

JUDGES || *The Rollercoaster of Sin*
Judges 19–21 || *One Ends, Another Begins*
North Center || December 20, 2023
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Today is New Years Eve, which is a time when many of us reflect on the year behind us and anticipate all that God has in store for us in the year ahead. If there was ever a Sunday to preach an inspiring, motivational sermon, this would be the day. “*God is with you. God is for you. So, God and do great things for God!*” If there was ever a time for a pastor to preach a message like that, it would be on the eve of a new year. Preach a sermon that fills your congregation with **confidence in God** so that they look toward the new year with hope.

Well, there are at least two different ways to do this...

1. A pastor can seek to build his people’s **confidence in God** by focusing on a story in the Bible that shows how good and powerful and capable God is... so that we leave trusting Him more. And that’s the kind of sermon that we are hoping for – and the kind that is so fun to preach.
2. But there is another way to build people’s **confidence in God**, and that is by focusing on a story in the Bible that reveals how sinful and broken and helpless people are... **so that** we leave zero confidence in our own inner goodness or in our own moral strength – so that we might put all of our confidence in God alone.

In the providence of God, we find ourselves in the final chapters in Judges this morning, and the story that we are about to hear is one of the most powerful reminders (in the entire Bible) of how much we need God to be the Lord of our life in 2024, but I’m telling you – it’s not a fun story. In fact, it’s one of the hardest stories in the entire Bible to read. Only the crucifixion is a harder story for me to read.

I didn’t plan on preaching one of the darkest stories in the Bible on the final Sunday of 2023, but I think there are at least two reasons why (in God’s sovereign timing) this is the perfect Sunday to preach these chapters:

1. It’s appropriate that the Christmas story be surrounded by darkness. These chapters are dark (so dark), and Jesus came into a world that was dark. When we read about the darkness of humanity in these chapters, we are reminded of how desperately we need the Light of the world (**John 8:12**). Jesus did not come down a chimney into a cozy house filled with dazzling Christmas lights. He came as a baby, born in a stable, in a world full of people who loved the darkness (**John 3:19**).
2. It’s appropriate for the final Sunday of this year we anticipate (with hope and prayerful expectancy) what God is going to do as we turn the page into the new year. The final chapters of Judges are full of darkness and despair and total depravity, but then we turn the page to the book of Ruth – which is full of hope and healing and the promise of the coming Messiah. As one chapter ends (*and we feel a sense of hopelessness with the darkness all around us*), it is preparing us for a new chapter that is about to begin (*where we see that God is at work – doing amazing things – even in the midst of our darkness*).

PRAY

And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel...

~ **Judges 19:1**

This phrase shows up 4 times in the last 5 chapters, and it’s not just a political statement; it’s a spiritual statement. It’s describing the allegiance of the people’s hearts. They served no one. They bowed down to no one. They submitted to no one – not even God. “*Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (**21:25**). One of the things that makes the book of Judges so important for the church today is that we are living in the same world. Our contemporary culture is obsessed with the idea of “**personal truth**” (e.g., *What’s true for you is true for you, and what’s true for me is true for me. There is no such thing as universal reality; the only thing that matters is my personal feelings and my personal experiences*).

- If I say there is no god, then that's true for me.
- If I say that I'm a teenage girl trapped in a grown man's body, then that's true for me, and I should be able to live my life accordingly.
- If I want to dress like a Macy's sale (*where my clothes are 50% off...my body*), then I should be able to dress accordingly. Who cares what the Bible says about modesty? Wear what makes you feel good.
- If I feel a romantic pull toward the same gender, don't call it sin; call it love, and embrace it. It doesn't matter what God's Word says. The only thing that matters is how you feel.
- You don't want the baby in your womb? *Just kill it.* "It's your body, and therefore it's your choice, and you should be able to act accordingly." It requires thousands of dollars to hire an assassin to kill somebody (*not to mention some black-market connections*), but there's a good chance that your own insurance company will cover the cost for you to assassinate the baby in your womb. *Do what feels right.*
- Tired of your marriage? *Just get a divorce.*
- Going through a hard season in your church? *Just leave.*

Do whatever feels right in your own eyes. In your marriage. With your money. In your church. With your body. With your lifestyle. You do you. And I'll do me. And oh, what a world it will be...

And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in [America] Israel...

~ *Judges 19:1*

This has been the trajectory of the book of Judges, and these final chapters show us what this kind of worldview leads to.

READ 19:1-3

- A Levite is staying in the **remote** mountains of Ephraim (*19:1*).
 - *God had given the tribe of Levi a sacred responsibility (1) of serving in the house of God; (2) they were called to be teachers and protectors of God's law, and (3) they were called to keep watch over the cities of refuge.*¹
 - *And because of their sacred calling, the tribe of Levi didn't receive any land of their own in the Promised Land. Instead, God gave them 48 cities that they were to live in.*²
 - It seems as though this Levi is not **living** where God had called him, and he is not **servicing** as God had commanded him. He has abandoned the work and the place to which God had called him as he lives in the remote mountains of Ephraim.
- He took for himself a concubine (*19:1*).
 - *What is a concubine? Legally, a concubine was a man's wife, but relationally, she was little more than a female servant...who existed to give him children and gratify his pleasures.*
- She ends up "*playing the harlot against him*" and then runs back to her family in Bethlehem (*19:2*) – probably because she knew the penalty for adultery in that culture.³ After four months had passed, he decides to go get her. The text says that he was going "*to speak kindly to her and bring her back*" (*19:3*), and at this point **the story actually sounds a little bit like Christmas** (*a man whose life was set apart for God arrives in Bethlehem to bring good tidings for His bride who was deserving of death and to bring her home to be with him*). But we already know (from verse 1) that this man is nothing like Jesus. In fact, by the time this story is over, this man is not the savior in this story; he's the villain.
- So, the Levite travels to Bethlehem (to her family's house), and the girl's father shows over-the-top hospitality to the Levite.

READ 19:4-9

¹ See Exod–Deut.

² E.g., Josh 21.

³ E.g., Lev 20; Deut 22.

I've spent hours wondering what the point of these verses are. The author could have simply said that the Levite stayed there five days and then left with his wife, but the author drags the story out with all this imagery of the girl's father delaying him. I think one of the things we are meant to see is that that this Levite is easily persuaded. In **verse 18**, we hear the Levite say that he is on a journey to the house of the Lord. If that was true, then there was nothing more important than for him to be on his way...but he stays – and he stays – and he stays... why? because he is being persuaded by the voices around him.

As you look at the calling that God has placed on your life (*parent, spouse, child, student, Christian...*) where is God calling you to go, and what voices are you listening to that are “*detaining*” you from God’s call?

Finally, he’s stayed long enough, and he takes his wife, his servant, his donkeys, and heads out...

READ 19:10–15

He waited to start his journey until “*the day was far spent*” (19:11). Let me say a word to all young people in the room (kids, teens, young adults): *don't wait to start your journey with God until later on in your life. Sometimes, people think that being young is about having fun and that you can wait to have a relationship with God until you are older. When I was growing up, my dad used to ask me (almost every single day) where I was reading in my Bible. And some kids might think, “I don't need to spend time reading my Bible; I'm just a kid. I'll do that when I'm older.” I'm telling you, the longer you wait, the harder it gets.*

This man waited until the day was coming to an end before he started his journey, and that was a huge problem because (*at this time and in this part of the world*) you didn't want to be caught outdoors after the sun went down. It wasn't safe. And so, the man's servant suggested that they spend the night in Jebus (*which was the city of Jerusalem before it was captured by King David*). But the Levite refused to spend the night there because (at that time) the city was still controlled by *Canaanites (pagan, Jebusites)*. He expected that it would be better for them to be in a city full of God's chosen people than it would be for them to spend the night in a city full of people who don't know God. And he had every reason to expect that this would be true because God's people were supposed to be known for their hospitality.⁴

He decides to spend the night in a city called Gibeah because it was inhabited by Israelites from the tribe of Benjamin, and so, he expected that they would be loved and cared for by the people of the city because God's law commands that kind of hospitality (*in that day & in our day*).⁵

So, they come into the city just after sunset, and they should have known right away that something was very wrong in this city: ***nobody invited them into their home***. Have you ever watched a movie where the scene starts to make you feel nervous and the music suddenly gets eerie, and you have this feeling that something bad is about to happen? If this was a movie, that's the kind of music that would be playing right now. They have entered into a city full of God's people, but nobody is acting like God's people.

So, they sit down in the town square because there's nowhere else to go. They started too late, ran out of time, and now they are in a city that doesn't want anything to do with strangers. The sun has set, and the streets are about to get dangerous.

READ 19:16–21

Another outsider (*who was also from the mountains of Ephraim*) was living in Gibeah, and he sees the Levite and his traveling companions, and he invites them to stay with him. He says, whatever you do, “*do not spend the night in the open square*” (19:20). And so they go to his house, wash up, share a meal, and settle down to enjoy the evening together.

And this is the moment where every single person in this story turns out to be the villain.

⁴ E.g., Lev 19:34.

⁵ E.g., Matt 25:35; James 1:27.

READ 19:22–25

They had settled down for the evening and were enjoying each other's company when suddenly fists begin pounding on the door. So, the man of the house opens the door, and sees that his home is surrounded by a mob of perverted and wicked men (19:22). They tell the man of the house to bring out his guest so that they can engage in a group homosexual relationship with him. And, initially, this host sounds like he might actually be the one good guy in this story full of cowards and perverts. He begs them not to act so wickedly and tells them that what they are about to do is outrageous (19:23). At this point (*having read all the other stories in Judges*) we are hoping that he is going to pull out his left-handed dagger (*like Ehud*) or grab his ox goad (*like Shamgar*) or pick up a tent peg (*like Jael*) or start swinging a donkey's jawbone (*like Samson*) and go to war to defend those who were entrusted to his care. This man has opened his home to protect this family, and now we expect that he is going to finish what he started.

But then he takes his own mask off, and suddenly he looks just as evil as the men outside. **Instead** of grabbing whatever weapon he could find and fighting for the safety of his guests – **instead** of standing in the doorway and saying “*over my dead body will you come into this home*” – **instead** of offering himself as a substitute to protect those in his home...he offers to send out his daughter and the Levite's wife as a substitute (19:24). Let that sink in. This man is the most honorable person we have met so far in this city, and his plan is to offer up his daughter and the Levite's wife in order to get this violent and perverted mob to leave.

The mob doesn't accept his offer, and so, in the most horrific moment imaginable, he grabs the Levites' wife, shoves her outside, and shuts the door behind her. Her husband and her host are both on the other side of the door, and she is left to face the wolves alone. **What does her husband do in that moment?** Does he break down the door to fight for his bride? Does he scream his rage at what is taking place right in front of him? Does he offer himself in her place? Does he give himself up to them in order to save his wife? Does he fall to floor and weep uncontrollably for what is about to happen? No. None of these things. In fact, the Hebrew text is a little ambiguous as to which man shoved her outside. It may have been the host, but it also could have been him. He could have been the one who gave his bride to the wolves. Either way, she is left alone to face a hell on earth, and what does he do? He lays down and apparently goes to sleep. When the morning finally came, the mob let the woman go, and this is how the story ends...

READ 19:26–30

When the Levite wakes up in the morning and finds his wife on the ground just outside the door, what does he do? Does he fall to his knees and scoop her up in his arms? Does he collapse on the ground next to her as he sobs for the unspeakable horror she has just endured? Does he scream in terror and rage? No. He looks down at her and says, “*Get up*” (19:28). When she doesn't respond, he realizes that she's dead. **So, now what does he do?** Does he bury her? No. He picks her up and throws her over his donkey and goes back home. He doesn't go to the temple like he said he was. He doesn't bring this tragedy before the throne of God. He doesn't seek God's help. No, this man has long ago walked away from God. He brings her home, and then (instead of burying her) he treats her like a sacrificial animal. He divides her into 12 pieces and sends those 12 pieces throughout the land – so the people would see a visual of the horror that had taken place by Benjamin.

That's how chapter 19 ends. And the last two chapters end with the rest of Israel in outrage against Benjamin. Civil war breaks out, and over 85,000 were killed, their families murdered, and their cities were burned to the ground. And then the final chapter is a story of men running around the country stealing women to be wives.

READ 21:25.

THE END

CONCLUSION

If you get to the end of this book and think to yourself, “I could never do that; I could never do those things. I could never treat somebody like that,” then you don't understand the point of Judges.

The point of this book is to show us that, when God is **not** the King of our heart and our mind and our affections, every single one of us is capable of anything.

You say, “I could never do that.” Well, maybe not today. And maybe not tomorrow. But when you live your life based on what seems good to you instead of what God’s Word says, it’s only a matter of time until your heart gets to this place. Note that nobody is doing chapter 19 kinds of things in chapter 1. Sin is a progression. It’s one small step of compromise after another after another. **You don’t start out** in chapter 21 where you’re stealing women; you start in chapter 1 where you are fighting for them (1:12–13). You get to chapter 21 through a lifetime of compromise. **You don’t start out** sacrificing your wife to save your skin (19:25); you start out by going to war against anyone who would ever threaten her safety (1:1–19). You get to chapter 19 after a lifetime of compromise. Slowly getting comfortable with sin. Slowly becoming complacent with a culture that rejects God. Slowly getting rid of God in your thinking until your mind has embraced the darkness around you (*Romans 1*) – until eventually, your heart becomes a new Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen 19*).

You take God out of the public school. You take Christianity out of the history books. You take creation out of the science books. You take the 10 Commandments out of government buildings. You replace family worship with the family television. You replace the Sunday Gathering with Sunday Football. You replace time in the Word with time scrolling your phone. You replace having a family for having a career and bank account. You become numb to the practice of abortion. You become comfortable with an entertainment industry that increasingly mocks God’s Word. You continue in this trajectory long enough, and you will find that a society is capable of anything (*even those who profess to have a relationship with God like this Levite*).

That’s the point of Judges. The point of Judges is for you to look into the mirror and see the depravity of your own heart. This isn’t a picture of some primitive culture in a galaxy far, far away. This is a picture of the human heart that has rejected the authority of God. The book of Judges is meant to show you a trajectory of sin. This is where it leads. Not “maybe”. Not “sometimes”. There is where it always leads. Every time.

If you get to this point in Judges, and your heart feels sick with a sense of hopelessness and despair, you have been reading it correctly. The point of this book is to bring every single one of us to the end of ourselves, to reveal the depths of our depravity, to glimpse the deceptive wickedness within our own heart, to see that even the best of us are capable of the worst of us...**so that** we will utterly despair of hoping in ourselves...**so that** we might utterly depend on the only One who can deliver us from a heart like this. The point of Judges is make us unimpressed with the person in the mirror so that we might turn our eyes on the promised Deliverer and look full in His wonderful face – where there is hope and forgiveness and help.

Because that’s who our God is. He doesn’t leave us in our hopelessness. As you consider the hardships that you endured this past year, the beauty of our God is that here is always hope in store for His people – even on the very next page. When you turn the last page of Judges, you open to a book called Ruth – which is a story that takes place during the time of the Judges (*Ruth 1:1*). And if you don’t know anything about Ruth, it’s enough to say that it’s a story full of hope and grace and redemption in God.

APPLICATION: *How shall we then live* (if we have no confidence in our own ability to walk with God)?

Start your year with God. As you make your plans and dream your dreams and set your resolutions, don’t start with your diet or your muscles or your budget or your vacations or your school ambitions...start with God. With God’s help, praying consider how are you going to invest 2024 into your relationship with God.

Start your year with God. **Start your week with God.** Prioritize this Gathering with your local church on the Lord’s Day. Don’t try squeezing the Lord’s Day into your schedule. Start with the Lord’s day, and then build your schedule from there.

Start your day with God. Set aside a specific place in your home (*a spot at the kitchen table, a corner in your living room*) and set aside a specific time each day when you can spend time listening to God speak to you in His Word and when you can spend time talking to Him in prayer.