

Judges 12:1-7

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 February 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] If you come to church to escape from all the chaos and mess that so often dominates our lives and our world, then I can only apologize, because this evening I want to talk about mess.

As I read chapter 12 of Judges, the first seven verses, the verses that we've read already this evening, the words that sum up my response are these words, What a mess!

Now that may not sound very theologically precise, may not even sound very spiritually helpful, but I think it's a pretty accurate summary of what we have described before us here in God's Word.

What a mess! This is one serious mess that the people of God are in. Now, I think we can probably be agreed that that is an accurate description.

We could use other language, but in summary, in essence, that is a fair description of what we have described here in these verses.

[1 : 2 3] But even if we are agreed that it is indeed a mess that is described here, you could ask the question, and it would be a reasonable, a legitimate question, what profit is there in wallowing in the mess for 30 minutes or so on a Sunday evening?

Perhaps some might imagine, or imagine some might be of the view, and some might cry out, not audibly, I'm sure, but give me the gospel.

Tell me about Jesus. Give me the gospel. I don't want to hear about Jephthah and Ephraim and massacres and killings and wars and battles. What do I gain from that?

Give me the gospel. And that's, of course, a very worthy cry to ask that it would be the gospel that we would focus on and concentrate our attention on.

But here's the thing. The thing is that we can't properly understand and appreciate the gospel, God's good news, without recognizing and, in some measure, understanding the mess.

[2 : 3 5] The mess the world is in, the mess the church is often in, and the mess that we are in. And so, there's a reason why the Bible speaks of and tells us about and describes times and circumstances in which God's people here, very particularly, as we'll see in a moment, God's people find themselves in one serious mess.

There are three things that I want us to think about, or three things I want to do this evening as we think about this passage. First of all, to describe the mess.

You can read the verses, and that alone gives us some idea of the mess. But we probably do need to just think a little bit more and get a little bit of the background to have a greater, I hope, a greater understanding of the mess.

So, the first objective is simply that, to describe the mess. But then, the next thing we want to do is to explain the mess. If the first question is, what is going on?

And the second question is, why is this going on? Why are the people of God in such a mess? So, describe the mess, explain the mess, but then, finally, we want to think about sorting out the mess.

[3 : 59] Is that possible? Who is able to sort out the mess? So, these are the three things we want to think about. But first of all, then, let's describe the mess.

Now, there's a lot that we could say, but I think three words sum up the mess before us. Division, pride, and violence. And as we'll see, they're all very much connected.

One flows from another. Indeed, the order in which we're going to mention the words probably isn't the order in which they occur. There isn't really the causal aspect by looking in the order that we're going to.

But bear with me, and let's just think about these three words that I hope will give some greater insight into the mess that the people were in. The first word is division.

You know, we read these verses about the men of Ephraim and, you know, this conflict that they have with Jephthah and the Gileadites. And it's possible for us, even if we have a fair measure of biblical knowledge and background, but if for whatever reason we have less, then it's even more likely, it's possible that we could make the mistake of thinking that, well, here we have a scenario that we see so often.

[5 : 22] You have a bunch of pagans attacking God's people, and, well, there's a battle, and God helps His own, and, well, they win the battle, they win the victory.

We've come across that already on several occasions in the book of Judges, but that is not what we have here. Here the situation is very different and very much more serious in many ways.

And the reason it's so much more serious is that the Ephraimites aren't a bunch of pagans. The Ephraimites are one of the tribes of Israel. They are the ones who are opposing Jephthah and the men of Gilead, who also belong to the nation of Israel.

The conflict arises because of the Ephraimites' complaint that Jephthah had not involved them in the battle against the Ammonites.

We read what happens there at the beginning of chapter 12, that the men of Ephraim called out their forces, crossed over to Zaphon and said to Jephthah, Why did you go to fight the Ammonites without calling us to go with you?

[6 : 31] And then you have this great threat, not really even a threat, a declaration of what they're going to do. Burn your house over your head. And then there follows a discussion.

Jephthah says, Well, I did call you, but you didn't respond. And there they have this argument about what had happened or what had not happened. But the point is that the division here is within God's people.

These are not the enemies of God's people attacking from outwith, but rather these are God's people being attacked and undermined from within.

Now, with regard to the Ephraimites or the men of Ephraim, we've been here before in chapter 8 and verse 1 in the context of Gideon's ministry as a judge over Israel.

A very similar situation had arisen. Let's just remind ourselves in chapter 8 of Judges and in verse 1. Again, this is following a great victory that had been won by Gideon, or certainly in great measure the victory had been won.

[7 : 48] There were still some mopping up to do, but in great measure the victory had been won. And what do we find? What problem arises? Well, there we read it. Now, the Ephraimites, the same tribe, asked Gideon, Why have you treated us like this?

Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian? And they criticized him sharply. Now, if you remember what happens, Gideon is a lot more diplomatic. He manages to pacify them, and it doesn't all end in violence.

But it's the same issue. The Ephraimites, resentful of the fact that they hadn't been involved, that they couldn't take any of the glory from this great victory because Gideon hadn't involved them, or so the accusation.

Well, almost exactly the same thing happens now with Jephthah. The nation is divided.

The tribes are divided. They are increasingly opposed one to another. Not all of them, no doubt, but within the tribes there are these rivalries and this opposition that evidences itself on this occasion.

[9 : 00] Of course, we know that the tribes were historically one big family, each tribe owing its origin to one of the sons of Jacob, with the slight complication that Ephraim and Manasseh, precisely one of the tribes that are involved in this, were the sons of Joseph, so the grandsons of Jacob.

But they were all part of one family. But now, of course, centuries have passed. Now they are far from being one big happy family.

Now they are divided tribe against tribe. So division. This is the mesh that God's people are in.

Now if we were to fast forward to our own day and say, well, what has that got to say to us today? Well, the modern day equivalent of the circumstances that we find described here in chapter 12 would not be the church being opposed by enemies from outwith, by growing secularization, or those who are opposed to the church's beliefs and morals and are attacking us.

If indeed we are being attacked by those outside of our number, that wouldn't be the application. The application would rather be a much more common scenario, and that is the church divided from within.

[10 : 29] And I think we'd have to agree that that is not an uncommon circumstance, be that at the level of a congregation. There can be divisions within a congregation.

We, of course, do and must seek to cultivate and treasure our unity and our harmony, but there can be, on occasion, divisions within a congregation, within a denomination, or across the wider Christian community.

We can be divided, and we can often oppose one another. Isn't it the case often that those that are, in some ways, nearest to us, closest to us, they're the ones that often can be most vehement in their opposition to us, and it goes, of course, in both directions.

We aren't always the victims. We can also be the perpetrators. So, in describing the mess, we can say this, that the people of God were divided.

But the next word that I suggested would help to describe the mess is the word pride. In a sense, this is entering into the realm of the why.

[11 : 40] But let me just comment on this word pride. The Ephraimites, and in this sense we're being descriptive, were, or they considered themselves to be, very much one of the special tribes.

We find this time and time again in the history that's recorded for us in the Old Testament, at different occasions when it's clear that they think of themselves as a cut above the rest.

And when we think about that, and when we do try and just cast our minds back to the history of it, there is a sobering irony in this when we remember the story of Joseph.

Joseph was the father of Ephraim. And you remember all the problems. Joseph's spoiled status and his pride in being better than all his brothers.

Remember all the problems that brought to the original family. Now, isn't there a very sad irony that centuries pass and we find the same thing being repeated on a grander scale.

[12 : 41] His descendants having this holier-than-thou, superior attitude towards the other tribes. And as a result, the problems arise as we find them.

Pride is an ugly and a destructive thing. And it's still a problem today in the church and the cause of much division. You know, so often when we see or hear about divisions in the church, and so often we're given reasons, oh, it was some doctrinal matter.

And of course, sometimes it is. But sometimes when you just scratch beneath the surface a little, you find that really that wasn't the problem. It was a matter of personalities and pride and people wanting to take a prominent role and being resentful of one situation that had arisen or another.

So, as we describe the mess, we can speak of division. We can speak of the pride that the Ephraimites in particular were guilty of. And then, of course, another word we can use to describe the situation is violence.

It all erupts in terrible violence. The division, the pride, result in hatred, one of another, and violence. We've already noticed what was the intention of the men of Ephraim.

[13 : 58] We're going to burn down your house over your head. This isn't just a complaint that they're hopeful can be resolved with a little bit of dialogue. No, they've decided we're going to burn you down.

We're going to crush you for not involving us in this battle. Well, Jephthah doesn't hold back. He responds in kind. And you have this great battle.

And the outcome of it, the scale is mind-blowing, really. There in verse 6, we're given the summary of the outcome of this great conflict that arises.

42,000 Ephraimites were killed at that time. Now, we probably don't want to dwell on such a terrible carnage. But just as a kind of statistical curiosity, if you wish, when we have the record of the original taking possession of the land, you know, the people of God who left Egypt and then crossed through the wilderness and took possession of the land, in the book of Numbers, you have numbers given as to the numbers involved.

And in the case of the Ephraimites, we're told that there were, I hope I've got the number right. I haven't noted it down. But I think it was 32,000 men of fighting age. Well, of course, maybe some 300 years have passed.

[15 : 19] But even taking into account the population growth that would have followed or that would have taken place, we imagine during that time that 42,000 would have perished is almost difficult to get your head around.

It just seems such a huge number. And so, it only adds to the legitimacy of describing this as one serious mess.

This is indeed a mess of epic proportions. The people of God are divided. They're resentful one of another. There's pride. There's jealousy. And it all ends in this terrible carnage.

And one tribe almost wiped out. And it is interesting that in what follows in the history of God's people, there is almost no longer reference to the tribe of Ephraim.

It almost seems as if they were, perhaps not entirely, but very close to being wiped out by this terrible battle that there was between God's people.

[16 : 24] So, that's the mess described, at least in a measure. But let's move on and spend a little time, just a few moments, trying to explain the mess. It's one thing to describe something. It's quite another to explain it.

And I think as we do try and explain why is it that this happened, I think it all revolves around jealousy. You just need to read the verses. And this problem of jealousy very much is prominent.

It rears its ugly head. The Ephraimites were jealous of Jephthah, of the victory he had won, and how they had not participated. But why were they jealous?

And remember, this is a recurring problem. It's not just on this occasion that, you know, they succumb to the temptation of being jealous. We've already seen just a few chapters before how exactly the same thing had happened.

And we would imagine that on other occasions also, even if not all of them are recorded. Why were they jealous? Well, I think we can identify three factors that would help explain or would help maybe identify what contributed to them succumbing to jealousy and then the outcome of that.

[17 : 39] The first factor I'm describing as a historic factor. And really what I'm trying to do is to try and really go back centuries to see if we can find in the distant past some of the roots of what happened on this occasion.

And I think we can. I think the problem that rears its head in the jealousy of the Ephraimites can be traced back to the conquest, at least in some measure, this isn't the whole answer, but in some measure, to the conquest and the disobedience of God's people to God's original instructions.

And we're not going to go into all the gory details. Not that they're particularly gory, but we're not going to go into the details. But the fact is that at that time God had determined the land that was to be the land, the promised land for God's people.

The land allocated to Israel was clearly described by God and its borders and frontiers. But God's people didn't obey God's instructions.

The land allocated to them was all west of the Jordan. You could just visualize Palestine and how the River Jordan flows from north to south right down, dividing what ought to have been the promised land on one side of the Jordan and, well, the neighboring nations on the other side, on the eastern side of the Jordan.

[19 : 05] But what happened? What happened was that some of the tribes took a fancy to land on the east side of the Jordan and took possession of it. And Joshua, who was responsible for organizing all this, and it was a thankless task, I'm sure, felt unable, was unable or felt unable to insist on God's instructions.

And as we go through the history from that time, it's very striking how this disobedience at the very beginning causes all kinds of problems in the succeeding generations and centuries.

This geographic barrier that there was dividing God's people, the River Jordan, it basically constituted itself in this barrier between God's people. Some were on one side of the Jordan, some were on the other side of the Jordan.

Just at a practical level, when the Jordan was in full flood, even getting from one side to the other was difficult. And so it did constitute certainly a geographic, physical barrier between God's people, but it also in turn contributed to creating a problem in matters of social and spiritual cohesion.

It was much more difficult because of this division that emerged from the very beginning. And as we think about that and think of how that can be repeated in other ways, it is sobering to appreciate how the sins of one generation can have consequences that echo down through succeeding generations, as appears to have been the case here.

[20 : 45] And in the case of the Ephraimites and Jephthah and the Gileadites, they were indeed tribes that occupied opposing sides of the River Jordan to bring it to bear on the passage before us.

So that's a historic factor that could explain why it was that these tribes opposed each other and were divided between each other. But then there's also what we could call a social factor.

It very much flows on or follows on from what we've just said. Even in the passage, there's evidence or we can detect some evidence of the social disintegration of the nation.

Even in the manner in which the men of Jephthah are able to identify the Ephraimites. This is perhaps what the passage is most famous for, the Shibboleth test when the Ephraimites had been defeated and those who remained were seeking to cross over the Jordan and return to their homeland.

There was this test that they had to pass if they could pronounce this word properly, or at least in the view of the men of Gilead, properly.

[21 : 55] And they couldn't. They had difficulty in the sh sound. We can understand that very much in our context. We think of how in some parts of the highlands, you know, the word worship would be pronounced worshop.

And it's basically the same idea. I suppose the difference is I think we're capable of pronouncing it both ways, but here it would seem the men of Ephraim had great difficulty. And this was the test that was used to determine who they were.

And we know the outcome, the very violent outcome if they failed the test. But even that, not that we're saying there's anything wrong in and of itself of a nation or within a nation there being different ways of pronouncing words or different dialects.

Of course, that in and of itself is innocent enough. But I think in this case, it just gives evidence of the social disintegration that had been taking place perhaps over several generations.

It's also maybe to tie in with this. It's interesting how Jephthah is described by the author in chapter 12 and in verse 7 where we have the summary statement, Jephthah led Israel for six years, then Jephthah the Gileadite died.

[23 : 07] It's really a very parochial description of it. His identity, very much a function of this town that he was from. Not identified as one who led the nation, but one who was very much identified with his own clan, his own tribe.

There was very much a tribal mentality in the negative sense of that expression. The members of each tribe felt less and less identified with the whole and more and more loyalty to the tribe they belonged to.

Now, when we fast forward to our own times and we think of tribalism in the church, we don't need to look very far to see how that has been a feature of church life in Scotland.

Indeed, within our own Reformed tradition, within Presbyterianism, we have all these tribes that have arisen. Of course, we all have very pious reasons for why they've arisen, but so often we are guilty of this tribal mentality, more interested in our own group, our own clan, our own tribe, and unwilling to see ourselves and to behave as part of something much greater, the one nation of God.

I don't know how many one-nation Tories there are in the congregation this evening. I'm not really concerned if there are or not. But what I would want there to be is one-nation Christians, one-nation Christians, not Christians who owe greater loyalty to the tribe than to the whole.

[24 : 43] This was a problem that explains what happened here in the verses that we've read. Then a third factor is what I'm calling the human factor.

We can talk about history, and there's some merit in doing so. We can talk about society, and again, there may be some merit in doing so. But the Ephraimites were jealous ultimately.

The Ephraimites involved, described, who approached Jephthah and speak to him in such violent language, they were jealous because of their own sinfulness. They were sinful.

Nobody obliged them to be jealous. They weren't the innocent victims of history and of society. No, they were jealous because their own sinful hearts led them to be jealous.

Nobody forced them to hate Jephthah. Nobody forced them to design and to determine to crush their fellow Israelites. This was something that they decided on their own, and they were responsible for.

[25 : 42] They were responsible for their own jealousy and the actions that flowed from it, including their own ultimate destruction. Well, when we think of ourselves, we can try and dissect and explain our own divisions as Christians, and there can be some merit in doing that.

But ultimately, each generation needs to take responsibility for its own sinful attitudes, its own pride, its own tribalism, and the behavior that goes with that.

But then finally, let's just notice the matter of sorting out the mess. Having described the mess, having tried to explain the mess, let's see what there is to be said about sorting out the mess.

And the first thing to recognize is that we, in our own strength and wisdom, can't sort out the mess. We, as men and women, we think of the incident before us. Jephthah was God's man.

He was called by God to be a judge over Israel. He was God's man, but he didn't sort out the mess. If anything, he made it worse. Now, people come to different views as to whether what Jephthah did in terms of this battle, and particularly the deliberate intention of not only winning the battle, but then of massacring even those who were fleeing from the battle.

[27 : 07] Different views are held as to whether that was legitimate or not. But I have to say, it seems to me difficult to justify the slaughter of the men who were fleeing from the battle.

Those who died in the course of the battle, well, that's what battles are like. People die. But the manner in which he so deliberately and brutally seeks to ensure that every single man of Ephraim meets a bloody death that day does seem very difficult to justify.

See, Jephthah, far from sorting out the mess of the division that there was, if anything, simply deepens the problem. If anything, he simply makes it worse.

Jephthah, God's own man, wasn't able to sort out the mess. But you know where we're going with this. God can sort out a mess of epic proportions.

But before talking about sorting out the mess, notice that God can use a mess created by and the responsibility of human sinfulness.

[28 : 17] And here I just want to draw out one point or make one observation about what happened here, what followed from what happened here in chapter 12 of Judges.

It can be argued, I think, quite powerfully and quite cogently, that in the matter of the massacre of the Ephraimites, even if we take the view, as I do, that it's very difficult to justify what Jephthah did, it can be argued that because of that massacre, the most significant obstacle to the subsequent monarchy in Israel, which historically was just a few decades after this happened.

We're coming to the end of the period of the Judges. Samson follows Jephthah, and Samson lived about 50 years before King Saul became king. So we're talking about really a period of time very close to the establishment of the monarchy.

Now, that's another story about the origins of that, but there's no doubt that God used the establishment of the monarchy to, in due course, have David as king.

And we know the significance of David as he points forward to King Jesus. The point is, had the Ephraimites not been destroyed, it can be argued that it would have been very difficult to secure a united Israel under one king.

[29 : 42] And there's a sense in which this was necessary, or in any case, there's a sense in which God uses these circumstances to secure the outcome that he has in mind.

And of course, God's power and sovereign rule is such that that is something he can and does do. We find that time and again in the Scriptures. God uses the mess, to put it that way.

But nonetheless, he overrules them and indeed even orders them for the fulfilling of his purposes. And it would seem that a case could be made that that is what happened here. God uses the mess, to put it that way.

But ultimately, God does a great deal more than use the mess. He sorts out the mess. As we've said, Jephthah couldn't sort out the mess. None of the judges could sort out the mess.

We can't sort out our own mess. The mess we make. Let's think of the fractured state of Presbyterianism in Scotland. How many wise men have come up with ideas of how to sort that out?

[30 : 50] And how many have succeeded? We can't sort it out. That's not to say that there's nothing to be done. Don't misunderstand me. But ultimately, we recognize our limitations.

But God, in the person of his own Son, came into the world to sort out the mess that we have made. He's come into the world to deal with sin and its guilt and consequences.

And that is what he has done. God, in his Son, has sorted out the mess on the grand scale. But he is also the God who is willing and able to sort out the mess in our own lives, our own messed up lives that need outside help to sort them out for us.

God is able and willing to do so. So, we have a mess described. A terrible description for us.

A terrible state of affairs. The people of God divided. And we thought a little bit about why that was. But ultimately, even this very bleak picture is a means of reminding us that God is not oblivious to.

[32 : 07] He's not indifferent to. He's not silent in the face of the big mess that we make of our own lives, often of our churches and of God's cause.

And indeed, beyond. He is the God who intervenes to sort out the mess for us. And we are thankful to him for that. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for what you can say to us and teach us through your word. And we pray that this evening, even in the time that we spent on these verses, describing this terrible battle and this terrible massacre that occurred so long ago, even from such unpromising material that is truth for us to draw, to be instructed by and challenged by.

And we pray that we would indeed be challenged by it. We do pray that we would be, as your people, one nation Christian, one people Christians, very much conscious of and grateful for our identity as members of the one church of Jesus Christ.

And deliver us from the pride, the petty pride and the foolish tribalism that often has characterized our church life and has given such a bad witness to the world that is looking on.

[33 : 38] Help us then. And show us where we are going wrong. And help us to put things right with your help. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.