

# The Moral Collapse of a Nation

## Judges 19-21

In recent days I have spent hours reading about despicable and violent people, callousness and lovelessness in marriage, and the violent debasement of women. The specifics include a public chorus' shouting for the satisfaction of homosexual lust, a heterosexual gang rape that claimed the life of its victim, the grisly dismemberment of a battered corpse, a heartless coward's inciting others to genocide, and gang warfare that ends with the cold-blooded murder of countless innocent victims. I was reading of those things not in the newspaper or in some commentary on the modern world, but in the Bible. This morning we are going to consider what are probably the most morbid chapters in the Bible. Today's text is at least rated R.

This is the final message in our series on the Book of Judges, and it is the second of two conclusions to the Book of Judges. The first conclusion (chapters 17-18) had to do corruption of worship featuring a Levite who sold out and became a "personal priest for hire" to Micah, and then to the tribe of Dan. The second conclusion (chapters 19-21) focuses moral collapse featuring another Levite, whose testimony results in the destruction of an Israelite town and the near annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin. I believe the author was very deliberate in focusing on two Levites in his two-part conclusion and that he intends for his readers to compare and contrast the two conclusions in order to discern the message that God has for us as the book ends. We will do that at the end of this message.

It is the mistreatment of the Levite's concubine in chapter 19 that precipitates the civil war described in chapter 20. And the near annihilation of the Benjamites in chapter 20 prompts the Israelites to bend the rules to find brides for the few remaining Benjamites in chapter 21.

Let's start by reading a little of chapter 19:

- 1 And it came to pass in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote mountains of Ephraim. He took for himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.**
- 2 But his concubine played the harlot against him, and went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there four whole months.**
- 3 Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back, having his servant and a couple of donkeys with him. So she brought him into her father's house; and when the father of the young woman saw him, he was glad to meet him.**
- 4 Now his father-in-law, the young woman's father, detained him; and he stayed with him three days. So they ate and drank and lodged there.**

### **Hospitality (19:1-10) to horror (19:11-30)**

Once again the author tells a story about a Levite. This fellow lived somewhere in the hill country of Ephraim. He obtained a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. A concubine was kind of a second class wife. She was unfaithful or angry with him and so she returned to the home of her father. She had been there four months when the Levite

decided to go to Bethlehem and sweet talk her into returning home with him. Literally the text in verse 3 says he went to “speak to her heart.”

The concubine welcomed her husband and her father smothered him with Middle Eastern hospitality. The Levite was “wined and dined” for three days, which in the minds of many would be the outer limit for entertaining a guest. But verses 5-9 show that the hospitality continued. On the fourth day, the Levite got up early to get on his way, but the father-in-law detained him yet again, encouraging him to have something to eat before he departed. This resulted in him staying on another day. On the fifth day, the Levite was determined to leave; nevertheless the father-in-law detained him with hospitality until late in the afternoon. His host urged the Levite to stay yet another night, but he was determined to begin his journey home. Knowing that he would not be able to make it home before dark, the Levite planned on spending the night in one of the Israelite cities along the way. The only question was how far they would get, and thus, where they would spend the night.

In verse 11 we find it was already late in the day when the Levite’s group approached Jebus. (Jebus is another name for Jerusalem, only at this point in time it is controlled by the Jebusites, rather than by Israel.) The Levite’s servant suggested that they spend the night here, but his master was unwilling to stay the night in a **“city of foreigners, who are not of the children of Israel.”** He thought that if he could reach an Israelite town, he could be assured of his safety. So they pressed on toward Gibeah or Ramah.

The sun was beginning to set as they reached the Benjamite city of Gibeah. They entered the city gates and seated themselves in the town square. This was a clearly understood signal that they were passing through the city and needed a place to spend the night, but in stark contrast to the hospitality of the concubine’s father, no one invited them in. As darkness set in, an old man from the remote hill country of Ephraim came in from his work in the field. He saw the weary travelers and asked **“Where are you going, and where do you come from?”** The Levite explained their plight and made it clear that they needed only a roof over their heads because they had supplies for their own needs and the needs of their animals.

The old man insisted that they stay with him. He knew all too well, it seems, that spending the night in the city square was not safe, just as Lot was unwilling for his guests to remain in the streets at night in Sodom. When they had enjoyed themselves and were about to settle down for the night, the peace and safety the Levite had hoped for was abruptly interrupted:

**22 As they were enjoying themselves, suddenly certain men of the city, perverted men, surrounded the house and beat on the door. They spoke to the master of the house, the old man, saying, “Bring out the man who came to your house, that we may know him carnally!”**

**23 But the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brethren! I beg you, do not act so wickedly! Seeing this man has come into my house, do not commit this outrage.**

**24 Look, here is my virgin daughter and the man's concubine; let me bring them out now. Humble them, and do with them as you please; but to this man do not do such a vile thing!”**

This was not the welcoming committee or the Gibeah Chamber of Commerce. This was a group of perverted men – literally called **“sons of Belial.”** They asked that the Levite

be sent out to them. Their intention was not to “get to know him” in some neighborly way. They wanted to sexually abuse him. No wonder the old man urged the men not to do such a vile and wicked thing (verse 23). Only the threat of homosexual rape could prompt the old man to offer his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine to be sexually abused and thus to satisfy their deviant sexual desires.

If this reminds you of another episode in the Bible, it is meant to. It is almost impossible to miss its connection to the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. In both accounts, the wicked men of the city wish to rape the male guest of an outsider who is sojourning in their city. Likewise, in both accounts the host offers his daughter to the men of the city in place of his guest. There is no doubt that the author is informing us that Israel has now stooped to the moral level of the wickedest of the Canaanites.

When it became obvious that the crowd would not listen to reason, the Levite compelled his concubine to go out to the men, who abused her the rest of the night. Barely alive, they let her go, and she somehow managed to make her way back to the door of the old man’s house, where she lay grasping the threshold with her hands.

In the morning, the Levite’s mind seems to have been on his return home to safety, rather than on the well-being of his concubine. When he almost trips over her on his way out the door, this Levite who had traveled to Bethlehem to sweet talk his concubine into returning home with him now gruffly orders her to get up and get going. When she doesn’t respond, he loads her on the donkey and heads home.

What happens next is even more shocking. Once safely home the Levite cuts the dead body of his concubine into twelve pieces, sending a portion to every Israelite tribe. Nothing like this had ever happened before, or after. King Saul would later cut his oxen into pieces and send them throughout Israel, but the mutilation of this woman’s body was something far more disturbing. The Levite had certainly managed to get Israel’s attention.

### **Civil War: Israel vs. the Benjamites (20:1-48)**

The Levite’s action had exactly the effect he had hoped for. The whole nation was shocked and energized to action. Four hundred thousand armed Israelites assembled in unity before the Lord at Mizpah.

The Israelite warriors asked the Levite to explain what had happened at Gibeah, prompting him to take such drastic measures to summon them. The Levite does a great job of making himself look good, while at the same time making the Benjamites look bad. Given his distorted version of the story, it is not surprising that those gathered concluded that the entire city should be annihilated.

According to Deuteronomy 13:12, **“If you hear someone in one of your cities, which the Lord your God gives you to dwell in, saying, ‘Corrupt men have gone out from among you.’ That phrase “corrupt men” is the same used here in Judges 19, literally, “Sons of Belial.” Deuteronomy goes on to say “then you shall inquire, search out, and ask diligently.” And if it is found to be true, then “you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword--utterly destroying it.”**

Those gathered resolved that they would see to it that this evil was purged from Israel. Since Gibeah was a Benjamite city, the assembled Israelites called upon the other Benjamites to hand over the wicked men of the city for judgment. The Benjamites concluded that “blood was thicker than water,” and thus they chose to stand with the

wicked men of Gibeah, rather than against them. In so doing, they precipitated a civil war. Now, more than at any other time in the days of the judges, the tribes of Israel were acting in unity as they went to battle, but they were doing battle with one of their own tribes, and not with the Canaanites.

40,000 Israelite warriors were chosen to fight the Benjamites. The Benjamites mustered 26,700 men to defend of the wicked men of Gibeah.

The Israelites appear to be approaching this battle as they should. As they did in Judges 1 when fighting the Canaanites, they went to Bethel to inquire of God who should lead the attack. The answer is the same, **“Judah first!”**

But to our surprise, the outnumbered Benjamites prevailed in the first and second battles, slaughtering 22,000 Israelite soldiers in the first and 18,000 in the second. Then verse 26 says, **“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.”** This time when they ask God about the battle the Lord answers, **“Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand.”**

The author provides the reader with a two-fold account of this third battle – a short version in 20:29-35 and a longer, more detailed, account in 20:36-48. In all, 25,000 Benjamites were killed that day, and only 600 escaped into the wilderness, to the rock of Rimmon. The Israelites then went about burning the other Benjamite cities.

### **Brides for the Benjamites (21:1-25)**

Having zealously waged war on the Benjamites, they had succeeded in nearly wiping them out. This brings grief to all Israel and they cry out to God in verse 3, **“O Lord God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that today there should be one tribe missing in Israel?”**

In the course of waging war with the Benjamites, the Israelites had made two vows, the first of which they have come to regret. They had vowed that they would never allow one of their daughters to marry a Benjamite. The second vow had possibilities of being used to their advantage. They had vowed that they would execute anyone who did not appear for battle. They cleverly devised a plan whereby they would play one vow against the other. They would diligently keep the second vow, which enabled them to circumvent the first.

They inquired and found that no one from Jabesh Gilead had assembled for war at Mizpah. In order to “keep their vow,” they assembled 12,000 warriors and attacked Jabesh Gilead, killing every man and woman, sparing only the young virgins. This left 400 virgins who could be given to the surviving men of Benjamin.

But there still remain 200 Benjamites who are without wives, and thus they cannot bear offspring to perpetuate their tribe. The Israelites conclude that something else must be done to provide wives for the remaining 200 Benjamites. They shrewdly concocted yet another devious plan. The Israelite men had vowed that they would not give any of their daughters to the Benjamites as wives. Nothing had been said about any virgin being taken from among their daughters.

An annual festival was soon to be celebrated by the Israelites at Shiloh where there would be dancing by the virgin daughters of Shiloh. They allowed the Benjamite

bachelors to seize 200 Israelite virgins for wives. With this accomplished, everyone returned to his home. With this, the book closes with this now familiar statement:

**In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.** (Judges 21:25).

Think of how this final episode in Judges began in chapter 19. Some worthless men in the city of Gibeah took the Levite's concubine and gang raped her, which resulted in her death. Rape and murder (accentuated by the cutting up of his concubine) were the crimes which had so incensed the Israelites. And so they went to war with their Benjamite brother, coming very close to bringing this tribe to extinction. And now, those who were so offended by the rape of this concubine conspire to bring about the kidnapping and rape of 200 Israelite virgins. The irony and hypocrisy of this can hardly be missed. Surely, the Benjamites and the Israelites were all "doing what was right in their own eyes." They were certainly not living according to the spirit of the law.

Let me conclude with some application for us.

We are surely intended to read Judges 19 in the light of Genesis 19. The sin of Sodom is now a sin within Israel. Things have gotten that bad. It does not appear that the entire population of Gibeah practiced homosexuality, but a portion of their citizens did. And those Benjamites who did not practice this sin somehow were willing to tolerate it, much as our culture does today. Regardless of what the law of our land says, the Bible speaks very clearly about homosexuality as sin, and today's text is but one passage where it is portrayed in a very negative light.

The difference for us is that we do not live in a theocracy. Ours is an increasingly secular and hedonistic culture. As much as we would like the rest of society to adopt Christian morals, it should not surprise us that unregenerate people will live unrighteous lives and uphold values that are non-Christian. Instead of hating people who live this way, as Paul says we are to: **Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life** (Philippians 2:14-16).

Our lives ought to shine so brightly with the love of God and the righteousness of Christ that all could see Christ in us.

The two conclusions in Judges (the idolatry of the Danites in chapters 17 and 18, and the immorality of the Benjamites in chapters 19-21) reveal Israel's inconsistency or hypocrisy. The murder of a young woman was inexcusable; the blatant practice of idolatry was met with a yawn. But in reality the sin of idolatry was much worse. In fact it was because they had corrupted worship of God in chapters 17 & 18 that they sank into such depravity in chapters 19-21.

Let's face it, there are certain sins that we Christians love to hate – homosexuality being one of these sins, even though other sins receive a great deal more attention in the Bible. We must be very careful not to be hypocritical about sin. All sin is abhorrent to God, not just those sins we love to hate. All sin falls under God's condemnation and makes men worthy of eternal judgment – not just homosexuality, or adultery, or murder. Let us be careful not to be selective about those sins which we condemn. We must not be like this Levite, who amplifies the sins of others, but overlooks or minimizes his own sins. Let us be merciless with our own sins and like our Lord, be merciful toward others when they sin.

Why does the author of Judges point-out several times that Israel had no king, and that everyone did what was right in their own eyes? If Judges teaches us anything, it is that man is a sinner and cannot live up to God's standards of righteousness. Salvation can only come from above, from Him who took on human flesh so that He might die in the sinner's place.

How vastly different is God's way of salvation from man's! As I reflected on our text, I had to marvel at how the Israelites sought to "save" the Benjamites from their sins. They sought to save this tribe from extinction by circumventing and twisting God's law. They sought to perpetuate the Benjamites by counseling them to kidnap other men's daughters and then force them to be their wives. Man's efforts at achieving salvation are so pathetic, so disgusting.

God's salvation came about in a very different way. God took pity on fallen men, sending His Son in human flesh so that He might identify with man, live a sinless life, and then die in the sinner's place, bearing the punishment for our sins. Christ alone willingly took the sinner's place on the cross of Calvary. Trusting in Him alone is what saves sinners.

It is not just the Book of Judges that was given to make man look bad; it is the entire Bible. The Bible shows us how ugly our sin is and how desperately lost we are. It shows us that we cannot be saved by our own efforts, but only by the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as the Bible shows us how bad we are, and how much we need to be saved apart from our own efforts, it portrays a beautiful Savior who came to earth to bear the sinner's guilt and punishment, so that men might be saved and live forever in His presence. Have you trusted in Him? If not, I urge you to do so today.