and serve the Lord.

Let's be sure our shibboleths are essential and not personal, preserving unity while contending for the faith.