**Jephthah and Ephraim**

During the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962, the world watched in terror as two superpowers had a standoff that had the potential for a global nuclear war. The Soviet Union was shipping ballistic missiles to Cuba and President John F. Kennedy established a blockade to prevent delivery of the missiles. Many saw the confrontation as a test of wills between Kenney and Soviet Premier Khrushchev and many worried that neither man would back down. Ultimately the crisis was resolved, perhaps because both men realized the consequences of a war between their two countries were too horrible to even contemplate. In our study of Judges chapter 12, we see a confrontation that had devastating consequences for one of the tribes of Israel.

In chapter 11 of Judges, Jephthah defeated the Ammonites and returned to his home in Mizpah which was located in Gilead east of the Jordan River. This is the same location where Laban caught up with Jacob who was fleeing from him (see Gen. 31). It is curious that there was no mention of Jephthah leading any forces in battle (see v. 29 & 32). It is probable that he did lead an army assembled from the men of Gilead who were from the half tribe of Manasseh which had settled east of the Jordan River along with Gad and Reuben. Chapter 12 begins with men from the tribe of Ephraim crossing the river to the town of Zaphon where they confronted Jephthah. The asked why he had not called them to join him in the battle against the Ammonites. They had asked the same question of Gideon after he had defeated the Midianites. They had been called to participate, albeit towards the end of that conflict. As we discussed, God only used 300 men to defeat Midian, so the army of Ephraim would have been excused by God. Gideon responded in a conciliatory manner which placated the men from Ephraim. Their meeting with Jephthah was much different as they threatened to burn down his house with him in it. Whereas Gideon was a peaceful man by nature, Jephthah was a warrior and he reacted much more forcefully. He said that he had called Ephraim to help but they did not respond so he went alone and God gave him the victory.

Jephthah then called out the men of Gilead and led them in war against the men of Ephraim. Apparently, the Ephraimites added fuel to the fire by calling the people of Gilead renegades from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. It would seem that they saw the Gileadites as a people who thought of themselves as a separate tribe who were loyal to neither Ephraim nor Manasseh. Since Ephraim considered itself to be the dominant tribe, they would have seen Gilead as a threat to their power. The men of Gilead controlled the fords of the Jordan River and detained anyone who tried to cross over to return to the western side. They used the dialect of the Ephraimites to identify them, capturing and killing 42,000 of them. The chapter concludes with noting that Jephthah died after leading Israel for 6 years followed by the judges Ibzan, Elon and Abdon who led Israel for a total of 25 years.

This chapter is the first recorded civil war among the Israelites after they entered Canaan. Wars are typically caused by territorial or economic disputes but this one had its roots in prideful men. The men of Ephraim saw their tribe as superior due to their first born claim given to the son of Joseph who was the favorite son of Jacob. It is remarkable how many denominations in the modern church see themselves as the only legitimate representative of the Gospel message. The confrontation with Jephthah could be been resolved peacefully if he had responded as Gideon had. It would seem that Jephthah was by nature a more bellicose man than Gideon but it is odd that he was much more patient with the Ammonites by attempting a peaceful settlement before going to war (see Prov. 18:19). Note that the characterization of Gilead as renegades seemed to be the spark that set off the conflagration while Gideon described his clan as the weakest (see 6:14 and 8:2). Probably the men from Ephraim had an equally dominant leader and neither he nor Jephthah could back down. The resulting conflict took a heavy toll on Ephraim, killing 42,000 of their soldiers. During the second census taken in Numbers, the total number of men aged twenty or older was only 32,500. The trait among those most cherished by the Apostle Paul was humility (see Phil. 2:3-4). I think great leaders project both humility and strength and know when one may be needed more than the other. It is tragic that the men involved in this incident could not humble themselves to avoid war.