

The Nation without a King...but not without Its God

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, we come to our Bible reading, and perhaps you'd turn with me to the book of Judges, chapter 20. And you'll find this on page 219 in our hardback Bibles, Judges, chapter 20.

Now, in fact, we'll be reading chapters 20 and 21 as the evening goes on. It's a little bit long to do as a single reading, at least I thought it was, so I'll read chapter 20 in just a moment, and I'll save chapter 21 for just before the sermon.

But let me introduce the passage before I read, because it's very much related to what we were reading last week from chapter 19. Chapters 19 and 20 and 21 form a single story.

It's the story of a localized incident which breaks out into the horrors of a civil war. In which 65,000 soldiers are killed.

All who die are Israelites, and those who kill them are Israelites. And the author of Judges is showing us what happens when the people of God turn their backs on God and follow the pagan culture around them.

[1 : 15] And, of course, there are lessons for the people of God today. Now, this localized incident, which we studied last week, concerned the murder of one young woman from Bethlehem.

She was a concubine. That is, a kind of second-class wife or a sex slave. And her husband was a Levite. He'd come from the priestly clan or tribe of Levi, but he proved to be a scoundrel.

She had deserted him. And he went after her to find her and fetch her back to his home. And having found her, they journeyed back home, and they spent the night at a town called Gibeah, which was in the land of Benjamin, in the tribal area of Benjamin.

And having had their dinner, they were just relaxing, and a gang of men from Gibeah, intent on rape, surrounded the house where they were lodging. And without going into all the details of the story, this Levite took his concubine, and he pushed her out of the door to the gang of men.

And they raped her and abused her all night long. She'd just managed, as dawn was breaking, to crawl back to the door of the house. And in the morning, her husband found her dead on the doorstep.

[2 : 27] He picked up her body. He laid it across his donkey. He took it home, and he cut it up limb from limb into 12 pieces, and he sent these packages throughout the length and breadth of the country, one body part for each of the 12 tribes.

Presumably, the couriers who carried these body parts explained where they had come from and what had happened to the woman. Well, the people of Israel, as the final verse of chapter 19 indicates, were scandalized at what had happened, and they called a great national assembly so as to decide how to respond to the outrage.

So this brings us to chapter 20, verse 1. 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.

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.

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? 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.

[3 : 51] 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. 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.

Behold, you people of Israel, all of you, give your advice and counsel here. 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.

But now this is what we will do to Gibeah. We will go up against it by lot, 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.

So all the men of Israel gathered against the city, united as one man. And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying, What evil is this that has taken place among you?

Now therefore, give up the men, the worthless fellows in Gibeah, that we may put them to death and purge evil from Israel. But the Benjaminites would not listen to the voice of their brothers, the people of Israel.

[5 : 14] Then the people of Benjamin came together out of the cities to Gibeah to go out to battle against the people of Israel. 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.

Among all these were 700 chosen men who were left-handed. Everyone could sling a stone at a hare and not miss. And the men of Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered 400,000 men who drew the sword.

All these were men of war. 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. Then the people of Israel rose in the morning and encamped against Gibeah. 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.

The people of Benjamin came out of Gibeah and destroyed on that day 22,000 men of the Israelites. 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.

[6 : 31] 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.

So the people of Israel came near against the people of Benjamin the second day. 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. 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.

And the people of Israel inquired of the Lord, for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days. And Phinehas, the son of Eliezer, 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. So Israel sent men in ambush around Gibeah.

[7 : 43] 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. 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.

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.

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 Mare Geber.

And there came against Gibeah ten thousand chosen men out of all Israel. And the battle was hard, but the Benjaminites did not know that disaster was close upon them.

[8 : 42] And the Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel, and the people of Israel destroyed twenty-five thousand one hundred men of Benjamin that day. All these were men who drew the sword.

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.

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. 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, 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. 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.

Then the men of Israel turned, and the men of Benjamin were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them. Therefore they turned their backs before the men of Israel in the direction of the wilderness, but the battle overtook them.

[9 : 57] And those who came out of the cities were destroying them in their midst. Surrounding the Benjaminites, they pursued them and trod them down from Noah as far as opposite Gibeah on the east.

Eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell, all of them men of valor. 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 two thousand men of them were struck down.

So all who fell that day of Benjamin were twenty-five thousand men who drew the sword, all of them men of valor. But six hundred men turned, and fled toward the wilderness, to the rock of Rimmon, and remained at the rock of Rimmon four months.

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.

Did you follow the ins and outs of the battle? There was an ambush, and the long and short of it was, that the people of Israel, the troops of Israel, the eleven tribes, crushed the troops of Benjamin in the end.

[11 : 16] But did you notice the six hundred men, that fled to the rock of Rimmon? Now that's very important, for understanding the last chapter. So do bear that in mind. And as I read it, do also bear in mind, the very last verse of the whole book.

Because in a sense, that sums up the message of Judges. So chapter 21. Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah, no one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.

And the people came to Bethel, and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices, and wept bitterly. And they said, O Lord, the God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel, that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel?

And the next day the people rose early, and built there an altar, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. And the people of Israel said, Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly to the Lord?

For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah, saying, He shall surely be put to death. And the people of Israel had compassion for Benjamin, their brother, and said, One tribe is cut off from Israel this day.

[12 : 30] What shall we do for wives, for those who are left? That's the 600. Since we have sworn by the Lord that we will not give them any of our daughters for wives. And they said, What one is there of the tribes of Israel that did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah?

And behold, no one had come to the camp from Jabesh Gilead to the assembly. For when the people were mustered, behold, not one of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead was there.

So, the congregation sent 12,000 of their bravest men there, and commanded them, Go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead with the edge of the sword, also the women, and the little ones.

This is what you shall do. Every male, and every woman that has lain with a male, you shall devote to destruction. And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead, 400 young virgins who had not known a man by lying with him, and they brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

Then the whole congregation sent word to the people of Benjamin, that's the 600, who were at the Rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them. And Benjamin returned at that time.

[13 : 44] And they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh Gilead. But there were not enough for them. And the people had compassion on Benjamin, because the Lord had made a breach in the tribes of Israel.

Then the elders of the congregation said, What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin? And they said, There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel, yet we cannot give them wives from our daughters.

For the people of Israel had sworn, Cursed be he who gives a wife to Benjamin. So they said, Behold, there is the yearly feast of the Lord at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Labona.

And they commanded the people of Benjamin, saying, Go and lie in ambush in the vineyards and watch. If the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and snatch each man his wife from the daughters of Shiloh and go to the land of Benjamin.

And when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, Grant them graciously to us, because we did not take for each man of them his wife in battle, neither did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.

[15 : 04] And the people of Benjamin did so, and took their wives, according to their number, from the dancers whom they carried off. Then they went and returned to their inheritance, and rebuilt the towns and lived in them.

And the people of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and family. And they went out from there, every man to his inheritance. In those days, there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Amen. Well, I wonder if I'm right in guessing that these final chapters of Judges are largely unknown territory to us.

The earlier chapters of Judges are quite different. They're well-known, aren't they? Those famous stories about Ehud, for example, Deborah and Gideon and Barak, and Jephthah and Samson.

They're some of the best-known chapters in the whole of the Old Testament. But these last few chapters of Judges have been, for many people, no-go areas. And I think the reason for that is that they are so gruesome.

[16 : 12] We look at them for a moment, we glance at them just for a moment, and then we shut our Bibles. Because we think, is this Israel? Is this the people of God? How could they behave so brutally?

Let's draw a veil over all this horror, and let's turn to something more wholesome. But, friends, God has not excluded these chapters from our Bibles, and therefore we must not exclude them from our thinking.

Like everything else in the Bible, these stories are here for our instruction. And one of the lessons that they teach us is that membership of the people of God is no guarantee against very bad behavior.

So, before we get into the details of the story, let's remind ourselves of the reasons why Israel had reached this state of rottenness and corruption.

It goes back to the end of the story of Joshua. When Joshua was very old, and realized he was soon going to die, he gathered the elders and the leaders of Israel together to meet him.

[17 : 15] You'll find all this in the final two chapters of the book of Joshua. And he speaks to them. It's a key address. And the heart of his final charge to them was this.

Cling to the Lord. Love the Lord. Serve the Lord. To do this, you must finish the job, the job which is only half done, and the job is to drive out all the Canaanite tribes from the Promised Land.

For, and I'll quote Joshua word for word now, for if you cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you, and if you make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes until you perish from this good land that the Lord your God has given you.

Now that was Joshua's final command and his final warning, and it could not be clearer. But what happens after his death? The Israelites do make a brief half-hearted attempt to drive out the various pagan tribes for a few years, but they don't have the determination and the will to carry the job through, and the very things that Joshua warns them against start to happen thick and fast.

They begin to intermarry with pagans, and inevitably, they begin to worship the gods of the pagan tribes. Things go from bad to worse, and by the time we reach these final chapters of Judges, the people of Israel have become essentially paganized.

[18 : 57] Now they're still using God language. They still speak of the Lord, but their lifestyle and their values have become almost indistinguishable from those of the pagans around them.

And that dreadful incident, told in chapter 19, of a mob in Gibeah wanting to gang-rape either men or women, that shows how the lifestyle of pagan Sodom from back in Genesis has become the lifestyle followed in the promised land by the covenant people.

It's shocking, and we are meant to be shocked by it. And it's not difficult to see how exactly the same kind of creeping corruption from the pagan society around us can affect the life of the covenant people today.

In fact, that very example of the values of Sodom invading the Christian church today is equally shocking, and the extent to which we're not shocked by it will reveal how much our own hearts have been corrupted by the pagan culture in which we live.

Now let's turn to chapters 20 and 21. This sorry tale has the fingerprints of paganism all over it. God language is used, but the people have drifted so far from the Lord that they try to sort out their terrible problem, the problem of the death of this woman, at best by human reasoning and at worst by vengeful violence.

[20 : 26] Look with me at a phrase in chapter 20, verse 13. What they're trying to do is to purge the evil from Israel, this evil deed of the mob in Gibeah who killed the young woman.

But what they end up doing is creating a bloodbath and a civil war. So then, chapter 20 and verse 1. The 12 pieces of the dead concubine sent throughout Israel have had their effect.

And just look at the unity that is created. Look at verse 1. Then all the people of Israel came out from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead, that's across the Jordan, and the congregation assembled as one man to the Lord at Gibeah.

Now, Dan to Beersheba, that's like talking about John O'Groats to Land's End. It's the whole country from top to bottom. They assemble as one man. And the author is at pains to emphasize this unity.

Look at verse 8. And all the people arose as one man. Verse 11. So all the men of Israel gathered against the city of Gibeah, united as one man.

[21 : 39] But it's a strange unity. Just think back to the days of Samson. Samson, on his own, fought the Philistines without the united backing of his fellow Israelites.

There was no unity then as Samson was fighting the real enemy. But now that they're fighting a group within Israel, the Benjaminites, they find a unity that stretches from Dan to Beersheba.

It's painfully ironic. So how do they go about purging the evil of the gang rapists of Gibeah? Well, they come to their decision.

A decision taken by the whole assembly in verses 8, 9, and 10. In those verses, they decide to punish Gibeah by sending selected troops from the different tribes of Israel to the city of Gibeah so as to avenge this foul deed.

Then in verses 12 and 13, having sent their small army to Gibeah, they then send men around all the towns in the Benjamin area with the message, hand over the culprits.

[22 : 45] Surrender these men who have perpetrated this dreadful crime and we will execute them. That sounds reasonable. It's tough, but it's justice. But the response is not what the 11 tribes expect at all.

What happens is that the people of Benjamin close ranks. They say to the other Israelites, take a running jump. We are not handing over our brother Benjaminites.

Whatever they may have done, blood is thicker than justice. So this one-man unity of Israel is suddenly blown apart, so much so that the people of Benjamin not only refuse to hand over the gang rapists, they declare war on the other 11 tribes.

As verse 14 puts it, they come together out of their cities, they gather at Gibeah and go out to battle against the people of Israel, despite extraordinarily unfavorable odds.

26,700 men of Benjamin against 400,000 from Israel. Do the math, as the Americans would say, and that is roughly one Benjaminite against every 15 Israelites.

[23 : 56] That is not smart military strategy, but the Benjaminites are seeing red and not seeing reason. Now, isn't it extraordinary how warfare can be triggered by an isolated incident of this kind?

It was a horrible incident. It was heinous behavior on behalf of the group, on behalf of the gang from Gibeah. But this small localized incident involving one murder triggered off a civil war that killed 65,000 soldiers, not to mention a lot of civilians as well.

Human life can be like that when there is an absence of gentleness and human sympathy. Just think, for example, of the Plebgate affair, which has been rumbling on in London for this last year or two.

Does it make you laugh or cry? It makes me laugh and cry in the same breath. 20 or 30 seconds of ill temper at the gates of Downing Street involving one politician and two or three policemen over what?

A bicycle. A bicycle. And a huge court case erupts consuming thousands of man-hours of work and millions of pounds of money. Now, I have no idea whether Mr. Mitchell or the police were in the right.

[25 : 12] Probably it was half, six of one and half a dozen of the other. But if somebody had said, I'm sorry, I should never have said that, or if somebody had written a note, I've been a Burke, please forgive me, the whole thing surely could have been sorted out and settled very, very quickly.

Stubborn pride causes mayhem. Now, that's what we have here in a much bigger way in Judges chapter 20. There's no gentleness here. There's no willingness to admit fault.

And the result is that a localized incident triggers a horrible civil war leading to the slaughter of tens of thousands. So when the people of God become corrupted and paganized, here's my first point, they try to practice justice, but all they produce is genocide.

And genocide is not too strong a word. Look on to verse 37 of chapter 20 and you'll see that after the Benjaminite soldiers have been defeated, the army of Israel strike all the city of Gibeah with the edge of the sword.

Everybody, that means the women and children and elderly people as well. But then look on to verse 48 at the end of the chapter and we're told that the men of Israel slaughtered even the livestock, the cattle and sheep of the Benjaminites and all the towns that they found they set on fire.

[26 : 38] Every town that they could reach within the Benjamin area. So they didn't just destroy Gibeah, they scorched and devastated every Benjaminite settlement they could get to.

And they killed all the Benjaminite women. Which explains why these 600 surviving Benjaminite soldiers had no one to marry from within their own tribe. So they simply wiped out Benjamin apart from those 600 men.

Let me catalogue the elements of corruption which led to this genocidal disaster. First, if that Levite man had followed the teaching of Moses, he would never have taken a concubine.

He would have been content with his one wife. Second, if the men of Gibeah had followed the teaching of Moses, they would never have formed a mob determined on rape.

They would have learned self-control. Third, if the men of Gibeah, the ones not involved in the gang, had followed the principles of justice taught in the law of Moses, they would have handed the culprits over to proper judicial process.

- [27 : 46] So we have here a toxic cocktail. Polygamy, unrestrained gang lust, and a refusal to exercise judicial discipline.
- And all this among the people of God. This is behavior on a level with the worst of pagan standards. They try to practice justice, and all they achieve is genocide.
- Then secondly, are you feeling depressed? It is very depressing, isn't it? It won't be all the way through. Secondly, they try to practice prayer, but that too leads to genocide.
- The great assembly at Mizpah finishes at verse 10 of chapter 20. And verse 11 tells us that all the men of Israel, numbering 400,000, all this huge army gather against the city of Gibeah.
- Verses 12 to 14 describe the refusal of the Benjaminites to surrender the guilty men. And verses 15 to 17 tell us of the numbers of soldiers involved on both sides.
- [28 : 54] And then in verse 18, we catch a glimpse of the threadbare remnants of covenant faith. There are far too many soldiers for them all to attack Gibeah at once.
- I mean, how can you attack a very small city with 400,000 men? So they pray. They go to Bethel, which was just a few miles up the road from Gibeah. And they go there, as verses 26 and 27 explain, because the Ark of the Lord's Covenant was there at that time.
- And the Ark represented the presence of the Lord in Israel. So they ask the Lord, who shall go up first for us to fight against the people of Benjamin? And presumably, a priest at Bethel gave them the Lord's reply, Judah shall go up first.
- Now that reply is intended to ring a loud bell in the memory of the reader of the book of Judges. And it's a bell that speaks tragedy. There's no need to turn this up, but let me read you the very first two verses of the whole book of Judges.
- Judges 1, verses 1 and 2. After the death of Joshua, the people of Israel inquired of the Lord, who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites to fight against them? And the Lord said, Judah shall go up first.
- [30 : 08] Behold, I've given the land into his hand. Do you see the tragedy? Back in chapter 1, the enemy to be conquered was the Canaanites. They were the real enemy, the enemy designated by the Lord.
- But here in chapter 20, it's the people of Benjamin, their brother Israelites. The book of Judges started with such hope and promise. But, and this is the root of all the corruption, because the Israelites had not followed the Lord's agenda with determination, the very things that Joshua had warned them about happened and they became Canaanites and paganites.
- And the consequence was civil war, genocide, and fratricide, that is the killing of brothers. So they pray in verse 18, but you realize it's a wretched prayer because its intention is aimed in the wrong place.
- It's the kind of prayer that should never have had to be prayed. The Lord answers, Judah shall go up first. The battle rages for three days. On the first day, Benjamin prevails and they kill 22,000 Israelite soldiers.
- On the second day, it's almost the same and 18,000 Israelite soldiers are killed. The Benjaminites are very determined and as verse 16 tells us, some of them are highly skilled with sling and stone.
- [31 : 32] A well-aimed stone can bring a man down, as Goliath found out later when he met David. Then after the second day of defeat, the Israelites in verse 26 behave for a moment with something that looks like real and sincere faith.
- they weep, they sit before the Lord, they fast, they offer sacrifices and they pray. And in verse 28, they say, shall we go out once more to battle against our brothers, the people of Benjamin, or shall we cease?

And the Lord gives them a word of reassurance. He doesn't just say go, as he's done in verse 18 and 23. This time he says, go up, for tomorrow I will give them into your hand.

So on the third day of the battle, these Benjaminites are defeated. I won't try and retell the rather complicated story of the battle, but if you're somebody who enjoys studying military tactics as practiced before the days of gunpowder, you'll find this a fascinating account.

In fact, one of my commentaries on the book of Judges even provides a map in diagram form to show how the ambush worked and how these 600 soldiers managed to escape to the rock of Rimmon.

[32 : 47] And it's those 600 Benjaminite soldiers who become the focus of attention in the final chapter. So we've seen the Israelites, first of all, try to practice justice, but it turns to genocide.

They try to practice prayer, but being miserably misdirected, their prayer also turns into genocide. And thirdly, they try to practice promise keeping, but it only leads to further atrocities.

One of the secondary lessons, more minor lessons, you might say, of the book of Judges is that rashly taken vows lead to great trouble. Remember Jephthah?

If Jephthah had not vowed to sacrifice to the Lord the first living thing that came out of his house after his defeat of the Ammonites, he would not have had to put his only daughter to death.

Jephthah's vow was a vow that he should never have made and should never have kept. But here we are, just a century or so later, and the Israelites have not learned the lesson of Jephthah's folly.

[33 : 51] They make two, not one, but two rash vows here. The first is here in chapter 21, verse 1. Now the men of Israel had sworn at Mizpah no one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin.

Now that vow, of course, was made before the battle of Gibeah, before the slaughter of the 25,000 Benjaminites. In other words, at a time when the rest of the Israelites had no idea what depth of trouble Benjamin was about to fall into.

But they'd made their rash vow and they felt in honor bound to keep it. They didn't have the wisdom to see that it would have been much better to supply the 600 men of Benjamin with wives peaceably from amongst their own daughters rather than resorting to further violence.

But violence breeds violence. And this is where the second rash vow comes in. There it is in chapter 21, verse 5. The people of Israel said, Which of all the tribes of Israel did not come up in the assembly or to the assembly to the Lord?

For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the Lord to Mizpah, saying, He shall surely be put to death. Not just an oath, it was a great oath.

[35 : 06] And it was duly discovered in verse 8 that the people of Jabesh-Gilead had sent no soldiers to fight against Gibeah. Jabesh-Gilead was a biggish town, quite an important town on the other side of Jordan in the land of Gilead.

So what does the mighty assembly do in its wisdom? They send 12,000 of their best soldiers to Jabesh-Gilead and they kill everyone in the town.

These are Jews again, Israelites, men, women, and young children. The only ones they save are virgin girls of marriageable age whom they abduct and bring back across the Jordan to Shiloh.

400 girls. The situation is extraordinary, isn't it? There are the people in verses 2 and 3 weeping bitterly, crying out to the Lord, O Lord God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel that today there should be one tribe lacking in Israel as if it was God's fault?

It wasn't his fault, was it? And look at verse 6. They have compassion at this stage for Benjamin, their brother. They didn't show much brotherly compassion for Benjamin when they were killing about 98% of the tribe of Benjamin, were they?

[36 : 18] And how do they solve the problem? Oh, simple. Let's go and kill a few thousand more of our brothers at Jabesh-Gilead and while we're killing them, we'll tear their teenage daughters out of their arms and herd them back across the Jordan and marry them to men that they wouldn't want to share a meal with, let alone a bed.

It's not only foolish, it's wicked. This is what happens when, in the words of the final verse of the book, everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes.

The thing is, it did really seem right to them in their own eyes. They were saying, we cannot possibly break the oaths that we've made solemnly to God. What a wicked thing it would be to fail to keep a promise made to the God of Israel.

It sounds moral, doesn't it? But it produced murder, bloodshed, and unimaginable terror for hundreds of young girls. They were still 200 short.

They only had 400 from Jabesh-Gilead and there were 600 Benjaminites who needed wives so that the tribe of Benjamin could be rebuked. built. So, what do we do now?

[37 : 28] We've solemnly promised to the Lord that we shan't give any of our daughters to the Benjaminites. Nothing is going to make us backtrack on our noble and virtuous task of promise-keeping.

Aha, here's a good idea. The Shiloh dances are coming up soon. The annual Shiloh festival, the Shiloh-Caley. We'll get the 200 wifeless men of Benjamin to hide in the vineyards.

This is a great idea. And as the young girls come out in their dances, dancing in their party dresses, each of the Benjaminites can rush out, grab a girl and take her home and marry her.

Problem solved. And then we shan't have broken our promise. 200 girls. Just the same number as were abducted in northern Nigeria eight months ago.

Same thing, isn't it? All this happened 3,000 and odd years ago. But the girls of Shiloh and their mothers and their fathers were as real as we are, as real as those grieving Nigerian families are today.

[38 : 31] This was terror. This was wickedness. And all in the cause of keeping promises that should never have been made. Well, friends, let me take a final few moments to look back over these two chapters and then briefly over the book of Judges as a whole.

This final and very horrible story shows how the people of God can get into a position where they think they're doing right when in fact they are acting wickedly in the sight of God.

They think they're practicing justice but it turns to genocide. They think that they're seeking the Lord in prayer but the day after they pray they put tens of thousands of their brother Israelites to death.

They think they're enjoying wonderful unity and yet they wipe out a tribe. They think that they're honoring the Lord by keeping promises made to him but their promise keeping leads to one atrocity and abduction after another.

So this final story of Judges warns us sharply of a real danger and that is that it's possible to have known great blessing from God and yet to walk away from him.

[39 : 49] Just think of the blessings that the Israelites had experienced over the years. So many blessings. They had the covenant promise that was made to Abraham and to Isaac and Jacob. This sure promise that they were being specially chosen selected as God's people and that God would bless them.

That he would be their God and they would be his people and they would live a different kind of life from anybody around them. Their ancestors not long in the past had crossed through the Red Sea when the walls of water had stood up on both sides.

They'd seen the great miracle. They'd been rescued there and then they had been given the matchless, priceless law of Moses, the very book of life, the words of life.

They'd been fed with manna from heaven for 40 years in the wilderness. They'd been guided by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They'd been brought into the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

They'd seen the river Jordan dried up in front of them to let them in and they had begun to take possession of their inheritance. In Canaan and yet they ended up behaving in the way that we've seen this evening because they lacked the will, they lacked the determination to obey the Lord thoroughly.

[41 : 09] So they accommodated themselves to the values of the pagan peoples whom they had refused to drive out of the land. Yes, they retained some of the language of Moses but they lost Moses' desire to love and serve and obey the Lord.

Now if we think that a similar thing can't happen to a Christian church we're simply naive. Exactly this kind of thing can happen to individual churches, to groups of churches or to whole denominations.

Think of our church for a moment, this congregation. We have had great blessings for many years as St. George's Tron and now as an independent congregation, this congregation has stood with the Bible.

The Bible, the words of God have been preached in this congregation with passion and focus for something like 60 years. This congregation has been taught to love the Lord, to thank the Lord, to serve the Lord and to rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the issue for any church today, just as it was for these Israelites of old, is whether we will be willing to love and obey the Lord by keeping his words.

[42 : 26] That is the issue. It was the words of God through Moses which were designed by God to determine the shape and life of the people. And it's just the same thing today.

We, of course, have a fuller revelation of God's words than Jephthah and Samson had. We have the words of the prophets and the apostles. We have the words of Jesus himself. But the issue still is shall we gladly obey them?

Shall we fully obey them? Shall we be determined to obey them? Or shall we allow the pressures of our own Canaan, our secular neo-pagan society to shape our lives?

If we do, if we do allow the pressures of society to shape us, we shall end up in the final verse of the book of Judges. Each one of us simply doing what is right in his own eyes but what is not right in the eyes of the true God.

The crunch will come for us as individuals when we're pressed on certain issues. For example, people will say to us, and sometimes they will say this very aggressively to us, they will say, how can you possibly hold that heterosexual monogamy is the only right arena for sexual relationship?

[43 : 39] How can you hold that today? Or, how can you hold that the Bible is in a category of its own and needs no supplements so as to make its teaching more congenial to the modern world?

Or, how can you possibly hold that your Jesus is the only way to God the Father? What a horribly exclusive thing that is. Or, how can you hold the long discredited view that Christ will, in the end, separate the saved from the lost on the day of judgment?

Now, friends, it's questions like that that will test us out and demonstrate whether we are ashamed of Christ and his words or not. If we are willing to be unashamed of him and his words in today's world, we shall be blessed and we shall be learning something of the lesson of the book of Judges.

Let's look finally at this last verse, chapter 21, verse 25. In those days, there was no king in Israel. What the writer means is no godly king like David who would enthusiastically lead the people in the ways of the Lord and of Moses.

Everyone was simply doing his own thing, doing what was right in his own eyes. But did this mean that God had finally turned his back on Israel?

[45 : 06] What was God doing while all this corruption was going on? Well, just look over at the next page for a moment, the book of Ruth, chapter 1, verse 1.

In the days when the judges ruled, do you see that? There was something else going on. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

And the consequence of that famine and their stay in Moab was that Ruth, many years later, came back to Bethlehem and married a man called Boaz and they had a son named Obed who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David, who was the ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth.

God was at work in the days when the judges ruled. Even in those dark days, God was preparing even then for the coming of his son. And Jesus came a thousand years later and by his death and resurrection, he secured the eternal salvation of his people.

Yes, we could walk away from him. We could allow the pressures of secularism to gag us and put us off course. We could talk the talk while in reality we forsake the Bible.

[46 : 30] But friends, let's not do it. Let's learn from the book of Judges to be thorough going in our obedience to the Lord, even if it's costly, even if it makes us unpopular with friends. And then, when Jesus the Lord returns, he will establish his glorious kingdom, the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness is at home.

And in that kingdom, there will be a king. And in that kingdom, nobody will be doing what is right in his own eyes. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[47 : 43] God the Father. So please hasten it and in the meantime, Lord Jesus, give us grace to stand firm, not to be ashamed of anything that we are taught in the Bible, but to follow it in a thorough-going manner. Help us to honour you. May those who are still, as it were, living in pagan society, those who are not part of the Christian church, may they see our lives and be drawn to you through the attractive and winsome behaviour and manner of living that we show. And our prayer is that you will help us in every part of our lives to acknowledge your kingship and to do so joyfully and gladly. And we ask it for the sake of your great name. Amen.