

The Tribe of Benjamin is Defeated

Judges 20:29-48

Judges 20:29-48 - *"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. ⁴⁵ 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."*

Background Notes

The events of Judges 19 resulted in a civil war between Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. A Levite and his concubine had stopped for the night in the town of Gibeah, in the territory of Benjamin. During the night, wicked men of the city surrounded the house where the Levite was staying. They demanded to have homosexual relations with the Levite, but were given the Levite's concubine instead. The evil men of Gibeah viciously abused the concubine all night, and as a result she died. In the morning the Levite intended to go on his way, but he discovered his concubine's body lying on the doorstep. He put her body onto his donkey, took her home, cut up her body into twelve parts, and sent the body parts to all the tribes in Israel. How he sent the body parts and who received them, we're not told.

All Israel was outraged when they heard this horrible story. They decided to go to war to discipline the tribe of Benjamin for allowing such events to happen in Israel. Although the allied forces of Israel far outnumbered the army of Benjamin, Benjamin was able to defeat Israel in the first two battles of the war. In the third battle, however, the forces of Israel were finally able to defeat the forces of Benjamin by means of an ambush. This ambush reminds us of the ambush of Ai in Joshua 8 – and by the way, that event would have happened not long before this time. Remember – chronologically, the events of the last chapters of the book of Judges actually occurred early in the time of the Judges.

Doctrinal Points

1. God's assistance is not necessarily a sign of God's approval.

In verses 27-28, Israel asked counsel of the Lord as to whether they should continue the war against Benjamin, and the Lord had answered "yes." *"So the children of Israel inquired of the LORD (the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, 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.'"* Because the tribe of Benjamin tolerated the gross sin of immorality at Gibeah, and would not give up the guilty men, God assisted Israel in the war against Benjamin. However, the fact that God gave Benjamin into Israel's hands does not mean that God approved of **everything** that Israel was doing. No way!

God's assistance is not necessarily a sign of God's approval. The tribes of Israel were right in disciplining Benjamin, but they were far from faultless themselves. The fact that it took a horrendous deed - the concubine's death and the Levite cutting up her body - to finally cause moral outrage in Israel shows how low all of Israel had sunk during the time of the Judges. That's one reason why God included the gross details in His Word. God wanted to show how bad, both morally and spiritually, **all Israel** had become during the dark days of the Judges! The fact that the Lord allowed the forces of Israel to be defeated by Benjamin in the first two battles shows that the people of Israel had to go before the Lord and get their spiritual condition made right with Him.

In addition, the Lord certainly didn't approve of the fact that Israel almost annihilated the tribe of Benjamin. *"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” (v48). In the next chapter we’ll learn that **all** the women of the **entire** tribe of Benjamin were killed! Such pillage and carnage throughout the land of Benjamin was completely uncalled for, and certainly God didn’t approve of that.

Then, because all the women in the tribe of Benjamin had been killed, the men of Israel massacred the men of Jabesh Gilead and kidnapped their unmarried women as wives for the men of Benjamin, so the tribe would not disappear from the nation (Judges 21). There’s no mention that God approved of these violent acts! So the fact that God assisted Israel in defeating the tribe of Benjamin does not mean that He approved of all the unnecessary killing and devastation.

An important lesson for us to learn from this event is that God’s assistance is not necessarily a sign of God’s approval. Some Christians never seem to learn that lesson. Some Christians who are in business, for example, think that because God is giving them success over their competition that God is approving of all their business practices and ethics. But that’s not necessarily so. Some Christian leaders and parents think that because God is assisting them in disciplining wrongdoing in their family or fellowship, they think that God approves of all their forms of discipline. Church leaders and parents need to be extremely sensitive to the kind of discipline that they use when it is necessary to deal with wrongdoing.

Discipline can be carried too far, both in the home and in the church. Many sad illustrations could be given. Over-reaction to wrong behavior has resulted in broken families. Discipline administered without love has resulted in broken lives. Remember, God’s initial assistance is not necessarily a sign of God’s approval for all subsequent actions taken. God’s assistance is not necessarily a sign of God’s approval.

2. God can suddenly change the course of events.

The tribe of Benjamin thought that they were getting away with their defiant attitude of defending the sinful city of Gibeah. They had defeated all of Israel in two battles! But God suddenly changed the course of events. Israel went before the Lord and wept and fasted and sacrificed (v26). God answered, and overnight the course of events was changed. What a lesson for us!

Does it seem like everything is going wrong in your life at the present time? If you’ve gone to the Lord, and you’re weeping before the Lord, and you’re waiting on the Lord, don’t give up! Hang in there! God can suddenly change the course of events.

Right now it seems that the “wrong side” is winning in our nation. Moral standards are up for grabs. Lying is being re-defined and condoned. Sexual misconduct pervades the land. Can it change? Yes, it can! God could bring another

Great Awakening to this land, but we must humble ourselves, turn from our sin, and pray. *“If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).* This verse can be applied to our nation, as well as to Israel in Old Testament days. God can suddenly change the course of events.

Practical Application

Are we desensitized to behavior that God calls sin?

During the time of the Judges, as we've seen, everyone was doing "*what was right in his own eyes.*" And this includes the perverted sexual activity of the men of Gibeah. From God's point of view, this was depravity. Let me read a little-known Scripture from the book of Hosea -- Hosea 9:9 - "*They are deeply corrupted, as in the days of Gibeah. He will remember their iniquity; He will punish their sins.*" As far as God was concerned, the people of Gibeah were "*deeply corrupted.*"

The tribe of Benjamin was desensitized to this kind of sin. Some people probably thought that it was just an alternative lifestyle, but from God's point of view it was sin. Can we agree with God on this point? Or are we gradually being accustomed to the idea that same-sex relationships are only a matter of an individual's sexual preference?

We must reach out with the gospel of God's great love and grace to those who are involved in sexual sin. Obviously we aren't saying that we wish that everyone involved same-sex activity was dead! Certainly not! The point of this practical application is that we should ask ourselves – "Do I agree with **God's** judgment of the situation in Judges 20?" Or do we have "problems with God" on this point?

Can we **agree with God** that He did the right thing when He judged those who were involved in perverted sexual behavior? Can we agree with Him that He made the right decision in the way He dealt with that situation? Or are we becoming desensitized to behavior that **God** says is **sin**?