

Israel Goes to War against the Tribe of Benjamin

Judges 20:1-28

Judges 20:1-28 - *"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. ³ (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!"

⁸ 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.

¹² 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.

¹⁸ 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. ²¹ 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."

²⁴ 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.

²⁶ 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."

Background Notes

Why did God record the terrible events at the end of Judges in His Holy Word? Was it to give us some interesting historical reading material? No! God included all this material at the end of Judges to show us the terrible things that really happened when His people turned away from the Lord, His Word, and His Laws.

When did these events take place? The events in the Book of Judges aren't necessarily chronological. The period of the Judges lasted about 350 years, and it seems that the events of chapters 19-21 actually took place at the beginning of that time. The priest at the time was Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron (v28) - the same Phinehas who stood for the Lord back in Numbers 25, before Israel entered the Promised Land, when they became involved with Moabite women. So the events in Judges 19-21 occurred early in the time of the Judges. This fact shows us how quickly the people went downhill after the time of Joshua. It took only **one generation** to depart from the Lord!

The Lord told the tribes of Israel to go to battle against the tribe of Benjamin (v18, 23, 28). How did the Lord tell the tribes to do this? The message may have been given by a prophecy from Phinehas (or another righteous person), or it may have been through the Urim and the Thummim. We don't know exactly what Urim and Thummim were, but we do know from references in the Law that they were items, maybe precious stones, that were put in the breastplate of the high priest. When a major decision was needed, the high priest could use the Urim and Thummim to determine God's will, and they may have been involved in Israel's decision to go to war against Benjamin.

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. Moral laxity results from a low view of the holiness of God.

When we read about the idolatry in Judges 17-18 and the moral laxity in Judges 19-21, we ask ourselves, “How could Israel so quickly sink to such a low spiritual and moral level?” We’ve already seen that it happened because the people of Israel turned away from the Lord and His Laws, but let’s go further. **Why** did Israel turn away from the Lord? I think the key reason is that **the people had a low view of the holiness of God.**

Where do we see this low view of the holiness of God? Look again at verses 26-27: “*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. So the children of Israel inquired of the LORD. The ark of the covenant of God was there in those days...*” This is the **only** mention of the Ark of the Covenant in the **entire** book of Judges! The good news in these verses is that Israel was finally weeping and fasting before the Lord. The bad news is that the Ark seems to be located at Bethel, not in the Tabernacle. The Ark was to be kept in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle, and it appears that the Tabernacle was at Shiloh, not Bethel, at this time.

What was the Ark doing at Bethel, outside the Tabernacle? The Ark was a holy object that represented the presence of a holy God with His people. It was to be kept in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle! It was not to be taken out and paraded around. It was not to be looked at by the “lay” people. It was only to be approached by the high priest once a year, when he brought the blood of the sacrifice into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

The fact that the Ark was not in its proper place indicates that the people had a low view of the holiness of God. Do you remember 1 Samuel 4, when Samuel was a boy (at the end of the time period of the Judges), that Israel wrongly took the Ark from the Tabernacle at Shiloh? The army took it into battle when they fought against the Philistines. They tried to use the Ark like a “good luck charm” in battle! Why? Because they had a low view of the holiness of God! And when the Ark came back from the land of the Philistines in 1 Samuel 6, the men of Beth Shemesh improperly looked into the Ark, and were struck down by the Lord! Why? Because they disrespected God, and had a low view of His majestic holiness!

So all through the time of the Judges the people had a low view of God’s holiness, and moral laxity naturally followed. You can be sure there will be moral laxity in your life if you have a low view of God’s holiness. If there is moral laxity in your life in what you read, or what you watch on TV, or what you search for on the internet, chances are you have a low view of the holiness of God.

How do you view God? If you have a high and proper view of God’s amazing holiness, you will not have a problem with lax morals. Moral laxity results from a **low** view of the holiness of God.

2. Moral outrage should lead to correction by discipline.

The Levite cut his dead concubine into 12 parts and mailed them out to the twelve tribes of Israel to cause moral outrage. And it worked! Sadly, it took a violent and repulsive action to cause outrage about the low moral standards in Israel.

What will it take to cause moral outrage about the violent act of partial birth abortion or dismemberment abortion in our nation? If all Americans could view these gruesome procedures, there would be moral outrage! Do you notice how the politically correct media and press “protect” the information about this sin of our nation? And it’s not just this horrible sin, but many others as well. Moral values have sunk to the level where there is no moral outrage to the gross sin in this land.

When there is moral outrage, correction by discipline should follow. And discipline is what we see in Judges 20. Because the proud and the defiant tribe of Benjamin wouldn’t judge and discipline the sinful men of Gibeah, God allowed civil war in Israel. Sin must be dealt with. This is true today in the home and in the church. Moral sin must be disciplined. Read 1 Corinthians 5 in this connection.

God allowed Israel to be defeated twice, in order to bring all of Israel to its knees, before He finally struck down the tribe of Benjamin. The Lord promised victory only when Israel wept, and fasted, and brought the proper sacrifices.

We need to see a parallel in our country right now. There must be moral outrage, then humility and confession before the Lord before God will step in. Then there can be correction by discipline. Moral outrage should lead to correction by discipline.

Practical Application

Take heed lest you fall!

1 Corinthians 10:11-12 - *“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”*

“All these things” refers to the Old Testament events that occurred when Israel came out of Egypt and traveled to the Land of Promise, and “all these things” could certainly be extended to the time of the Judges. So if you think your moral standards could never sink to the level of what we read about at the end of Judges, pay attention to this Scripture. **And take heed lest you fall!**