

Judges 20-21 – “Civil War”

Chapter 19 dealt with a disgraceful act causing the death of a man’s wife. That then led to another horrible act which leaves you wondering how anyone can sink to this sort of action. It’s horrendous and meant to shake you to your core to realize the depth of sin and wickedness that is possible when people walk away from God’s ideal. And it affects many people. One groups deplorable act will lead to the death of 65,000 people in Chapter 20. Sin has far reaching consequences which we can never underestimate.

These last three chapters of Judges can be outlined as follows:

1. Benjamin’s Perversion – Ch. 19
2. Benjamin’s Purge – Ch. 20
3. Benjamin’s Preservation – Ch. 21

20:1-2 - *So all the children of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, as well as from the land of Gilead, and the congregation gathered together as one man before the Lord at Mizpah. ² And the leaders of all the people, all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand foot soldiers who drew the sword.*

Many people came out from all across the land. From Dan to Beersheba was a way of saying that it encompassed all the territory of Israel.

Gilead was east of the Jordan River.

A great army came out, 400,000 soldiers who could handle the sword.

Now it’s interesting that the author in this chapter highlights the unity of Israel.

They ***gathered together as one man*** (cf. vv. 8+11). Yet we’re going to see that one tribe is going to take a different action and is going to greatly cost the unity of Israel. It’s actually going to lead to a civil war.

We get a hint of this right off the bat because though Benjamin seems to know about the meeting in Mizpah, they decide not to go.

20:3-7 - *(Now the children of Benjamin heard that the children of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) Then the children of Israel said, “Tell us, how did this wicked deed happen?” ⁴ So the Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered, answered and said, “My concubine and I went into Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin, to spend the night. ⁵ And the men of Gibeah*

rose against me, and surrounded the house at night because of me. They intended to kill me, but instead they ravished my concubine so that she died. ⁶ So I took hold of my concubine, cut her in pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of the inheritance of Israel, because they committed lewdness and outrage in Israel. ⁷ Look! All of you are children of Israel; give your advice and counsel here and now!”

The people gathered want to know more about what happened. Each tribe has received an arm or a leg, a finger or a toe of the concubine and they're wanting to know what in the world necessitated that. So the Levite begins to share his tragic story, but it seems there's some revisionism going on. He's making himself out to be the victim. He certainly could have protected her more. It seemed he was rather calloused towards her, he brought her out to them (19:25).

But the Levite is clear, the people of Gibeah ***committed lewdness and outrage in Israel***. This is a major problem and concern.

But notice what's happening here, it's going to be repeated in this chapter, the Levite is seeking advice, but nobody seems to be taking this to the Lord. The Levite wants the people's advice, but He should be asking for the Lord's counsel. Again, we're going to make a quick mess of things if we're going off of our own wisdom and counsel and not allowing the Lord to lead.

20:8-11 - So all the people arose as one man, saying, “None of us will go to his tent, nor will any turn back to his house; ⁹ but now this is the thing which we will do to Gibeah: We will go up against it by lot. ¹⁰ We will take ten men out of every hundred throughout all the tribes of Israel, a hundred out of every thousand, and a thousand out of every ten thousand, to make provisions for the people, that when they come to Gibeah in Benjamin, they may repay all the vileness that they have done in Israel.” ¹¹ So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, united together as one man.

How quick we can be to make plans and say, 'We will do this... Lord bless it.' When what we really need to do is ask, 'God, what do You want me to do?' And you can be sure that when we start with that sort of prayer, and wait for God to direct, we're going to spare ourselves a lot of trouble.

In making their own plans, Israel decides to take 10% of their men (men of war, vs. 17). These men are selected from 11 tribes as Benjamin is not a part of this.

They gather an army of 400,000 soldiers who can handle the sword (vs. 2+17). They are ready for business, they're ready for a fight.

Again, we see in vs. 8 and 11 the emphasis that they are united as **one man**. They may be united in their plans, but they're not united with God's plans. And though they may feel strengthened in numbers and unity, numbers are no indication that you are doing what is right. Don't look to side with the majority, always seek to side with what God desires.

20:12-17 - Then the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What is this wickedness that has occurred among you? ¹³ Now therefore, deliver up the men, the perverted men who are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and remove the evil from Israel!" But the children of Benjamin would not listen to the voice of their brethren, the children of Israel. ¹⁴ Instead, the children of Benjamin gathered together from their cities to Gibeah, to go to battle against the children of Israel. ¹⁵ And from their cities at that time the children of Benjamin numbered twenty-six thousand men who drew the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah, who numbered seven hundred select men. ¹⁶ Among all this people were seven hundred select men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair's breadth and not miss. ¹⁷ Now besides Benjamin, the men of Israel numbered four hundred thousand men who drew the sword; all of these were men of war.

The Benjamites are not acting too wisely here. They're more interested in showing loyalty to their tribe (of which Gibeah was a town in their territory) than they are in being loyal and obedient to God.

- How we need to be careful that we don't align with the unrighteous in their guilt. This is what the men of Benjamin are doing. They're thinking they need to stand up for their own, but you cannot justify partnering with that which is evil and against God. These are perverted men. Remember from last time (19:22) this word for perverted is translated 'sons of Belial'. These are people that have given themselves over to the work of the enemy/Satan. They are not to be partnered with or helped. This kind of wickedness needs to be expunged from Israel, and this is God's means to do this.
- Don't defend it or align with it because you only do so to your detriment. You're getting into a battle you have no business being a part of and will be fighting against something much bigger than what you think. It never pays when you align with that which is evil.

20:18-20 - Then the children of Israel arose and went up to the house of God to inquire of God. They said, “Which of us shall go up first to battle against the children of Benjamin?” The Lord said, “Judah first!”¹⁹ So the children of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah.²⁰ And the men of Israel went out to battle against Benjamin, and the men of Israel put themselves in battle array to fight against them at Gibeah.

Judah first was always the way they were to go into battle. This is the tribe that means praise. They were to go forth in praise and worship of God. We saw that in the beginning of Judges where Judah was to go first against the Canaanites (1:1). But there they asked the Lord (Yahweh). Here they ask God (Elohim). It seems their relationship has quickly changed. They’re no longer asking in the personal name of the Lord and coming to Him relationally, they’re asking of God, in a generic sense. Previously they sought the Lord to fight against the enemy, but now they’re fighting one another.

- But there’s coming a day when Judah will lead the nation in righteousness. One day Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah will accomplish this to the praise and glory of God.

So they’re asking the wrong question. They should be asking, ‘*Should we go up to battle against the children of Benjamin?*’

They inquired of God, but they already had their decision made whether to go.

20:21-23 - Then the children of Benjamin came out of Gibeah, and on that day cut down to the ground twenty-two thousand men of the Israelites.²² And the people, that is, the men of Israel, encouraged themselves and again formed the battle line at the place where they had put themselves in array on the first day.²³ Then the children of Israel went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and asked counsel of the Lord, saying, “Shall I again draw near for battle against the children of my brother Benjamin?” And the Lord said, “Go up against him.”

The Benjamites were few in number compared to the rest of Israel. Benjamites were 26,700 vs. 400,000 of Israel. And yet, the Benjamites had a decisive victory. Israel lost 22,000 men.

Now they’re beginning to see the importance to seek the Lord properly. So they come to Him and inquire whether to go up again against the people of Benjamin. The Lord, perhaps surprisingly to us, says yes.

20:24-25 - *So the children of Israel approached the children of Benjamin on the second day. ²⁵ And Benjamin went out against them from Gibeah on the second day, and cut down to the ground eighteen thousand more of the children of Israel; all these drew the sword.*

Why did the Israelites get defeated again? Didn't God say go? Well He did, but He didn't ensure them a victory. You see, God had to bring the Israelites to a place of humility and repentance. This tragedy that happened in Gibeah was not just the result of a few people, or a single tribe acting wickedly, it was due ultimately to the entire nation becoming corrupt and immoral. The Israelites were in no place to point the finger, they needed to see their sin too.

- God is using this whole occasion to reveal Israel's need for Him and the importance of walking in obedience to His ways. He's using this time to chasten and purify all of Israel, all the while saving the bulk of His judgment for the Benjamites.
- These can be troubling passages to see how it all played out and why God operated this way. There will be things that we don't understand well. But when we come to things we don't know, it's good to remember what we do know, and that is that God is never unjust. He never does something wrong. We may not understand it, but the problem is not with God, it's with us. Let's not question Him but trust Him. He has a good reason for all that He does.

What's interesting is what we see Israel doing next...

20:26-28 - *Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the Lord and fasted that day until evening; and they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. ²⁷ So the children of Israel inquired of the Lord (the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, ²⁸ and Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days), saying, "Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of my brother Benjamin, or shall I cease?" And the Lord said, "Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand."*

They fasted, prayed and offered sacrifices. There was an act of repentance and restoration. Now God could work on their behalf.

And we see now the Lord not just giving permission to go, but now He's promising their victory. Something that wasn't given previously.

Notice, the people were ready to stop going against the children of Benjamin if that's what God wanted. They're no longer taking matters into their own hands. They're letting the Lord call the shots.

- Who's calling the shots in your life?

20:29-44 - Then Israel set men in ambush all around Gibeah. ³⁰ And the children of Israel went up against the children of Benjamin on the third day, and put themselves in battle array against Gibeah as at the other times. ³¹ So the children of Benjamin went out against the people, and were drawn away from the city. They began to strike down and kill some of the people, as at the other times, in the highways (one of which goes up to Bethel and the other to Gibeah) and in the field, about thirty men of Israel. ³² And the children of Benjamin said, "They are defeated before us, as at first." But the children of Israel said, "Let us flee and draw them away from the city to the highways." ³³ So all the men of Israel rose from their place and put themselves in battle array at Baal Tamar. Then Israel's men in ambush burst forth from their position in the plain of Geba. ³⁴ And ten thousand select men from all Israel came against Gibeah, and the battle was fierce. But the Benjamites did not know that disaster was upon them. ³⁵ The Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel. And the children of Israel destroyed that day twenty-five thousand one hundred Benjamites; all these drew the sword. ³⁶ So the children of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. The men of Israel had given ground to the Benjamites, because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah. ³⁷ And the men in ambush quickly rushed upon Gibeah; the men in ambush spread out and struck the whole city with the edge of the sword. ³⁸ Now the appointed signal between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise up from the city, ³⁹ whereupon the men of Israel would turn in battle. Now Benjamin had begun to strike and kill about thirty of the men of Israel. For they said, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle." ⁴⁰ But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, the Benjamites looked behind them, and there was the whole city going up in smoke to heaven. ⁴¹ And when the men of Israel turned back, the men of Benjamin panicked, for they saw that disaster had come upon them. ⁴² Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness; but the battle overtook them, and whoever came out of the cities they destroyed in their midst. ⁴³ They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them, and easily

trampled them down as far as the front of Gibeah toward the east. ⁴⁴ And eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell; all these were men of valor.

Israel implements a familiar strategy – an ambush, this is what Israel did at Ai (Joshua 8:17-22). A small group from Israel drew the Benjamites out of their city. The people of Benjamin thought they were going to have another easy victory like the previous two times. But then out came a group of 10,000 to come against Gibeah. Once the Benjamites saw their city being taken, they knew they had been defeated. 25,100 Benjamites died that day (vs. 35), leaving them with 600.

20:45-48 - Then they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon; and they cut down five thousand of them on the highways. Then they pursued them relentlessly up to Gidom, and killed two thousand of them. ⁴⁶ So all who fell of Benjamin that day were twenty-five thousand men who drew the sword; all these were men of valor. ⁴⁷ But six hundred men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and they stayed at the rock of Rimmon for four months. ⁴⁸ And the men of Israel turned back against the children of Benjamin, and struck them down with the edge of the sword—from every city, men and beasts, all who were found. They also set fire to all the cities they came to.

It was a thorough defeat and God's judgment was swift against the Benjamites. And it wasn't just for the perversion that happened at Gibeah, it was because these Benjamites came to their aid. They fought on their behalf rather than fighting for the Lord. They were disobedient and rebellious and paid a price.

21:1-3 - Now the men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah, saying, “None of us shall give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife.” ² Then the people came to the house of God, and remained there before God till evening. They lifted up their voices and wept bitterly, ³ and said, “O Lord God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that today there should be one tribe missing in Israel?”

This is almost humorous if it wasn't so sad. The men of Israel have decimated the tribe of Benjamin but now they're sorry that there will be one less tribe among them. Apparently this oath was made when they gathered at Mizpah before the battle.

- It's so true how we can be so quick to take action and not think through the potential consequences. How we need to be weighing everything out carefully and wisely before the Lord.

Their oath was very binding. They're grieving that they said it. This is why we're not to arbitrarily make oaths or vows. God is a God of His Word and we are to be as well.

21:4-5 - *So it was, on the next morning, that the people rose early and built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. ⁵ The children of Israel said, "Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up with the assembly to the Lord?" For they had made a great oath concerning anyone who had not come up to the Lord at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death."*

Another oath is mentioned, which said that whoever did not join in the battle must be put to death. All of Israel was summoned, all the tribes saw a piece of the concubine delivered to them. So now Israel is looking at who else needs to be purged.

They're fresh off of mourning the outcome of their attack against Benjamin, now they're ready to put more to death? Doesn't make sense. But such is the case when everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes.

- None of this seems to be the direction of the Lord but rather what they feel is the right thing to do.

21:6-9 - *And the children of Israel grieved for Benjamin their brother, and said, "One tribe is cut off from Israel today. ⁷ What shall we do for wives for those who remain, seeing we have sworn by the Lord that we will not give them our daughters as wives?" ⁸ And they said, "What one is there from the tribes of Israel who did not come up to Mizpah to the Lord?" And, in fact, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh Gilead to the assembly. ⁹ For when the people were counted, indeed, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead was there.*

Jabesh Gilead, a town east of the Jordan river, didn't show up for the battle. They become the next targeted people.

21:10-15 - *So the congregation sent out there twelve thousand of their most valiant men, and commanded them, saying, "Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead with the edge of the sword, including the women and children. ¹¹ And this is the thing that you shall do: You shall utterly destroy every male, and every woman who has known a man intimately." ¹² So they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead four hundred young virgins who had not known a man intimately; and they brought them to the camp at*

Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan. ¹³ Then the whole congregation sent word to the children of Benjamin who were at the rock of Rimmon, and announced peace to them. ¹⁴ So Benjamin came back at that time, and they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh Gilead; and yet they had not found enough for them. ¹⁵ And the people grieved for Benjamin, because the Lord had made a void in the tribes of Israel.

This is unfortunate in that Israel is trying to make up for a wrong in almost taking out Benjamin, but they commit another offense. Two wrongs don't make a right. We need to be sure we don't justify an act of evil to try and make something right.

- Ever done that? We can quickly overlook something because we're trying to accomplish something better. But we never need to align ourselves with that which is wrong.

21:16-23 - Then the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for wives for those who remain, since the women of Benjamin have been destroyed?" ¹⁷ And they said, "There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe may not be destroyed from Israel. ¹⁸ However, we cannot give them wives from our daughters, for the children of Israel have sworn an oath, saying, 'Cursed be the one who gives a wife to Benjamin.' " ¹⁹ Then they said, "In fact, there is a yearly feast of the Lord in Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah." ²⁰ Therefore they instructed the children of Benjamin, saying, "Go, lie in wait in the vineyards, ²¹ and watch; and just when the daughters of Shiloh come out to perform their dances, then come out from the vineyards, and every man catch a wife for himself from the daughters of Shiloh; then go to the land of Benjamin. ²² Then it shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to us to complain, that we will say to them, 'Be kind to them for our sakes, because we did not take a wife for any of them in the war; for it is not as though you have given the women to them at this time, making yourselves guilty of your oath.' " ²³ And the children of Benjamin did so; they took enough wives for their number from those who danced, whom they caught. Then they went and returned to their inheritance, and they rebuilt the cities and dwelt in them.

600 wives just wasn't enough, so they hatch another plot to gather more wives for the tribe of Benjamin to have the best possible chance of success.

This time it involves kidnapping. No big deal in this day!

When the girls come to celebrate the feast (possibly Passover or Tabernacles) and do their dance, then the men of Benjamin who have been in hiding, will jump out and take a wife.

This wouldn't be breaking the oath by these Father's of captured brides because they didn't give their daughters away, they were taken. It was a matter of semantics.

You can see the lunacy of legalism that will only become more outlandish by the religious leaders in Jesus' day. They're doing everything to keep their oath legalistically, but overlooking greater error just to fulfill their vow.

21:24-25 - *So the children of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family; they went out from there, every man to his inheritance. ²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*"

The book ends with the solemn reminder that everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. And it's a grim reality when this is taking place.

We are called to do what is right in God's eyes. Then and only then will we experience a life that is free from the pain and torment that sin brings.

The theme of the book of Joshua could be 'Victory through Faith'.

The theme of the book of Judges could be 'Failure through Compromise'.

- It's a lesson we all need to learn that when we get away from God's ideal, we're heading for failure. Don't kid yourself.
- It's only when Israel, and only when we, allow the Lord to truly rule us and be our King that we will experience the peace and blessing He has for us.

Points to Ponder:

1. Being quick to launch into action before seeking counsel from the Lord is a recipe for disaster. Seek Him first!
2. It can be so easy to see the sin in others and come down with judgment, but make sure that you are not hiding sin in your own life. Walk in humility.
3. Don't make up for wrongs by doing more wrong. See how the Lord wants you to make things right and to be sure to do it His way and not your way.