

We’ve been working through the book of Judges.

The book of Judges is all about how Israel – the people of God –  
became just like the nations.  
It’s a story of sin, rebellion, and death.

It’s a world where everyone does what is right in their own eyes.  
And so – not surprisingly – the story gets more and more out of control.

As we saw last week, Judges 19 is the worst story in the whole book.

We saw last week how Judges 19 is a tale of two cities –  
Bethlehem in Judah – where the hospitality is top notch!  
And Gibeah in Benjamin – where the hospitality reminds us of Sodom  
in the days of Lot – when God sent fire from heaven to destroy the city  
because of its wickedness.

David – of course – was the King from Bethlehem in Judah –  
but Saul was the King from Gibeah in Benjamin.

The contrast between the two cities is clear:  
you *don’t* want a king from Gibeah!  
Why would you want a king from a city that acted like Sodom!

Judges 19 ends with the concubine from Bethlehem in Judah  
gang raped – murdered – and cut up in twelve pieces –  
sent as a grisly message to all Israel,

summoning the people of God to action.

But as the refrain of the book of Judges says:

“In those days, there was no king in Israel –  
everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

### **1. Israel Gathers Against Benjamin (20:1-17)**

#### **a. The Assembly at Mizpah (v1-11)**

*Then all the people of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled as one man to the LORD at Mizpah. <sup>2</sup> And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 men on foot that drew the sword. <sup>3</sup> (Now the people of Benjamin heard that the people of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And the people of Israel said, “Tell us, how did this evil happen?”*

All Israel then gathers together.

We haven't heard of such a thing since 2:4.  
All Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, gather (including Gilead, east of the Jordan).  
400,000 men.

None of the judges were able to mobilize all the nation.  
Only this nameless Levite from Ephraim.  
Only the outrage done against the concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.  
Only the wickedness of the men of Gibeah in Benjamin.

But now all the congregation gathers—  
as they had a few years before when Phineas had called them together (Josh 22:13-34)

That is, all the congregation except Benjamin.

Benjamin hears about this, but they are not invited.

The Levite tells his story to the assembly,  
*<sup>4</sup> And the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, "I came to Gibeah that belongs to Benjamin, I and my concubine, to spend the night. <sup>5</sup> And the leaders of Gibeah rose against me and surrounded the house against me by night. They meant to kill me, and they violated my concubine, and she is dead. <sup>6</sup> So I took hold of my concubine and cut her in pieces and sent her throughout all the country of the inheritance of Israel, for they have committed abomination and outrage in Israel. <sup>7</sup> Behold, you people of Israel, all of you, give your advice and counsel here."*

It's worth noting that the Levite leaves out some important details:  
for example, that *he was the one* who pushed his concubine out to the mob?!

There is nothing in this story that should make you feel particularly sorry for the Levite!  
He is *not* the victim here.  
The concubine from Bethlehem in Judah —  
she was the one who died so that he might live...

But all Israel responds with outrage:

*<sup>8</sup> And all the people arose as one man, saying, "None of us will go to his tent, and none of us will return to his house. <sup>9</sup> But now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we will go up against it by lot, <sup>10</sup> and we will take ten men of a hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thousand, and a thousand of ten thousand, to bring provisions for the people, that when they come they may repay Gibeah of Benjamin for all the outrage that they have committed in Israel." <sup>11</sup> So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one man.*

For the third time in our passage, we are told that Israel united "as one man."  
This is unheard of in the book of Judges!

They commit to bringing justice against Gibeah.

Think about it.

The Levite is no hero – he’s actually a miserable example of a husband.

But that doesn’t change the fact that *a horrible crime was committed*.

And justice demands that the guilty be held accountable.

And so the tribes of Israel sent messengers through Benjamin,  
asking Benjamin to hand over the guilty:

**b. The Gathering of the Tribes vs. Benjamin (v12-17)**

*<sup>12</sup> And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, “What evil is this that has taken place among you? <sup>13</sup> Now therefore give up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel.”*

They call on Benjamin to hand over the “sons of belial”–the worthless men of Gibeah,  
so that they may be punished.

*But the Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the people of Israel.*

Once again, everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

Benjamin does not listen to their brothers.

How often have we seen this?

Circling the wagons –

“hey, he’s one of us – he’s a good guy”

“what’s the big deal? Boys will be boys!”

No.

Boys will be men.

If they learn when they are young that they can get away with murder –  
then they will simply continue the habit!

It is wrong to “protect our own” from justice.

If we try to protect oppressors – then we become guilty of their oppression!

Think of the language that Israel uses:

“that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel.”

When evil is allowed to flourish –

when sin and rebellion is encouraged –

then God will judge that people!

When Sodom acted in such a way – God sent fire from heaven

and destroyed the city!

And it remains the case, that God brings judgment against cities that protect the wicked.

It's not always immediate.

And it's not as though God picks the *worst* city to judge first!

But the only way to forestall *God's* judgment –  
is to do what is just and right!

Every city will have bad things happen.

The question is – do the leaders of the city do justice?!

And if the city fails to do justice –  
will the regional authorities step in?

In this case, the regional authorities have failed to act –  
and so the whole nation comes together to rectify the situation!

*<sup>14</sup> Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel. <sup>15</sup> And the people of Benjamin mustered out of their cities on that day 26,000 men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who mustered 700 chosen men. <sup>16</sup> Among all these were 700 chosen men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. <sup>17</sup> And the men of Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered 400,000 men who drew the sword; all these were men of war.*

When Benjamin refuses,

all Israel gathers together for war for the first time since the days of Joshua.

But this time the target is Benjamin—one of their own tribes.

Benjamin has made it clear that they will defend their own –  
even against the claims of justice.

And since Benjamin has defended the guilty –  
since they are willing to fight in order to protect the city like Sodom –  
they have brought upon themselves the verdict of Sodom!

Benjamin gathers his troops–

26,000 against 400,000

But Benjamin has a special weapon,

700 chosen men who were left-handed;  
every one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.

Do you remember what Benjamin means?

Son of my right hand!

These are *left-handed* sons of the right hand!

And not just “left handed” – but *restricted in their right hand* –  
the phrase used of Ehud in chapter 3!

Remember Ehud?

The left-handed Benjamite?

A Son of My Right Hand who is restricted in his right hand?!

Was Ehud one of the 700?

One of the 600 who survived?

If not, then he is certainly one of their sons.

If you look at the timeline,

since this occurs during the time of Phineas,

it appears that Ehud would have come only 20-30 years later!

He is either one of the 700 from Judges 20 – or else he is one of their sons.

(Ehud was a good and faithful judge –

but his associations make him a little suspect).

## 2. Israel's Three Battles (20:18-48)

### a. Judah Goes First – and Gets Slaughtered (v18-21)

*<sup>18</sup> The people of Israel arose and went up to Bethel and inquired of God, "Who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin?" And the LORD said, "Judah shall go up first."*

*<sup>19</sup> Then the people of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. <sup>20</sup> And the men of Israel went out to fight against Benjamin, and the men of Israel drew up the battle line against them at Gibeah. <sup>21</sup> The people of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and destroyed on that day 22,000 men of the Israelites.*

So Israel launches into battle against Benjamin–

but first they inquire of God who shall go up first?

And, for the first time in the last several chapters, the LORD speaks.

“Judah shall go first.”

Judah has been God's favored weapon since 1:1.

And now they have the added incentive of being the aggrieved tribe.

With Yahweh's blessing, they go forth into battle,

and are routed–22,000 Israelites die.

How can this be?

You would think that with Judah in the lead (as God *said* they should do!),  
that God would be with them!

What's wrong?!

We're not told.

(Though we'll get a clue later...)

**b. Israel Goes Again – and Gets Slaughtered (v22-25)**

*<sup>22</sup> But the people, the men of Israel, took courage, and again formed the battle line in the same place where they had formed it on the first day. <sup>23</sup> And the people of Israel went up and wept before the LORD until the evening. And they inquired of the LORD, “Shall we again draw near to fight against our brothers, the people of Benjamin?” And the LORD said, “Go up against them.” <sup>24</sup> So the people of Israel came near against the people of Benjamin the second day. <sup>25</sup> And Benjamin went against them out of Gibeah the second day, and destroyed 18,000 men of the people of Israel. All these were men who drew the sword.*

All Israel weeps before Yahweh—why is God not strengthening their hands?

And they inquire again, shall we go up?

And Yahweh says, “Go up against them.”

But Benjamin slaughters 18,000 more!

Why is God saying “go” – when Benjamin keeps winning?

Remember the refrain?

“In those days, there was no king in Israel,  
everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Yes, they were inquiring of the LORD –

but there was something missing...

**c. Israel Worshiped the LORD (v26-28)**

*<sup>26</sup> Then all the people of Israel, the whole army, went up and came to Bethel and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. <sup>27</sup> And the people of Israel inquired of the LORD (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, <sup>28</sup> and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron, ministered before it in those days), saying, “Shall we go out once more to battle against our brothers, the people of Benjamin, or shall we cease?” And the LORD said, “Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand.”*

If you would be the instrument of God’s wrath,  
it is not enough to be “right.”

What is missing is *worship*.

They call for a day of fasting – they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings –

Now they return to Bethel and weep and pray and fast.

But this time, not just the men—all the people of Israel come.

And this time, not just for battle, but for worship.

They offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to Yahweh.

Only when Israel worships Yahweh does Yahweh give them the victory.

If you are going to be the agent of God's wrath –  
if you are going to be the destroying angel –  
then you must first be purified.

(There is a certain sense in which God is testing Israel:  
will you do what is right *in my sight* – even if it is costly?  
Will you worship me – even when things don't go right –  
even when it appears that God is against you?  
Will you still do what is right *in my eyes* – *no matter what?!)*

And so they fast and pray –  
they worship the LORD –  
and then they ask again, shall we go up or not?  
And this time God answers, “Go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand.”

Verses 29-48 detail the destruction of Gibeah and the Benjaminites.

#### **d. Israel Destroys Benjamin (v29-48)**

##### **i. The Ambush (v29-37)**

*<sup>29</sup> So Israel set men in ambush around Gibeah. <sup>30</sup> And the people of Israel went up against the people of Benjamin on the third day and set themselves in array against Gibeah, as at other times. <sup>31</sup> And the people of Benjamin went out against the people and were drawn away from the city. And as at other times they began to strike and kill some of the people in the highways, one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah, and in the open country, about thirty men of Israel. <sup>32</sup> And the people of Benjamin said, “They are routed before us, as at the first.” But the people of Israel said, “Let us flee and draw them away from the city to the highways.” <sup>33</sup> And all the men of Israel rose up out of their place and set themselves in array at Baal-tamar, and the men of Israel who were in ambush rushed out of their place from Maareh-geba. <sup>34</sup> And there came against Gibeah 10,000 chosen men out of all Israel, and the battle was hard, but the Benjaminites did not know that disaster was close upon them. <sup>35</sup> And the LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel, and the people of Israel destroyed 25,100 men of Benjamin that day. All these were men who drew the sword. <sup>36</sup> So the people of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. The men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin, because they trusted the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah. <sup>37</sup> Then the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush moved out and struck all the city with the edge of the sword.*

The ambush reminds us of Joshua's ambush against Ai – back in the book of Joshua.

It was a similar context –  
after Israel's sin at Jericho –  
when Achan took the devoted things for himself.  
The men of Ai grew cocky from their initial victories –  
but after Israel had dealt with their sin –  
they set an ambush for Ai to lure them into a trap.

The same trap is sprung here in Judges 20 at Gibeah.

This reminds us of two things:

first, just because God promises that you are going to win –  
that doesn't mean that you don't use strategy!  
but second, it's not your strategy that wins battles!  
as v35 says, "the LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel" –  
the battle belongs to the LORD.

Trust God – and be smart!

### **ii. Gibeah Destroyed in Fire (38-40)**

*<sup>38</sup> Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in the main ambush was that when they made a great cloud of smoke rise up out of the city <sup>39</sup> the men of Israel should turn in battle. Now Benjamin had begun to strike and kill about thirty men of Israel. They said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle." <sup>40</sup> But when the signal began to rise out of the city in a column of smoke, the Benjaminites looked behind them, and behold, the whole of the city went up in smoke to heaven.*

At the same time, we see Benjamin's utter desolation.

They have no priest – no access to the Word of the LORD.  
They are simply doing what is right in their own eyes.

And the result is that they fall into the trap –  
and when the ambush party takes the city,  
they set the city on fire –  
"and the whole of the city went up in smoke to heaven."

Gibeah has become like Sodom and Gomorrah.

### **iii. Benjamin's Warriors Struck Down (v41-47)**

*<sup>41</sup> Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them. <sup>42</sup> Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them. And those who came out of the cities were destroying them in their midst. <sup>43</sup> Surrounding the Benjaminites, they pursued them and trod them down from Nohah<sup>d</sup> as far as opposite Gibeah on the east. <sup>44</sup> Eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell, all of them men of valor. <sup>45</sup> And they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon. Five thousand men of them were cut down in the highways. And they were pursued hard to Gidom, and 2,000 men of them were struck down. <sup>46</sup> So all who fell that day of Benjamin were 25,000 men who drew the sword, all of them men of valor. <sup>47</sup> But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon and remained at the rock of Rimmon four months.*

And as Gibeah – so also Benjamin!



The warriors of Benjamin are struck down –  
they try to flee – and are cut down –  
so that only 600 men of Benjamin survive the battle.

But it's not just the warriors.  
The whole tribe is implicated.

When God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah,  
he didn't just kill *some* –  
he wiped out the whole city – men, women, children, and all!

And even so:

#### **iv. Benjamin's People Slaughtered (v48)**

<sup>48</sup> *And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire.*

Benjamin has become so Canaanite in their ways  
that the same method of warfare applied to the Canaanites is applied to them.

The curse of Sodom has fallen upon Gibeah, and all who defend the city.  
Except for the 600 Benjamites who hid in the cave of Rimmon,  
the entire tribe is wiped off the face of the earth.

How is that fair?

As we saw earlier – heinous evil *stains the land*.  
When you excuse and justify the rape and murder of another man's daughter –  
then you are justifying your own daughter's death.

Benjamin was willing to cut down 40,000 Israelites  
in order to defend Gibeah's wickedness.

Judgment now falls on all Benjamin!

As they have done to others – so it is done to them.  
If you want to be like Sodom – expect the fate of Sodom to be your own!  
If you want to be like the Canaanites – expect the fate of Canaan to be your own!

But all Israel suffers as well.  
Over 40,000 soldiers have been killed (1/10 of the army).

Israel has discovered his greatest enemy—himself.  
In those days, there was no king in Israel,

everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Do not think for a moment that this cannot happen again.  
When churches protect the wicked against the helpless –  
they share in Gibeah's rebellion!

This story was written down as an example for us –  
on whom the ends of the ages have come!  
That we might not protect sinners from the consequences of their sin!

Yes, Jesus died so that we might live –  
but he also died *to make things right!*

He died to deal with sin *and misery* –  
as Jesus himself said in his first sermon in Luke 4:18 –  
“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”