

Immorality, Disunity, and Legalism

Judges 19-21

Introduction

Chapters 19-21 continue the appendix to the Book of Judges, featuring materials not presented in chronological sequence. Chapter 19 details the actions of a Levite who had taken a wife only to see her be unfaithful to him. As we go through the chapter, we see a man who was supposed to be a servant of God act in immoral and wicked ways. How he handled the crime against his concubine explodes into a national controversy and the near destruction of the tribe of Benjamin. What happened in these events is explained in Chapters 20-21.

19:1-21 – A Levite, His Wife, and his Father-In-Law

A Levite residing in the remote hill country of Ephraim had taken a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. However, she had been unfaithful to him and eventually left him, returning to her father's house. After four months of painful separation, the Levite set out for Bethlehem with a servant and a pair of donkeys. His intention was to speak kindly to her and persuade her to return home with him. His efforts were successful, and she welcomed him into her father's house. The Levite's father-in-law was pleased to see his daughter's husband and welcomed him warmly. For three days, they feasted together, and the father-in-law, in his hospitality, convinced the Levite to stay a fourth day and night in Bethlehem. It wasn't until the afternoon of the fifth day that the Levite finally departed for his home in Ephraim.

By late afternoon, after traveling about six miles, the Levite's servant suggested they spend the night in the Jebusite city of Jebus (Jerusalem). However, the Levite refused to stay in a city of foreigners and insisted on continuing to Gibeah or Ramah. When they finally arrived in Gibeah at sunset, they sat in the public square, expecting hospitality from the locals. Unfortunately, Gibeah was unwelcoming. Eventually, an old man, an Ephraimite living in Gibeah, came from the field. Upon learning the Levite was also from Ephraim, he warmly invited them to his home. The Levite assured him they had their own provisions and wouldn't be a burden, but the old man insisted on hosting them. The Levite accepted his hospitality.

19:22-30 – The Crime at Gibeah

The evening meal was abruptly interrupted by a pounding on the door. A group of men from the city, described as "sons of Belial" (worthless fellows), had surrounded the house. They demanded the old man surrender the Levite to them so they could have sex with him, revealing the extreme corruption of Gibeah's inhabitants. The old man pleaded with them not to commit such an atrocity. To emphasize the gravity of the sin of homosexual rape, he offered his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to the mob instead. He suggested they could do whatever they wanted with these women if they would leave the Levite alone.

This shows both the moral perversity of the Benjamites and the old man's moral insensitivity, as he viewed heterosexual rape as a lesser crime than homosexual rape. Despite his duty to protect his guest, the old man's proposal underscored a low regard for women. Here we see the rampant immorality in Israel during the period after Joshua's death, and biblical teaching does not condone the notion that rape of a woman is less severe than rape of a man, or that heterosexual immorality is less serious than homosexual immorality. When the mob refused to listen, the Levite, equally morally corrupt and insensitive, pushed his concubine out the door. The men of Gibeah then raped and abused her throughout the night. At dawn, they released her, and she staggered to the door of the house, where she collapsed and died.

Early in the morning, the Levite prepared to continue his journey and found his concubine's lifeless body at the doorway. When she did not respond to his command to arise, he realized she was dead. He placed her on his donkey and returned to the hill country of Ephraim. At his house, the Levite dismembered her body and sent the pieces throughout Israel. His actions in death reflected the same lack of respect he had shown her in life. The entire nation was horrified by the Benjamites' crime, an unprecedented event since Israel had come up from Egypt.

Hosea viewed this sin as a benchmark for measuring other depraved acts and saw it as the beginning of Israel's apostasy after entering Canaan (Hosea 9:9; 10:9). This chapter, along with the next, also demonstrates the divine principle of sowing and reaping: the concubine who was unfaithful died through abuse, the Levite lost his spouse after sacrificing her for his honor, and the men of Gibeah, along with many in their tribe who supported them, perished in a war of retribution.

20:1-17 – An Awful Chain of Events

From Dan to Beersheba and Gilead, the sons of Israel gathered "as one man" at Mizpah, with 400,000 swordsmen present. The author emphasizes the unity of the tribes three times, highlighting that Benjamin was the only tribe absent, indicating their support for the men of Gibeah. The author's repeated mention of the united tribes and the Benjamites being "brothers" underscores the tragedy of this internal conflict. The assembly asked the Levite for a firsthand account of the events in Gibeah. The Levite recounted the horrific details, portraying his actions in the best possible light and stating that the men of Gibeah intended to kill him. Although not explicitly mentioned in the previous chapter, it is likely true that his life was in danger. He justified the dismemberment of his concubine's corpse by the gravity of the sin committed against her, describing it as a "lewd and disgraceful act". The terms "lewd" and "shameful act" denote sins so vile that they warrant being cut off from the nation.

The dismemberment of the corpse had achieved its purpose by rallying the national assembly. The Levite then called upon the assembly for advice and counsel regarding the incident. The assembly vowed not to return home until they had launched a military campaign against Benjamin. Following the traditions of holy war, they cast lots to designate ten percent of their number to provide food for the army, while the rest marched against Gibeah of Benjamin.

Messengers were sent throughout the tribe of Benjamin, demanding the surrender of the "sons of Belial" in Gibeah to remove the wicked blot from Israel. However, the Benjamites refused to cooperate and

instead mustered an army of 26,000 swordsmen to defend Gibeah. This force included 700 left-handed slingers capable of hitting a hair without missing. By siding with their guilty tribesmen, the Benjamites shared in their guilt and came under the same condemnation as Gibeah.

The united tribes of Israel, numbering 400,000 swordsmen, had a significant advantage in numbers, nearly fifteen to one. Despite this, they did not immediately defeat the Benjamites and instead suffered heavy casualties. This suggests that God was punishing the united tribes as well as Benjamin.

20:18-46 – Battle Against Benjamin

Over the next several days, the united tribes clashed with the Benjamites three times. Benjamin was victorious in the first two battles, but in the third clash, the united tribes nearly wiped out the Benjamites.

20:18-21: First Attack

Representatives of the eleven tribes sought direction from a priestly oracle at Bethel regarding the war with Benjamin. They did not request divine wisdom or help or offer worship. Their only question was which tribe should lead the campaign, like their query in Judges 1:1. The answer was that Judah should lead. The next day, as Israel approached Gibeah, the Benjamites met them in battle, resulting in 22,000 Israelite casualties.

20:22-25: Second Attack

Despite heavy losses, the united tribes were determined to punish the Benjamites. They arrayed themselves for battle again and sought the Lord's guidance, weeping until evening. They asked if they should renew hostilities with Benjamin, but their tears were not of true repentance; they were trying to coerce divine sympathy. The priestly oracle directed them to resume the attack without assuring victory. In the second battle, the Benjamites again defeated the united tribes, killing 18,000 swordsmen. Despite receiving divine guidance, Israel did not have divine aid in battle. This highlights that, despite their faults, the tribes still had access to divine guidance through the high priest, which Benjamin did not have.

20:26-35: Third Attack

In the first two defeats, the Israelites learned that victory would not come through their military strength but through the empowerment of the Spirit of God. They realized they could not continue their campaign against Benjamin without assurance from the Lord. So, everyone went to Bethel to seek the Lord's guidance. Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, ministered before the ark. The Israelites fasted, wept, and offered sacrifices, asking the Lord if they should continue fighting against Benjamin, even adding "or not" to indicate their willingness to stop if it wasn't God's will. This time, the Lord assured them of victory.

This time, the united tribes employed a new strategy. They set an ambush around Gibeah to trap the Benjamites. The main body of Israelite soldiers began the attack and then feigned a retreat. Overconfident from their previous victories, the Benjamites pursued the retreating Israelites, falling into

the ambush. The Israelites then attacked from three directions, catching the Benjamites off guard and decimating their forces.

One contingent of the ambush rushed into Gibeah. Seeing the smoke rising from the city, the Benjamites lost their will to fight and attempted to flee towards the wilderness. However, they were overtaken, and the Lord struck them down before Israel.

The casualties for Benjamin on that third day of battle were staggering, with a total of 25,100 swordsmen killed. A group of 600 Benjamites escaped to the rock of Rimmon, where they remained for four months. After defeating the Benjamite army, the united tribes turned against the rest of Benjamin's territory, killing non-combatants, destroying cattle, and burning cities. The entire tribe faced annihilation for siding with the men of Gibeah.

21:1-25 – Missing the Spirit of the Law

In their shock over the behavior of the Benjamites, the men of Israel had rashly sworn not to give their daughters in marriage to Benjamites. Realizing that an entire tribe was about to be lost, the leaders devised a scheme to technically uphold their oath while still providing wives for the surviving Benjamites. This hypocritical legal fiction allowed them to keep the letter of their vow while violating its spirit, a skill that later generations, including the scribes of Jesus' day, would perfect.

The Israelites were greatly concerned about the potential loss of an entire tribe. They went to Bethel, expressing their grief before the Lord all day. They had made a rash vow in their zeal to punish Gibeah and now lamented its consequences. They sacrificed, seeking the Lord's help to heal their nation's rift.

After a day of lamentation and worship, some leaders proposed a solution. They remembered that when the assembly was called to Mizpah, another oath was taken to put to death any soldiers who failed to appear. A roll call revealed that no one from Jabesh-gilead had aided in the war against Benjamin.

The assembly decided to put Jabesh-gilead under the ban, sending twelve thousand men to kill its inhabitants, sparing only the young virgins. This massacre was a human attempt to rectify the consequences of their previous rash vow by selectively implementing another. The virgins were identified by their distinctive clothing and spared.

Four hundred virgins were found and brought to Shiloh, where the Tabernacle was located. A peace offering was sent to the six hundred Benjamites at the Rock of Rimmon. They left their stronghold, came to Shiloh, and took the four hundred virgins as their brides. However, two hundred Benjamites still did not have wives.

With more wives needed, the rulers devised another, equally bizarre, solution. During the annual feast at Shiloh, the remaining unmarried Benjamites were to hide in the vineyards. When the daughters of Shiloh came out to dance, the Benjamites were to rush out and seize them as wives. If the girls' fathers or brothers complained, the leaders would assure them they were not violating the oath since they hadn't given their daughters to the Benjamites. No one seemed to care that a festival dedicated to the Lord was being used for this deceit.

The Benjamites followed this plan. Each captured a dancing daughter of Shiloh and took her as his wife in a manner reminiscent of cavemen, further desecrating the institution of marriage. The Benjamites returned to their tribal inheritance to rebuild and repopulate their towns. The national assembly of the eleven tribes dissolved, and the men of Israel returned to their respective territories.

The book of Judges ends with a reminder of the lawlessness of the time: there was no central government during the days of the Judges, and everyone did what they thought was right. Judges 21 is filled with both consistency and inconsistency. The punishment of Jabesh-gilead, while justified, was excessively harsh. The Israelites' desire to honor their oath to God is commendable, but their method—violating the rights of the Shiloh girls and their families—was perverse. Despite the grim events, God's grace is evident. While the old Sodom was completely destroyed in Genesis 19, a remnant of 600 Benjamites was spared in this "New Sodom" of Benjamin.

What's in This for Us?

Rash Decisions and Their Consequences: Making hasty vows or decisions without fully considering the consequences can lead to unintended and severe outcomes. We must think carefully before making promises or decisions, especially when they can significantly impact others. Seek wisdom through prayer and take time to reflect before acting.

Balancing Justice and Mercy: While seeking justice for wrongdoings is important, it should not lead to excessive or disproportionate punishment. Christ-like living demands that we respond with compassion, ensuring that responses are fair and not overly harsh.

Recognizing God's Grace Amidst Chaos: Despite the chaos and moral failings depicted, God's grace is evident in sparing a remnant of Benjamin. Redemption is possible, even in difficult situations. Trust that with the power of God, positive outcomes and second chances can emerge from challenging or morally complex circumstances.

For Discussion

1. How does the Levite's behavior in Chapter 19 reflect his moral and spiritual state? What can we learn from his actions about the responsibilities of those who are supposed to be servants of God?
2. What does the crime at Gibeah reveal about the moral condition of Israel during this period? How do the actions of the men of Gibeah and the old man's response illustrate this decline?
3. How did the Levite's handling of the crime against his concubine escalate into a national controversy? What might have been a more appropriate way to address the situation?
4. What were the consequences of the Israelites' rash vow not to give their daughters in marriage to the Benjamites? How can we avoid making similar hasty decisions in our lives?
5. How did the Israelites balance—or fail to balance—justice and mercy in their actions against Jabesh-Gilead and the remaining Benjamites? What does this teach us about the importance of compassion in seeking justice?
6. How did the Israelites seek God's guidance throughout these events? What does their approach teach us about the necessity of sincere repentance and humility when seeking divine direction?
7. How did the Israelites' schemes to provide wives for the Benjamites reveal their misunderstanding of God's will? What does this tell us about the dangers of manipulating situations to fit our plans?
8. How did the Israelites' solution to the problem of wives for the Benjamites violate the rights and dignity of the Shiloh girls and their families? What modern applications can we draw from this regarding respect for individual rights?
9. The story highlights the principle of sowing and reaping. How did the actions of the Levite, the men of Gibeah, and the Benjamites lead to their respective consequences? How does this principle apply to our lives today?

10. Despite the moral failures and chaos, how is God's grace evident in the sparing of the remnant of Benjamin? What can we learn from this about finding hope and redemption in difficult circumstances?