

LESSON 19: JUDGES 19-21

Overview

The section open and close with the statement that in these days, there was no king in Israel. This **inclusio** is a critical comment that suggests the only solution to Israel's condition is in a king and anticipates the coming age of monarchy.

In addition to the inclusio, these chapters are framed in a **chiastic structure**. The action begins with the individual and builds out in increasing social circles to family, city, and tribe until finally the entire nation comes together as one united front to deal with the crisis. From this apex, the action then resolves back down to the individual. The focus on Israel's unification reinforces the picture of Israel's movement toward monarchy.

Chiastic Structure of Chapters 19-21:

Levite	Individual
Concubine/ father-in-law	Family
Men of Gibeah/Benjamin	City/Tribe
Congregation of Israel	Nation
Remnant of Benjamin	Tribe
Daughters of Shiloh	Family
Every man to his tribe/family/inheritance	Individual

Read Judges 19:1-21

The Levite from the hills of Ephraim travels first to Bethlehem, then to Gibeah. He has a different experiences in both. **Compare his experience between Bethlehem and Gibeah.**

- The Bethlehem experience:
 - What does the name Bethlehem mean?
 - What does the Levite experience in Bethlehem?
 - What is wrong here?
- The Gibeah experience:
 - Why does the Levite choose Gibeah over Jebus (Jerusalem)?
 - What does the name Gibeah mean?
 - What does the Levite experience in Gibeah?
 - What is wrong here?

Case Study: Do's and Don'ts of Conflict Resolution Within the Congregation

For this next section, imagine that Israel is modeling a modern church congregation:

All of Israel is the congregation.

The tribe of Benjamin is a ministry within the congregation.

The city of Gibeah is a group within the ministry.

Some sin or injustice will be committed against a member (Levite) with the group.

We are going to look at Israel's actions and what happened as a result, then consider what we should or should not model in Israel's example.

Read Judges 19:22-30.

- **Compare Gibeah to Sodom (Genesis 19:1-11).** What makes the difference between how the incidents at Sodom and Gibeah play out?
- In Judges 19:3, the Levite went after his wayward concubine to speak kindly to her (“to her heart”) and bring her back to him. In Judges 19:25, he gives her up heartlessly to the men of Gibeah for their use.
 - Was the Levite brutal in his treatment of his concubine?
 - Hosea 2:2-13 describes God doing the same thing to Israel when she plays the harlot with Him. Was God brutal in His treatment of unfaithful Israel?
- How does the concubine’s end fit her sin?

Questions for Reflection

- Sometimes God’s reaction to our sin is to lift His hand and let the consequences of our sin and unrepentance overtake us. What happens to us when we are thrust out into the world without His protection?
- When we suffer at the hands of the world, even when it is a consequence of our own actions, do we feel like God doesn’t see or respond?
- When we are determined to pursue a sinful lifestyle, what does it take to bring us back to God?

- What is odd about the Levite’s reaction at finding his concubine dead?
- Why doesn’t he raise an outcry?
- How does the Levite seek his own justice?
- Saul did something similar to this in 1 Samuel 11:7, only he divided up a yoke of oxen and sent them throughout the territory. What was the message he sent with the pieces?

Questions for Reflection

The Victim’s Response

- The Levite left Gibeah without raising a cry over the murder of his concubine. Why would a member opt to leave a ministry rather than raise an objection?
- Reactions to feeling powerless include remaining silent or acting with destructive anger. How should a victim react to feeling powerless?
 - Should he/she retaliate with some equally outrageous act to express his outrage?
 - Should he/she try to enflame the greater congregation and whip up public opinion?
 - What is the protocol Jesus established in Matthew 18:15-17?

Read Judges 20:1-21:3.

Armies of Israel Assemble (v1-3)

- What is odd about Israel's response to the receiving the evidence of the crime?
- Where do the armies meet?
 - What does the name Mizpah mean?
 - What picture should the name Mizpah bring to mind?

Questions for Reflection

The Congregation's Response to the Victim

- Israel launched her armies immediately on receiving the body parts.
 - Should the entire congregation go to arms immediately upon hearing that a crime had been committed?
 - What should have been done first?

The Trial & Verdict (v4-14)

- What is wrong with this trial?
 - What does the Levite fail to mention in his testimony?
 - Is there an investigation of the truth of his statement?
 - According to Mosaic Law, how many witnesses are required to render such a judgment?
- Did Israel decide to go to war before or after they talked with Benjamin?
- What is Benjamin's response to Israel's ultimatum?
- What is wrong with Benjamin's response to Israel's ultimatum?

Question for Reflection

- How should the trial have been conducted?
- Was Benjamin's response out of true loyalty to the men of Gibeah or a reaction to Israel's aggression?

The Drawing of Sides (v15-17) – Israel (400,00 men) vs. Benjamin (33,000 men)

It is particularly noted that 700 select men of Benjamin were left-handed. 1 Chronicles 12:2 also notes that there were fighting men of Benjamin who could use both their right and left hands when shooting arrows or slinging stones – very skilled warriors. But the phrase for left-hand here in verse 16 is different.

- Look up the phrase behind “left-handed.” What condition makes these Benjaminites left-handed?
- Who else have we studied that had the same condition?

The Battle Outline (v18-48)

Consider the order in which Israel did things:

(v18-21) Israel set itself for war first, then inquired of the Lord, and Judah lost 22,000 men.

(v22-25) Israel set itself for war again, then wept and inquired of the Lord, and lost another 18,000 men.

(v26-35) Israel wept before the LORD and inquired of Him, the LORD gave the go-ahead, then they set themselves for battle, and then Benjamin was delivered to them.

- Did Israel inquire of the LORD before or after they had decided on their course of action?
- Why would the LORD cause Judah to suffer loss in this battle along with Benjamin?

Questions for Reflection

The Congregation’s Judgment of the Offender

- What obligation do we have toward one another as members of one body?
- If there was something we could say to prevent or turn a brother from sin, and we don’t take action or at least warn them, should we bear some responsibility as a result?
- Gibeah’s crime and Benjamin’s lack of cooperation needed to be dealt with, and Israel dealt with them, but with what attitude? When a member of the congregation sins, is that a reason for us to come out of our corners swinging enthusiastically to deliver their punishment?

Judges 20:45 “. . . *and they cut down [alal] five thousand of them on the highways.*” Look up the word **alal** behind the phrase “cut down.”

- What are its two meanings?
- In what sense can gleaning a field become an act of severity or abuse?
- How does this action by Israel against Benjamin fit the crime against the concubine?

Read Judges 21.

The Repercussions of Judgment

- What problem did the oaths cause?
- Who didn’t come up to Mizpah with the rest?
 - What does the name Jabesh Gilead mean?
 - What event should the name Gilead or “galeed” recall? (Genesis 31)

- What was tragic about the judgment against Jabesh Gilead?
- What was the final solution, when not enough women were found from Jabesh Gilead?
- What is wrong with this solution?
- Why must provision be made from Shiloh?
- What does the picture of Shiloh add to the final picture in the book of Judges?
 - What does the name Shiloh and its root word, *shalah*, mean?
- What famous Benjamites would have been lost to history without this provision at Shiloh?

Questions for Reflection

Reconciliation of the Offender

- What was Israel's attitude toward the Benjamites going into battle? After the battle?
- When a member of the congregational body falls under judgment for sin and must be removed from the body, do we weep for their loss?
- Should we create stumbling blocks that prevent their reconciliation in the event of repentance?

New Testament Example and Application: The Church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11)

- What was the sin Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 5?
- What was the Corinthian church's initial attitude toward the sin?
- What is Paul's instruction to the church in dealing with the sin?
- When he heard how the Corinthian church had acted on his instructions, how did Paul temper his instructions? (2 Corinthians 2:5-11)

MANASSEH

EPHRAIM

★ Shiloh

Rimmon?

Bethel

Mizpah

Ramah

Gibeah

Jerusalem

Bethlehem

BENJAMIN

JUDAH

MOUNTAINS OF EPHRAIM

AN

Travelers and Strangers: Hospitality in the Biblical World

Dennis Bratcher

"Southern hospitality" is deeply imbedded in the local culture of the southwestern United States where I grew up. This informal "code" of hospitality helped otherwise fiercely independent people get along with each other. There may be some similar factors in the background of the hospitality customs of the ancient Middle East. However, the biblical customs concerning how a person should treat travelers and temporary residents were much different. They were more than simply ways to be polite or friendly, and went beyond entertaining guests. Hospitality customs were a vital part of the culture of the ancient world. The people followed these customs as formal, even sacred, codes of conduct.

Hospitality customs in the biblical world related to two distinct classes of people: the traveler and the resident alien. In most translations of the Bible, there is little attempt to try to separate the two. Even in the original Hebrew and Greek, different words are sometimes used interchangeably for the two groups. Either is called a *stranger*, one who does not belong to a particular community or group. Other terms applied to either or both are: *foreigner*, *alien*, *sojourner*, *wayfarer*, or *gentile*. In Israel, the law protected the resident alien, a foreigner who had settled permanently in the land. He could not own land, but he could participate in communal activities. The traveler, however, was extremely vulnerable. Only the force of the customs of hospitality protected him.

The environment of the desert and arid land in most of the Middle East is harsh. For a traveler, access to water and food was a matter of life and death. Most settlements were built near available water or wells. The traveler needed to have access to the water. Yet, it was also important for the settled community to have protection. As a result, strict codes of conduct developed to govern such encounters. These conventions of hospitality also applied equally to the desert dwellers who lived in tents as

they followed the grazing herds (today called Bedouins) They were obligated to provide for travelers that stopped at their tents, and under these customs could expect some protection from hostile actions from the "stranger."

The host was obliged to provide the traveler with food, water, and shelter. Abraham welcomed three such "strangers" (Gen 18:1-8) into his tent. He eagerly ran to meet them and lavishly welcomed them. Abraham's words and actions, including bowing to the ground, seem exaggerated to us. However, this was typical of Oriental hospitality. He provided them with water to wash their dusty feet and a place to rest.

Often a servant washed the feet of the guest. This provided a needed and refreshing service. However, it also symbolized the acceptance of the stranger and the absence of any hostile intent by the host (cf. John 13:5-20). Abraham's elaborate preparations for the meal indicate the importance of providing for the travelers. When they left, Abraham traveled with them a short distance "to start them on their way" (Gen 18:16, NEB).

Laban's welcome of Abraham's servant reflects similar customs (although shaded in the story by the fact that Laban had already seen the gold given to his sister; Gen 24:28-32). Luke recounts Jesus' visit in the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-47). Simon failed to greet Jesus and provide water to wash his feet. By this omission, he violated the most basic customs of Eastern hospitality. This was a profound insult and hinted at hostility to Jesus. Jesus used Simon's insult as an example of the failure to understand the nature of sin and forgiveness.

The traveler was expected to accept what the host offered. To refuse such hospitality was an insult that only an enemy would inflict. On the other hand, a traveler would interpret a resident's failure to provide food and amenities as a hostile act. The men of Succoth and Penuel refused to feed Gideon and his men (Jud 8:4-17). Gideon's response was a violent overreaction. Yet, their refusal was a serious violation of Eastern customs of hospitality. Nabal nearly started a war over his refusal to feed David and his men (1 Sam 25).

The traveler had few legal or political rights in the ancient world. He was largely at the mercy of the residents where he journeyed. By accepting the traveler, especially in providing him food and sharing that food with him, the host also took the responsibility of protecting him. The story of Lot offers graphic evidence of the importance of protection. Lot offered his virgin daughters to an angry mob rather than betray the guests "who have come under the shelter of my roof" (Gen 19:8, RSV). In another instance, an old man pleaded with the men of his town not to harm a traveling Levite because "this man has come into my house" (Judges 19:23, RSV). Likewise, the traveler, by accepting the hospitality of the host, was responsible to honor the host and refrain from any hostile actions against him or his household (note these tensions in 1 Sam 25).

The sharing of food together was a token of friendship, a form of covenantal commitment. One of the most despicable acts in the ancient world was to eat with someone and then betray them (Obadiah 7; Psa 41:9; and of course Judas, John 13:18). This entire "code" of hospitality in the Middle East was so strong that it evoked a warning: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb 13:2). It is also this dimension of mutual commitment in the sharing of food that provides the Eucharist with one of its most dynamic meanings.

See also Dennis Bratcher, *s.v.* "Stranger", *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 1985, 1996.

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Published online on The Voice, Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians; Christian Resource Institute; <http://www.crivoice.org/travelers.html>; accessed May 6, 2021.

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