

October 25, 2009 Temple Baptist Church, Jamestown, ND
TITLE: AN OWNERSHIP QUESTION, Judges 10-12 (*Life Stranger Than Fiction*
#6)

Recently I sold our van. One of the things one does when selling a vehicle is to sign over the title to the new owner, without which he or she would not have a legal claim. Determining ownership is important.

Ownership is at the heart of the Middle East disputes in the West Bank, Jerusalem and Israel. Children squabbling over toys deal with ownership. Ownership fuels the debate over the possible use of the 1 cent sales tax in Jamestown to be used for infrastructure. Ownership changed hands with the sale of 4,400 acre Big Little Missouri Ranch sale last week. Ownership is part of the debate over health care reform, oil drilling in the western part of ND and federal stimulus spending. If we truly own these things as U.S. citizens, we also own the corresponding debt, which we would rather not consider.

What do you own . . . a business, a home, vehicles, clothing, tools, toys, property? Today's message in our series *Life Stranger Than Fiction* is about a dispute that hinges on ownership. Please turn with me to Judges 10. Read Judges 10:6-12:7.

Things are not good for God's people. They are in a world of hurt because **God is giving them what they want.** They think that serving the gods of the peoples around them is a good idea, forgetting that God defeated all these nations. What does He do? Verse 7. **He sells them.** Becomes angry and sells them to the Ammonites. How do their new owners treat them? Shatter and crush them. Severe oppression for eighteen years. **They are not free.** They have to carry their books, give them their lunch money, say "Uncle" all the time, and do other humiliating things. This is all taking place in the area east of the Jordan, in the region called Gilead where the tribes of Gad and Manasseh reside. Eventually the domination is so complete the Ammonites cross the Jordan River and oppress the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Ephraim. (See map.)

How do the people respond? Verse 10. They cry out to the LORD, admit they've sinned and forsaken Him for the Baals. What is God's reply? *"Didn't I save you from the hands of these nations? You left me for their gods. You are serving the gods of the nations I defeated. Go to these gods you chose and cry to them. They, they will save you."*

What's the problem? **These gods don't save. They can't save.** There is an allure to the worship, but ultimately it is a sensual ritual without substance. They aren't worshipping the LORD. God's people admit again they've sinned, but this time they **take steps to remove the foreign gods** from their midst and begin serving the LORD. In His mercy God acts.

We learn of Jephthah, a mighty warrior, who is the son of an Israelite and a prostitute. Unlike Abimelech, he doesn't even have legal claim through his mother. He is driven from the region and men not noted for their character gather around him, **men looking for leadership, but who relate to being rejected themselves**. They live in a region to the NE of Gilead.

Problems get worse. Now the Ammonites are giving the Israelites wedgies and they just can't take it anymore. The people all know of Jephthah, but they didn't let him into their club and now what can they do? Eventually they humble themselves and ask Jephthah to be their leader so he can lead them to fight the Ammonites. To his credit Jephthah will only agree to lead if they follow the LORD. They agree, taking an oath before the LORD as witness.

Jephthah then sends messengers to the king of the Ammonites asking why they are treating the Israelites with such cruelty. The Ammonite king claims they stole some of his property. Jephthah replies with a letter and a history lesson. Three hundred years earlier Moses led the people through this region, going around Edom as requested. The Amorites attacked the people of Israel, led by their king Sihon. The Moabites also tried to defeat the Israelites. The LORD defeated them and gave them the land of **Sihon the Amorite (not the Ammonite)**. The Moabite king Balak never contested it, although the Amorite land may have belonged to them at one time (cf. Numbers 21:29). The **people of Israel have lived there 300 years with no one questioning property ownership**. The LORD will be the judge regarding this matter.

Bottom line. **This property has never been yours. Get your history straight . . . and get out of here**. The Spirit of the LORD comes upon Jephthah and he leads the armies to defeat the Ammonites. Before going to battle he **makes a rash vow** to the LORD that if he is victorious, the first thing that exits his house after he returns will belong to the LORD. The first thing is his only child, his daughter. Scholars continue to debate exactly what takes place next. Does Jephthah sacrifice his daughter, which is clearly against the teaching of God's word, and could be reversed with a payment of silver, or does Jephthah give his daughter to serve the LORD without having the opportunity to marry and have children? Either way **Jephthah's line will be completely extinguished**.

Once again the **Ephraimites**, who think of themselves as "the west river" tribe above all others, **get their feelings hurt** when Jephthah doesn't bother to ask them to join him in the fight. Jephthah reminds them that their help was requested in the past, but they didn't bother to respond. So, he decides to fight the Ammonites without them. They call Jephthah and his fellow Gileadites fugitives (*renegades*-NIV, 12:4) from Ephraim and Manasseh. Jephthah, who has already whipped the Ammonites, is in no mood for another slur and teaches this proud tribe some respect. Interestingly the "fugitives" (*survivor*-NIV, 12:5) of

the Ephraimite army that don't make it back west across the Jordan are killed because they can't pronounce the "sh" in Shibboleth.

It's like the tourist who asks, "Is it Hawaii or Havaii?" The man responds, "Havaii." The tourist says, "Thank you." The man replies, "You're welcome."

Jephthah is a story of ownership. Please consider these questions with me.

- ◆ Am I grateful to God? How am I expressing it?

Framing the story of Jephthah are the stories of other leaders who only receive two or three verses describing their leading God's people . . . Tola and Jair before Jephthah and Ibzan, Elon and Abdon following him. These are only **regional leaders**, but God uses them to help His people. 10:6 begins . . . *Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD*; 10:7 says that the LORD *sold them*. These verses imply that life used to be better, but it was squandered.

Where are the **gratitude for His deliverance and the devotion for His mercy**? One of the things God has been doing in my life is allowing me to see His hand at work . . . in so many ways. He is revealing Himself and His work not just to me, but to so many of us: joining in His work in Africa, seeing how He continues to lead and provide for the new facility, helping families in need. He is so good to us. He **continues to pour out His blessings**. Yes, some of those have come through very hard times, but He continues to work through you and others, allowing us to see and even join Him in His work.

Dave Patzer challenged our Sunday School class last week about the issue of contentment. Contentment, I believe, begins with gratitude for Who God is and all He does. Paul's comments at the end of the letter of Philippians (4:12) conclude a theme he begins at the very beginning. *I thank my God every time I remember you.* Philippians 1:3

The Bible says, *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

When the Israelites aren't grateful, when they forget, **their eyes and their lives wander to serving other gods**. Warren Wiersbe (*Be Available*) comments, *The essence of idolatry is enjoying God's gifts but not being grateful to the Giver, and Israel was guilty . . . Thanksgiving glorifies God and is a strong defense against selfishness and idolatry.*

What are ways to express our gratitude to God? (Audience participation.) The Bible says I express my gratitude to God by the way I treat other people, especially those in need, by the attitude of my heart when I give, by following the teaching of His word. *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as*

members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. . . And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:15, 17

- ◆ Is anything standing in the way of my receiving God's help?

What was obstructing God's help for Israel? Sin. Following other gods that do not save. What are some of the gods we serve? (Audience participation.) Whatever takes significant time, finances and attention is something that I serve: computer, internet, TV, movies, texting, sports, hobbies, my ambitions and goals. **The gods Israel served could neither save nor satisfy. The gods we serve promise much, but leave us wanting more.** God said to Israel when they first called to Him in their distress, *I am under no obligation to answer, because you insist on following other gods* (10:13).

The people back up their words with actions. That's what **real repentance** is, **turning from our way to God's way.** A heart decision is made effective by the gift of faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit. God asks, *Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? . . . Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.* Isaiah 55:2, 3 The Bible says that when there is that sincerity of our heart cry to God, *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* Romans 10:13 (cf. Joel 2:32)

- ◆ Do I follow the Lord as I lead?

Jephthah insists that the people follow the LORD, not other gods. He makes this a clear condition to their request that he be their leader. *The LORD gives* (11:9); *the LORD is our witness* (11:10); *he repeated all his words before the LORD* (11:11). Jephthah gives credit for all success to the LORD: *the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon* (11:21); *the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out* (11:23); *the LORD our God has given us* (11:24); *let the LORD, the Judge, decide* (11:27); *the LORD gave them into his hands* (11:32); *the LORD gave me the victory* (12:3). **Jephthah** gives, even **insists**, that **the LORD receives all the credit.** Unfortunately, Jephthah also needs some correction with regard to his vow, but no one speaks to him.

Even leaders follow. So many times God's people are asked to lead but then abandon their Christian principles and values for those of the organization or group. What an opportunity to **give the glory to God and see Him at work.** Jesus says, *"Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."* John 12:26 To all who want to learn from Jesus, to be His disciples, His followers, He says, *"Follow me."* (cf. Matthew 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; John 1:43; 10:3-5; 27)

- ◆ What have I promised God?

Jephthah makes a tragic vow and no one corrects him. The **LORD did not give Jephthah success because of his vow**. The Old Testament gives instruction about how to make a vow, the seriousness of it and how to redeem (or buy back, as it were) what is dedicated to the LORD (cf. Numbers 30; Deuteronomy 23:21-25; Leviticus 27; Ecclesiastes 5:1-6). The Bible teaches that vows are serious matters. Jesus criticized the people for their elaborate system of making vows or oaths that paid more attention to the words than the heart (cf. Matthew 5:33-37).

Have you promised something to God, but have gone back or not carried through on that promise? Why? Was it a promise rashly made that goes against the teaching of God's word? Then confess it to God and He will release you. Or **is the reason you have not kept that promise because you are not willing to trust God to fulfill what you believe He is asking of you?**

When I ask Jesus into my life, it is not so much that I take a little of Jesus, but that I give myself to Him to be used however He sees fit for His purpose and service. It is not a burden, but a joy. At times it is scary, but I know that nothing can ultimately separate me from His hand. God reminds the believers in Corinth (as well as you and me) what it means when we say we follow Jesus. *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.* 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (cf. 7:23)

Conclusion. It's a question of ownership. When I call Jesus, Lord, I am saying that He is the One I follow. He is the One I go to for help. He receives my gratitude for saving me from the path of sin to live for Him with joy. **Who has the title of your life? Pray.** (Conclude with 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.)